

{ BOOKS }

**Letters of Stone - From Nazi Germany to South Africa**

★★★★★  
Steven Robins (Penguin Books, R250)

**A**T the beginning of this devastating book Steven Robins quotes the writer WG Sebald on the subject of memories: "If they remained locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight."

*Letters of Stone* is the story of the weight of memory, of the burden of guilt and regret; of the obliteration of hope, of identity, of human beings.

Robins grew up in Port Elizabeth in the '60s and '70s in a thoroughly anglicised, secular Jewish home. He was aware, as children so often are, of unspoken things. In the dining room an old photograph of three women watched over their meals. He was vaguely aware that they were family members but he never asked who they were, and no one ever spoke of them. It would be many years before he learnt that they were his father's mother, Cecilie, and his sisters Edith and Hildegard, and that they had died in the Holocaust. His father went to his grave without ever mentioning them. "There was a silence that completely shrouded anything about them," he says.

Robins is a professor of anthropology at Stellenbosch University and he speaks in the cadences of a man used to debat-

**I didn't want it to be another holocaust narrative that didn't deal with the broader implications**

ing, analysing and explaining. He writes in this tone, too. At first one presumes it is because he is an academic: he lacks the artistry of Edmund de Waal in *The Hare With Amber Eyes*, the dramatic skill of Mark Gevisser in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, the rich idiom of Dov Fedler's *Out of Line*, all family histories dealing with the extermination of Jews in World War 2. What Robins does, instead, is let the material speak eloquently for itself.

"I thought if I got too closely caught up in the emotions of the story it would swallow me up," he says, "and I also didn't want to burden the reader too much with the heaviness."

Robins's father, Herbert Robinski, escaped from Germany



# SILENT EYES

A tragic history emerges from an old photograph and a cache of letters, writes **Michele Magwood**



**THE WEIGHT OF MEMORY:** Steven Robins, left; above, his grandmother and two aunts who died in the Holocaust

to South Africa in 1936; his younger brother, Arthur, settled in what was then Northern Rhodesia. They left behind their parents, their sisters, and another brother, Siegfried, who hoped to follow them. Over the years, all Robins was able to learn was that they had perished in Auschwitz and Riga. Having come to a dead end with his research, he visited Berlin in 2000, laid commemorative *Stolpersteine* outside their home, and believed he was closing the chapter.

And then, in 2012, while clearing out their parents' flat in Sea Point, Arthur's children found a

cache of old letters. They were written mostly by Cecilie to her sons in Africa, reporting on their days in an increasingly frightening Berlin, and their futile attempts to leave. The quotidian details of their doomed lives are heartbreaking: a new felt hat, card games with coffee and cake, the scarcity of matzos, and the constant gathering of papers to help them emigrate.

At last Robins was able to "hear" their voices. Indomitable Cecilie, keeping up a cheerful front; her quiet husband David; proud, spirited Edith; and Hildegard, who it is clear was disabled.

The years pass, Cecilie's optimism begins to wear thin, and as readers we watch the dates on the letters with dread, knowing what lies ahead. And after the last letter, silence.

There is another important strand to this story which emerged for Robins when he was researching a forebear in the Karoo — the work of the German professor Eugen Fischer, a pioneer of eugenics and racial science. Fischer conducted experiments on the Baster people of what was then German Southwest Africa before returning to institute his diabolical programmes in Nazi Germany. Southern Africa was his laboratory.

As an anthropologist, this was crucial for Robins. "I didn't want it to be yet another holocaust narrative that didn't deal with the broader implications. I'm hoping this book does something different, that it draws wider connections between what happened in Europe in the 1930s and '40s and what had happened earlier in the colonies."

One senses that at last Robins has shifted the heavy stone at the heart of his family history, filled the lacuna of emptiness with commemoration. We are reminded of the words of Philip Larkin in his poem *An Arundel Tomb*: "What will survive of us is love." @michelemagwood

## Start working on your bucket list NOW

**Magicians of the Gods**

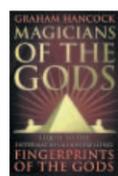
★★★★★  
Graham Hancock (Coronet, R360)

**A**RE we silly to worry about climate change when we all will be wiped out by a comet within the next 25 years? That's the implication in the latest theory from Graham Hancock, the consummate but controversial master of alternative history. He is usually discredited by orthodox historians, astrologers, geologists and a whole slew of academics, but unlike them he does write bestsellers.

One of those is *Fingerprints of the Gods*, written 20 years ago. He argues that an ancient civilisation was wiped out, leaving be-

hind massive monuments and mysterious buildings, including the earliest temples in Egypt. Members of that ancient civilisation, he argues, were gods to the primitive hunter-gatherers, who survived and kick-started civilisation again. The monuments left behind carried a message for future generations to be deciphered at a time when they could be understood: that the disaster will happen again — soon.

Now, in *Magicians of the Gods*, he argues that said ancient civilisation ended when the Earth took a direct hit from a comet 12 800 years ago. The impact threw so much dust and smoke into the atmosphere that it precipitated an ice age that lasted



1 200 years. Hancock travels the world to explore the monuments to decipher the message: from the scablands of Washington State to Gunung Padang in Indonesia, from Easter Island to Syria. This message indicates Earth will cross the path of the comet again sometime between 1960 and 2040.

There is new information too, such as the discussion of Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, an ancient site first excavated in 1995. Hancock's writing contains fascinating information and insights but it does not all add up to a lost civilisation. He does not argue that the monolithic blocks of Machu Picchu and Sacsayhuaman in Peru, Baalbek in Lebanon, or the

Valley Temple at Giza are remnants of the lost civilisation.

He also never gets round to explaining why there are strange handbags drawn on a pillar at Göbekli Tepe, the same handbags as carried by engraved figures in Babylon and Mexico.

Hancock has been accused of lifting ideas, cherry picking his evidence to fit with his argument, and ignoring that which does not. He postulates that the lost civilisation was one of high technology, but he never says exactly how advanced. At times one feels overwhelmed by astronomical details. And too often, he refers the reader to his earlier books for more detailed examination of a point. But whatever his faults, Hancock is a brilliant storyteller. — Andrew Unsworth

## book bites

**Innovation: Shaping South Africa through Science** ★★★★★

Sarah Wild (Pan Macmillan, R285)

**BOOK buff**



This is a valuable book for contemporary South Africa. It reminds us of our potential. It shows how, through science, we can solve some of our most pressing problems. Wild focuses on how we can use our skills and knowledge to sort out the crises in

energy, industry, education and the environment. New ideas abound, although innovators face many obstacles, the main one being the lack of funding for research and development. Wild explores a range of issues from topical skin cancer treatments to ways of solving the electricity shortage. Inspiring reading. — Kgebetli Moele

**After You** ★★★★★

Jojo Moyes (Penguin Random House, R285)

**BOOK fling**



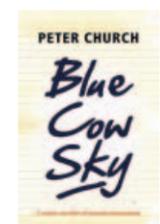
The sequel to *Me Before You* picks up after Louisa has euthanised Will Traynor, the paraplegic love of her life, upon his request. An accident forces her to move back in with her family and she has given up on finding happiness. Louisa's social life consists of support group

meetings for the bereaved. But then a figure from Will's past unexpectedly appears, forcing her to participate in life again. And there's the sexy paramedic ... It's light reading but it explores some pertinent questions about grief, healing and moving forward after loss. — Nikki Temkin @NikkiTemkin

**Blue Cow Sky** ★★★★★

Peter Church (Burnet Media, R175)

**BOOK bru**



Leo is an author. He is also a drifter and womaniser who is more often homeless and penniless than not. Our anti-hero wanders from one sweaty sexual encounter to the next, ending in mayhem for the unfortunate woman who is desperate or vulnerable enough to sleep

with him. Will Leo ever finish his second book or hold down a relationship for more than a week? The chances are slim. But, like watching a car crash, the reader is compelled to come along for the bumpy ride, as if trapped in Leo's jalopy with the doors locked. Also stinking up the pages is Jerome, Leo's partner in crime, a soft-hearted gangster with not-so-fresh takkies. In fact, the smell of BO, dirty socks and dog farts almost jumps from the pages. It's a non-demanding read for those who won't be offended by non-PC humour and toilet sex. Get the air freshener ready. — Jim Hislop

**The Marble Collector** ★★★★★

Cecelia Ahern (HarperCollins, R310)

**BOOK fling**



It's always comforting to dip into a novel by Cecelia Ahern. You know it will be warm and funny, with subtle twists carefully placed to keep one reading. Fergus Boggs has lost his memory after suffering a stroke. Going through his possessions, his married

daughter Sabrina discovers his marble collection and the meticulous inventory he painstakingly wrote out. A few marbles are missing and through her quest to find them Sabrina learns that her father lived a double life. Her world is shaken by these revelations — but will it help her failing marriage? — Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt