

The Second Sleep

by

Robert Harris

Extract from the Literary Review:

It isn't too much of a spoiler, I hope, to say that Robert Harris's enjoyable new book has a twist not at the end, but at the beginning: it starts out looking like a historical novel and, a chapter or two later, turns out to be science fiction. The opening gives it the whole nine yards:

Late on the afternoon of Tuesday the ninth of April in the Year of Our Risen Lord 1468, a solitary traveller was to be observed picking his way on horseback across the wild moorland of that ancient region of south-western England known since Saxon times as Wessex. If this young man's expression was troubled, we may grant he had good cause. More than an hour had elapsed since he had last seen a living soul. Soon it would be dusk, and if he was caught out of doors after curfew he risked a night in jail.

The slightly camp olde-worlde locutions would seem to locate the narration somewhere in the 19th century, though the date locates the action in the 15th century. We settle in. The protagonist, Christopher Fairfax, is a youngish priest journeying through a wild and woolly late-medieval landscape – all menacing weather effects, raven-haunted gibbets and scrofulous, God-fearing locals. He is, we discover, en route from Exeter, seat of the bishop, to the rural parish of Addicott St George to conduct the funeral of a long-serving parish priest.

*When Fairfax arrives at his destination, we come face to face with Father Lacey's body, slightly ripe by now, laid out in a coffin in the parsonage. There's a mildly dour housekeeper, a comely but mute niece, tallow candles and homely vittles. But there's something slightly odd about the deceased: Father Lacey, unlike most clerics, was clean-shaven. There are dark allusions to his eccentricities and a suggestion that his death in a fall near the Devil's Chair ('a lonely, fearsome spot') may not have been an accident. In Lacey's study, Fairfax discovers a remarkable private library that holds twenty volumes of *The Proceedings and Papers of the Society of Antiquaries*, books that are clear signs of heresy on a capital scale: 'The organisation had been declared heretical, its officers imprisoned, its publications confiscated and publicly burned, the very word "antiquarian" forbidden from use.'*

What's more, Father Lacey owned a collection of knick-knacks of a sort the Church would definitely have frowned on. Pick of the bunch is 'one of the devices used by the ancients to communicate':

He pressed the button on the front, as if it might miraculously spring to life, but the glossy surface remained resolutely black and dead, and all he could see was the reflection of his own face, ghostly in the candlelight. He turned it over. On the back was the ultimate symbol of the ancients' hubris and blasphemy – an apple with a bite taken out of it.

And, boom, we're off to the races. This is not medieval England after all; it's some dreadful post-Brexit scenario in which, a millennium or two after the end of our civilisation, the surviving dregs of humankind have blamed the catastrophe that caused it on divine retribution and turned to the grim comforts of the Church. The calendar has been reset, the only vocabulary allowed is that which appears in the King James Bible and any curiosity about the good old days is strictly verboten.

So the story of Father Fairfax's time in Addicott St George is one of a closed mind creaking none too reluctantly open, and the investigation of a possible murder. For the reader, there is also the desire – never wholly satisfied – to discover exactly what it was that did for 21st-century life: nuclear

Not everyone in the group enjoyed reading the book and many found it hard to read:

- For those familiar with Robert Harris novels, *The 2nd Sleep* did not make for enjoyable reading. It was described as complicated, confusing in its time-line and gloomy
- The question was: Was it because it was totally fictitious and not based on real history?

However, a good number found it clever, imaginative, with interesting characters, beautifully written, evocative in its atmosphere and quite frightening. Bill also pointed out that the book resonated with some of his own feelings. He also enjoyed many lines – not quoted here.

Was the book some sort of warning of things to come in our highly technological world? The book was definitely though provoking.

The ending was disappointing and questioned by all. At its best did Robert Harris want to send a foreboding message or did he get tired and run out of breath?

Personally I have greatly enjoyed reading this book. I found it atmospheric, mysterious, intriguing, well written, with a good plot and so compelling. It kept me engrossed. I could hardly put the book down. I very much enjoyed the settings, the characters, the search for answers, the tension. I was intrigued by the notion of second sleep – which makes sense to me as I personally feel I go through 2 main periods in my sleep every night. However, whilst the title is a good one, it is of no real consequence in the overall plot. Or is it a metaphor for the unfolding story?

The book starts off like a historical novel until the word "plastic" appears on the page! You realise that you cannot possibly be in the middle ages. Despite the pre-industrial life style and short life span of the villagers, the reference to plastic items is the first hint that you are not in the past, in some dark ages but in a different era. It is difficult to say what that era is except that it is after the apocalypse of the 21st century!

The ending is a let-down: after capturing my interest throughout the book, the story just reveals that ancient technology is/was worshipped as relics -hence the firm hand of the church to regulate the people and fight any heresy - I suppose it's the story of history repeating itself; With the collapse of a civilisation the world goes backwards. It is about the fragility of human progress!

A fairly grim tale, very potent in our current climate and unsettled world. A warning about the fragile nature of civilisation. And curiously although published in 2019, it seems to be uncannily relevant to questions we might ask about our world today in 2026.

The Second Sleep could be labelled as science fiction, as the reader is led in a futuristic/unreal world. It certainly reminds us of real concerns over our present technological world: the advance of AI (in all sectors of our lives, including warfare), fake news, the dangers of global communication...

I am left disappointed as the apocalypse is never elaborated upon. We never find out what happened, what actually caused the apocalypse. We can only guess that the technological system ended up to be self-destructive.

My other criticism is why would society re-build itself as a 'Christian' religious society? Why didn't people rebel against the strong hand of the law and the fanaticism of the people in charge? Why the use of old English?

Despite this, I would very much recommend this book. In addition, I am now curious to read other books by the same author...

Sabine