

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Shear

Tim Parks

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About the Book

An English geologist working on a Mediterranean island becomes embroiled in a nightmare web of deceit, corruption, lust and tragedy in Tim Parks' mesmeric story of a man whose life will be shattered like the fatal fragment of stone that obsesses him.

About the Author

Tim Parks is the author of seven novels, including *Tongues of Flame* (winner of the Somerset Maugham and Betty Trask Awards), *Loving Roger* (winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize) and most recently *Goodness*. He has just completed a new novel, *Mimi's Ghost*. He has lived in Italy since 1981 and is married to an Italian. *Italian Neighbours*, his non-fiction account of suburban life in Italy, has been variously described as 'tough, funny and sceptical', 'a rich treat from start to finish' and 'a travel book with a rare sense of purpose'.

Apart from his own writing, Tim Parks is the translator of such authors as Alberto Moravia, Italo Calvino, Antonio Tabucchi and Roberto Calasso.

Also by Tim Parks

Fiction

Loving Roger
Tongues of Flame
Home Thoughts
Family Planning
Goodness

Non-fiction

Italian Neighbours

TIM PARKS

Shear

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

'The mortal cannot go fearless through these many-coloured beauties.'
Aeschylus, Agamemnon, 923-4

Day Two

THAT NIGHT HE dreamt there was evil in the rock. So, such concepts still exist in dreams, was his first thought on waking, and careful not to disturb, he got up to write his report, for the room was full of light.

Ancient concepts, though not so old as the rock he had placed them in. The men had sunk their boreholes, fed in the penthrite. The air was gritty with a dust of feldspar from the last of the drill steels pushed hot on to its rack. Quartz glittered about their boots, then frothed to mud as the holes were stemmed. The water bubbled out. They retreated. Until, as hand reached for plunger, he suddenly became aware that there was evil in the rock. Not that the material was poor or excessively faulted. But there was evil there. There were unforeseeable consequences. Nesting in amongst the crystals, potent as the forces that had fashioned the landscape. His chest was tight and he couldn't speak. He opened his mouth soundlessly. His fingers clawed. And inevitably the blast woke him.

Tapping on a portable keyboard on the kind of rickety desk they will provide in such places, he wrote:

'The material in question is classifiable as late tectonic plutonite belonging to the group of leucocratic, fine-grained, equal-grained monzogranites. For the Talava pluton, the isochronous line determined by the Rb/Sr method on total rock points to an age of 275 ± 4 MY.'

Two hundred and seventy-five million years.

He stopped, and, looking up, caught a glimpse of her in the uncertain silvering of a cheap wardrobe mirror. She was twenty-two.

It was seven thirty-five. European summertime.

And he wrote:

‘Despite the brevity of the visit, some negative aspects of the local geological situation at Palinu quarry were immediately evident. The surface layer of weathered material is remarkably thick, 5 to 8 metres, and its removal is achieved with explosives (see plate 3). In the underlying mass . . .’

There had been no weathered material on Margaret. The writer stopped and thought about this. Rather, her explosion had blown off the weathered crust on him, taken both of them to a primitive state of fused magma. He closed his eyes. For some minutes it was as if he were in trance, outside time. Then he went back to the liquid-crystal ciphers on the desk before him.

‘In the underlying mass there are many fractures (see plate 2) following principal and secondary planes which intersect and determine quite severe rock discontinuities.’

There came a knock on the door.

It was repeated and a low voice called, ‘Mr Nicholson. Mr Nicholson, please.’

It was a voice he both knew and didn’t know. An accent. Was Margaret still asleep? He went to the door and, turning the key, found the dead man’s wife in front of him.

‘Mr Nicholson, I know it’s early, I’m sorry, but I’d like to talk to you. I thought maybe we could have breakfast together.’

For a moment he experienced the same vocal paralysis he had had in his dream. Basically he was annoyed. The Australian woman shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Smaller than himself. Not quite chubby.

‘Ten minutes,’ he told her, making sure she could not see into the room.

Margaret slept. He sat beside her and drew back the sheet a little. The colour in daylight was white to pink, perhaps potassium-aluminium silicate, but with a pearly lustre.

Which was appropriate. Pearly Margaret, not a stone, but very precious. And what impurity could have made the hair so red? What impurity! Smirking, he took a quick shower and left a note on the desk: 'You'll need all the sleep you can get!'



Mrs Owen was apologising. She had her little girl with her now, as on the previous afternoon. And she was sorry she had come so early, but she was afraid he might already be off at work, as he had been yesterday. She needed to see him on his own.

'You came to my room yesterday?' he asked too quickly. Then he shifted his gaze to where the window offered a first-floor view across the square: porphyry cobbles in interlocking fans, travertine sills and plinths, marble the little statue perhaps, the fountain basin – and above, between, around those stones, the people in their cars, their different dimension. Slim legs scissored off the corner of his field of vision to the right. The light was so bright here.

'You see, I want to find out who was responsible for my husband's death. I want to make them pay for it.'

He was torn between the need to be kind and wise and the desire to get back to his room for what he hoped might be enjoyed before the day's work began. Then he saw that her girl was smoothing the hair of a Little Pony identical to his own daughter's. And he said, 'Haranguing a quarry foreman won't help. You could have got yourself killed. In fact, to be frank, I can't really see why you're here at all.'

'They're winning that rock the wrong way,' she said. There was more than a hint of belligerence.

'How do you mean?'

'The explosives.'

'About ninety per cent of the world's granite is won with explosives.'

‘But they’re using too much. They’re being careless, to make more money. I read it in a report.’

‘There are definitely some problems,’ he conceded.

The waiter came to stand beside their table. Neither of them could speak his language. In many ways they were like particles transported here from some overburden far away, not easily assimilable. Or not at this temperature. The mother persuaded her girl that you did not eat ice-cream in the morning. Cake proved a sufficiently international word. Coffee was no problem at all.

Then Mrs Owen said, look, she believed in God. She believed there was right and wrong and people had got to recognise that and accept responsibility. Right? Otherwise civilisation stank. Otherwise it was merely a question of making money and the devil take the hindmost.

He was embarrassed, watching as she rummaged in her handbag. The way all women do. An animal burrowing. To produce a photograph in which a forty-year-old man simply smiled into a camera at close quarters against a domestic background. There was a chip on one front tooth. But nothing unusual about it. He could hardly have imagined anything else. What worried him was that the girl might be upset. But she was having her Little Pony nuzzle in the cream of her cake now with healthy unconcern.

‘He had protested about the safety standards. He was worried about the speed his men were being asked to work at. He said there was something wrong with the rock. He had found reports. Then one morning they phone me to say ...’

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Handing back the photo, the geologist slopped some coffee, and noticed that the green table-top was a plastic imitation of serpentine, complete with swirling, conchoidal cleavage. They were getting so clever at that kind of thing. Mrs Owen’s own cleavage became evident for a moment as she reached down and sideways for her bag again, her handkerchiefs. The curves

were neither round nor full. He drained his coffee and waited patiently. The little girl began to nag for more cake. Her mother told her quite sharply to sit still.

She said, 'The thing is, you're an expert, Mr Nicholson. You could tell me who was responsible. Or help me to find out. There are papers I can give you. That's all I need. Then I'll decide what to do about it.'



Margaret was in the shower. He grabbed his bag and jacket. But then wanted at least to see her. She hadn't locked, so he was able to walk in and gaze through a plastic made to imitate frosted glass this time.

'Did somebody come to the room yesterday morning?' he called.

The splashing stopped. She turned off the tap, pulled in a towel and slid back the door. Margaret. She was salmon pink now. Cinnabar almost. He had never felt like this. So that he wondered if he would ever have the courage to ask for all he was learning to want.

'Someone knocked four or five times.'

'Don't open. It's a semi-psycho case. Her husband was killed in an accident and she's on some kind of crusade to make everybody pay. She almost scratched a quarryman's eyes out yesterday. Walked right up to the face just as they were about to blast it.'

He was grinning foolishly, but Margaret's face showed concern.

'You'll get your jacket wet,' she said. But he embraced her anyway. And what he liked to do was whisper sweet lewdnesses in her ear. She smiled serenely. 'All in good time. Don't forget your bag.'

In the lobby, he was aware he ought to ask if there had been a fax for him. Yes, that was the worry, the slowly cementing unpleasantness in the back of his mind. Quite

probably it was that that had given him his nightmare. Evil in the rock. What could it mean? But heading for the desk, Mrs Owen was there again. Much as he sympathised, he changed direction and walked straight over to his driver at the door.

Who spoke no English. For which he was rather grateful. He watched the landscape. Steep slopes. Sparse vegetation on thin soils. Erosion of an old uplift. Much the same as might be said of his marriage, amidst the general drift of the continents. But the light was so bright here. He closed his eyes and let it glow through the blood of his eyelids. Redder than her hair. Looking into the light was the sweetest thing. He couldn't remember where he had heard that. And he opened his bag to glance quickly through his notes.

They had a beautiful woman waiting at the gate. That was the first indication somebody had over-estimated his importance. A truly beautiful woman: graphite-black hair, quick, perfectly-moulded face. And, if there comes a time in many men's lives when for sanity's sake they must decide between the escapes of total commitment to work, or having the occasional adventure, Peter Nicholson had now definitely plumped for the latter. Pandora's box was officially open. So that he even managed to consider for a moment whether bringing the wonderful Margaret mightn't have been a mistake, cramped his style. He felt extremely cheerful and happy. Runny as lava. And he said the first thing he needed to see was the deposit yard.

She clicked along beside him on heels, brushed him with airy clothes, and since her English appeared to be very good, he remarked that one of the things that had most worried him on his visit to the quarry yesterday was the poor segregation between freshly-won, rejected, or weathered material, and that awaiting slabbing. Though what he was actually looking for as he moved down the long lines of blocks in the yard was just one example of their having arrowed the direction of crystallisation wrongly. That

on its own would be telling. He stopped and brushed away dust from the groove a borehole had left: a grey, subvitreous, speckled surface. The bottom line was, he said, that if a slab broke and fell off, it could kill somebody. It had killed somebody. There were insurance costs.

She was well-mannered, polite and efficient. She squatted down and explained the code roughly painted in the corner of a block. He thought he had never been shown around a granite deposit by a woman before, and said that the different destination codes suggested the company was supplying at least three projects at the same time. Whereas they had promised priority would be given to Marlborough Place.

She smiled very brightly, then actually laughed. He had always been impressed by big, white, even teeth. By health really. Though there was a poignancy in chips and discolorations. Margaret had a canine buckled over an incisor. And he remembered the chip on the dead man's tooth. Not unlike his own. But on the lower set. There was always something different about another man's blemish. Whereas the teeth now smiling at him might have been hard, paste porcelain, the original cast the race had strayed from. 'Priority does not mean exclusivity,' she smiled. He could already see her in bed. Which, of course, was a facility Margaret had given him.

Did love mean exclusivity?

Then while they stood watching the men harnessing up a block to be trolleyed into the plant, she asked him if he had come alone, or brought his wife so as to take the opportunity of having a holiday. There were so many fine beaches. And this was presumptuous, he thought, since he wore no ring. Unless it was a request for just that information, his marital status. Peter hesitated. A distant explosion sent a crowd of birds wheeling and crying from the derrick arm. The huge block inched off the ground and swung very slightly towards them, centring to gravity under

the derrick. Because Dr Maifredi, she said, would be very happy to invite him to his villa, perhaps tomorrow if he was free. She would be on hand to interpret if that should be necessary, though Dr Maifredi spoke good English. There was a swimming pool. Splendid views.

And this, he thought, was the second indication. He asked his guide her name and she was called Thea.

They went on into the finishing plant, picking up headsets and overalls at the door. Here the 275-million-year-old blocks, each a vast and unique complex of quartz, feldspar, biotite mica, and a whole range of minor contributors crystallised in never-ending combinations, were to be transformed into so many identical polished slabs.

Almost immediately he began to feel ill. Most of the noise was coming from the twenty gangsaws lined up where one whole side of the plant was open to the deposit yard. On each saw a block of about four or five tons was being attacked by a heavy frame holding perhaps eighty steel blades and fed with a mixture of water, lime and cast-iron shot. Despite his headset, the incessant screaming of quartz against tempered steel and spiky shot knifed straight through his brain in a way it could not through the granite. The advance speed must be around seven or eight centimetres per hour. And all the meanwhile the big wheels forced the connecting rods back and forth, dragging and pushing their shrieking blade-frames with hypnotic plangency. He felt drawn to such things. Despite the oppressive machine clamour. The attraction was part of his feeling ill. So that now he had a fleeting image of the big blades slabbing his own body, or that of somebody precious to him. Logically, if there was evil in the rock, it was here it must be released.

Thea caught his grimace and smiled. When he nodded, she led the way to the foreman's sound-proof cabin where he asked what kind of tolerances the saws were operating to, the granulometry of the shot. Thea translated. Had it

been explained to everybody how important respect of tolerance was on this job? The man was wiry, moustached, unimpressed. He kept slipping a thin bracelet on and off one dark hand, as though in mesmerised time to the slow screaming of the machine immediately outside. Even in here they had to shout; and the foreman said that final tolerance was the job of calibration and polishing, down the line. He just had to make sure the slabs weren't too thin. If they were, he switched them to the tile production line.

Despite the sprinklers and suction filters, dust was everywhere. On coming out of the cabin after the swaying back of his guide, Peter felt more sick and oppressed than before. He got the same thing visiting shale crushers. The shrieking was in his mind, the massacring reduction of stone to something willed. Thea on the contrary, seemed admirably composed.

They walked further along the gangsaws. The air was wet and grey. The connecting rods drove back and forth. The blades sank parallel. Until she stopped at a saw offloading. He pulled out a steel calibrator and measured widths as the mechanical arm lowered the slabs. A watching operative was the first black he had seen in the country. And he had to force himself to concentrate.

An hour passed. They followed through, along the line of disc trimmers and honers, as the rocks made their slow progress to the desired uniformity. At every stage, despite the pounding in his head, he measured. He told Thea to tell a worker to reject a piece 0.5 mm too thin. Eyebrows were raised. He stood by the drilling frame. The slabs were 25 millimetres thick. The holes must be 8 millimetres in diameter. Leaving throats only 8.5 millimetres each side. It wouldn't be difficult to find something to reject here. A cracked phenocryst right on the edge. The operative was impassive, made no objection. There was no question of talking. And by the first of the polishers the fumes of stannous oxide almost had him vomiting. The grinding

heads skated slow circles across the stone. A tenuous lustre came up as water and paste sluiced over the slabs. Thea touched his hand and led him to the finished stacks.

He pulled out a magnifying glass to stare at what only a month ago had been deep in the palaeozoic earth. Grey Pearl it was called, a mottled play of black, white and off-white crystals, a sort of monochrome kaleidoscope in which his practised eye found two varieties of feldspar and biotite, the dominant quartz, the fine clays, surprisingly large phenocrysts, no preferred orientation, so that every square inch was still triumphantly unique despite all the long rows of machines. Indeed, they bought it for that. Modular and unrepeatable.

He asked to have a slab taken out into the sunlight and hosed down. Which two men duly did, leaning it against a derrick leg. Coming outside with them, he immediately experienced a sense of liberation. He removed his headset and breathed. And, looking obliquely across the surface of the rock, there they were: moderately aligned, originating in the quartz crystals, but spreading wide. 'Those will be twice as thick by the time it gets to Australia,' he told his guide to tell the men. 'Chuck it.'



'Imagine a man released from the pressure cooker of home for a week. His heart expands, doesn't it, his mind opens. Like a sponge when you let go. Well, it's the same with the rock when you pull it out from under the hill and slice it up. Stress relief. And as it expands, it fractures, in a cobweb of tiny cracks. Resistance to shear is reduced, it becomes more fragile.'

'I should take you straight back home then,' she had said. 'To where you're safe.'

He laughed. 'No, just don't subject me to any shear.'

'Which was?'

When pressure was applied in at least two different and not diametrically opposite directions. Wind and gravity, for example, in the case of a thin slab taken half-way around the world and carelessly hung thirty floors above a Sydney thoroughfare. In his own case it might be libido and loyalty, kids and work. Barely had he said this than they were kissing deeply. Crystal tears in her eyes.

That had been day one.



‘This woman again, she was at my office this morning.’ The quarry manager was a small, squat, jolly man, paunch pressed against the table, tackling meat. ‘She wants it to be my fault her husband is dead.’

Peter had told Margaret he would do his best to be back for lunch. His duties were only limited. The whole visit was little more than a stunt for claims the Australian contractor was planning to make against his supplier. But now Thea was sitting next to him. Despite her formal polish, he wondered if he noticed hints of complicity beneath the surface of a smile, and if so, how big and deep that deposit might be, what means might be required to win it. A light knee touched his own.

‘At first I have thought the lady comes with you,’ the quarry manager went on. There was the finishing plant manager too, but he spoke no English.

‘No, you’re joking. Never travel with a woman.’ Peter laughed. He was enjoying himself and at the same time registering the background discomfort of not knowing quite what he wanted, nor even what he should want. Only that it was exciting. There was another worry niggling too, if only he could place it. Asking the way to the loo, he found a pay phone in the cloakroom, worked out how to use it, called the hotel and asked for 221. But of course he had told her not to

answer. Annoyingly, reception didn't take back the line, so he had to call again to ask if there had been a fax.

'All faxes are carried directly up to the rooms, sir.'

This had honestly not occurred to him. He stood for a moment in the booth, noticing a ceramic floor beneath his feet which admirably mimicked the polished rock he had inspected this morning. And he could presumably phone his wife direct from here. If he had had enough change. Or the desire to go and get it. For a moment he saw the phone and all its possibilities divide like a million fracture lines, a net, a web of necessity, all the way across the crumpled hills of Europe back home. Though home, at this distance, became a somewhat arbitrary notion. One house in one street. Where his children were. He decided to enjoy himself.

They were chattering in their own language. He sat down. Through the interpreter, the finishing plant manager began to enthuse about new technology and what it had meant for this particular locality. He watched the beautiful woman's lips form the words, virgin territory. 'Yes, the whole area, until just a short time ago.' And as on two or three occasions already this morning, he was aware of vague parallels with his own life. His mind seemed so alive, as though heated to a fluid state where everything might be everything else. An intense metamorphism. 'With diamond tools,' Thea parroted, 'and modern robotics, these hills can become absolutely anything: kitchen surfaces, table-tops, spiral stairs, washbowls, window surrounds, skirting elements, tiled floors and walls, bar furniture, building façades, anything.'

The finishing plant manager grinned proudly between the wineglasses. He was hang-jawed, Mediterranean. 'Is beautiful stone, no? Beautiful.'

'The only traditional use,' offered the quarry manager, 'before we can mass-produce it, was tombstones.'

Peter nodded. Then everybody caught the unfortunate allusion at exactly the same time. Like the shadow a crane