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# The man who let the Titanic sink

**A mysterious chapter of the famous tragedy makes a gripping tale, says **Antonia Senior****

**O**ne cold night in April 1912, a young merchant navy officer is on the midnight watch aboard the SS *Californian*. Across the Atlantic swell, the lights of another ship break the darkness. It is behaving oddly and the men on the bridge of the *Californian* are watching it. Suddenly, the mystery ship sends white rockets into the sky.

The young officer, Herbert Stone, wakes his captain, Stanley Lord. Captain Lord does nothing; issues no orders. Meanwhile, across the dark sea, the *Titanic* sinks.

British and American inquiries found that the *Californian's* failure to respond to the *Titanic's* rockets contributed to the death of 1,514 passengers and crew. So much is recorded fact. There is, however, a giant piece of the jigsaw missing — why didn't Lord respond? David Dyer's debut novel, ***The Midnight Watch***, addresses this question.

The fictional reporter, John Steadman, is on the biggest news story of his life — the sinking of the *Titanic*. He begins to suspect there is something wrong with the SS *Californian's* official story that the officers saw nothing. The survivors from the *Titanic* tell of a ship on the horizon that failed to come to their aid; they tell of rockets reaching the sky, only to be ignored by this ship. As Steadman begins to uncover the truth, Stone wrestles with what happened. Young, easily led Stone is dominated by his captain, who sticks doggedly to his version of events.

This gripping novel sheds new light on a known event and probes with great subtlety the places in which historical fact has no business — the mysteries of the human heart. Stone and Lord are portrayed with convincing acuity as they drown in

their own moral failures. *The Midnight Watch* is historical fiction at its best.

**Death Zones** takes the reader into unsettling territory: Belorussia, in 1943, as the Nazis unleash a horrifying onslaught on the local population. An SS officer and his wife are found murdered, probably by partisans. The only witness is a local six-year-old girl. Detective Oberleutnant Heinrich Hoffmann is charged with finding the murderers. Hoffmann is helped and hindered in this by his childhood friend Manfred, an SS officer and charismatic nihilist who relishes the German mission to obliterate the local population.

*Death Zones* is deeply troubling. It is structured like a conventional historical crime novel but why care about the death Hoffmann is investigating when every page brings a new state-sanctioned vicious death or beating? Yet Pasternak is a talented writer and vividly re-creates the unbearable horrors inflicted by the Nazis. Manfred is well drawn. In one scene he rages against the words they use to describe their genocide, words such as liquidation and cleansing.

Manfred says: "It's all killing, Heinrich. I mean, we're not cleaning ladies or

functionaries, are we, for Chrissake?

We're not just giving the Jews a clean like they were some bloody germ. We plunder them... whip the s\*\*\* out of them, we strip them naked and put bullets through their brains..."

The blurb on the back tells us that Hoffmann "struggles to retain his humanity" — on the page this means he watches, and sometimes participates in, acts of appalling barbarity. *Death Zones* is skilfully done but horrible to read.

**The English Girl** is the opposite to *Death Zones* — everything is a little safe, a little romantic. It's a dual timeline tale of Oman in the 1950s and the early 20th



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century. Joan Seabrook, a young girl with dreams of being an archaeologist, travels to 1950s Oman with her fiancé, Rory. Her brother Daniel is there, fighting in one of those odd, confused conflicts that marked the end of Empire.

Joan meets her heroine, Maude Vickery, an Englishwoman of the old school, who crossed the Arabian desert on a camel and wrote stirring tales about her adventures.

## Death Zones vividly re-creates the unbearable horrors inflicted by the Nazis

Joan is seduced by the desert and by the irascible Maude's stories. In a parallel narrative we follow the young Maude's first adventures and her relationship with a famous explorer. Webb is atmospheric on the pull of the desert, and Joan and Maude are heroines worth following into the hot, wild Arabian horizon.

Flavia Alba, the informer-daughter of the famous detective of Ancient Rome, Falco, makes a welcome return in *The Graveyard of the Hesperides*. In this fourth instalment of Lindsey Davis's Flavia

Albia series, Flavia is due to marry the magistrate Manlius Faustus when his building company uncovers the bones of a missing barmaid in the garden of a dodgy bar.

Flavia is drawn into uncovering the mystery, which takes her into the seamy world of Roman prostitution. Davis's books crackle with wit and knowledge. She has the happy knack of making the reader feel entirely immersed in Rome. In a grim, run-down bathhouse "... the floors were slippery with other people's scraped-off filth. The customers looked like people who peed in the plunge pools."

Though *Altar of Blood* is the ninth outing for the Roman centurion Marcus Aquila, the series by Anthony Riches shows few signs of getting stale. In a shocking opener more misery is piled on Marcus, who has had his share of knocks. The centurion and his band of brothers are dispatched to Germany on a commando-style mission. They must cross the Rhine and kidnap a priestess, bringing her back to

Rome. What follows is a breathless adventure with plenty of twists and battles.

In *Winter's Fire*, Sigurd the Jarl returns. In last year's superb *God of Vengeance*, the young Sigurd Haraldarson proved himself a formidable Viking warrior. As *Winter's Fire* opens he still has only a small band and insufficient silver to take on the forces of the treacherous King Gorm, who betrayed Sigurd's father.

Sigurd and his band travel to Sweden to fight as mercenaries, becoming embroiled in other people's wars. Runa, his sister, is left on an island of women who learn to fight in preparation for the great battle at the end of the world, the Ragnarok. The central story of Sigurd's revenge on Gorm does not move forward very far; in plot terms it feels a bit like the flaccid second book in a trilogy. But Sigurd's travails are still riveting and *Winter's Fire* has all Giles Kristian's trademark swagger and poetry.

by Giles Kristian

Bantam Press, 320pp;  
 £14.99 \* £12.99

## The Midnight Watch

by David Dyer

Atlantic,  
 336pp;  
 £12.99  
 \* £10.99

## Death Zones

by Simon Pasternak,  
 trans. Martin Aitken

Harvill Secker, 336pp;  
 £16.99 \* £14.99

## The English Girl

by Katherine Webb

Orion, 448pp;  
 £16.99 \* £14.99

## The Graveyard of the Hesperides

by Lindsey Davis

Hodder & Stoughton,  
 416pp; £18.99 \* £16.99

## Altar of Blood

by Anthony Riches

Hodder & Stoughton,  
 400pp; £14.99 \* £12.99

## Winter's Fire



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**BLIND EYE** Stanley Lord, left, ignored the distress calls from the Titanic, above

