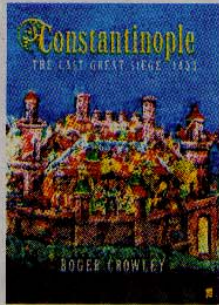


HISTORY



Constantinople: The Last Great Siege, 1453

Roger Crowley
Faber & Faber, \$49.95
Reviewer *Owen Richardson*

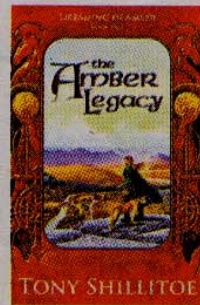
BY THE MID-15TH CENTURY Constantinople, the centre of orthodox Christianity and the once-great capital of the Byzantine Empire, had fallen into decline. Plagued by civil wars and ravaged by the Black Death, the city had been repeatedly besieged by the Ottomans but had held out, chiefly thanks to its natural defences and unbreachable walls.

Sultan Mehmet II was to change that. His 1453 siege and overcoming of the city was the end of what remained of the Byzantine empire and the beginning of a new chapter in Christian-Muslim hostility; in Christian folklore he was to become the archetype of the cruel Turk while to his own people he became an enduring hero, like Alexander or Napoleon. Moody, suspicious and violent, he was also a leader of outstanding intellectual gifts and interests and a military genius; the siege marked the first widespread use of artillery, and military historians consider it the end of medieval warfare.

Roger Crowley's book tells this dramatic story well and bears up well in comparison with the great historian Steven Runciman's 1965 account of the siege. Crowley writes of the psychology and technology of the siege with equal ease.

The Ottoman takeover of the city was its renaissance; Muslim Istanbul was to flourish and become as legendary as Byzantine Constantinople had been; the French traveller Pierre Gilles remarked in the mid-16th century that other cities seemed mortal but Istanbul would remain as long as there were men on earth.

FANTASY



The Amber Legacy

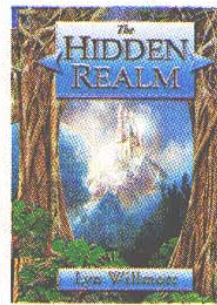
Tony Shillitoe
Voyager, \$19.95
Reviewer *Lorien Kaye*

GENRE FICTION IS, BY definition, written according to certain conventions. As the romance reader knows, the heroine will find love; the fantasy reader knows an ordinary person will be charged with a special task and thus will discover their own extraordinariness. The best writers play with the rules by pushing, subverting or overturning the conventions. But often readers want nothing more than to enjoy the way a book uses the familiar rules in its own way.

Tony Shillitoe makes reference to the conventions of fantasy fiction by citing a scholar from his invented world commenting on the way ballads "make heroes of ordinary folk". But this self-reflexive awareness is otherwise not much apparent in *The Amber Legacy*, which is a fairly standard fantasy novel, even though it is marked by some differences: its female protagonist and somewhat clumsy feminist undertones, for example, or its use of Australian landscape, wildlife, and even idiom — "bugger me," says an innkeeper. Overall, readers will find the comfortingly familiar rather than the challengingly different.

Meg, an ordinary young woman from a small village, is set multiple quests. Her prophetic dreams and her discovery of her magical powers amplified via the "conduit" of an amber pendant propel her into the wider, violent world. She fights alongside men as a soldier, becomes the queen's companion, and challenges the religious seers whose magical powers she shares. Ultimately she returns to the utopian simplicity of country life. At least until the next book: this is the first in a new series.

FIRST FICTION



The Hidden Realm

Lyn Willmott
Brolga Publishing, \$24.95
Reviewer *Dianne Dempsey*

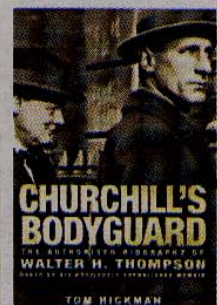
I RATHER LIKED THE economy with which this fantasy/quest novel is written. Instead of the thousands of pages that typify the genre, first-time novelist Lyn Willmott has restrained herself to 300 pages. In the first part of the novel, 16-year-old Rod Oakden is exploring a cave complex in the Kimberleys when he comes across an alternative universe within a hidden rainforest. Rod soon discovers that he has a mission in life.

He is part of a prophecy; he must save not only the Earth but the hidden forest kingdom. The people within this kingdom colonised the Earth countless years ago. They were responsible for altering man's genetic structure, which in effect resulted in mankind outgrowing the inhabitants of the forest kingdom and generally running amok. According to the prophecy, the two universes must align again before catastrophic forces destroy the planet.

In the forest kingdom Rod meets Chaldee, a powerful princess who becomes his partner in the quest to save the planet. Other offshoots include Robar, an ape-like Chewbacca character, who is loyal to Chaldee, up to a point, and Cypher, who is a sort of spiritual Tinkerbell. In the second and third parts of the novel Rod takes on the burden of the great warrior who is prepared to sacrifice himself in order to save the kingdoms.

Willmott is a skilled writer who has much to say about environmental issues. Unfortunately I must prophesy that her novel will struggle to compete within the crowded market of young-adult fantasy.

BIOGRAPHY



Churchill's Bodyguard

Tom Hickman
Headline \$55
Reviewer *Owen Richardson*

SPECIAL BRANCH DETECTIVE Walter Thompson's first meeting with Winston Churchill left him with a poor impression of the man. It was 1921 and Thompson had been assigned as his bodyguard after threats against his life by Sinn Fein. Whereas Lloyd George, whom Thompson had also shadowed, had turned on the charm for the detective, Churchill merely growled "don't get in my way" and disappeared back into his office.

By the time they parted company at the end of the Second World War — Thompson spent the 1930s guarding other VIPs and on regular Special Branch duties — they had become friends. It's almost too movie-cute: the quixotic, emotional Churchill (who wept openly after meeting bombed-out families) and the straightforward, working-class Thompson, who admired and loved him but who had no qualms about voicing his opinions.

No man is a hero to his valet, it is said. Churchill very obviously was a hero to Thompson but this didn't stop him standing up to him. Like many depressives, Churchill got a kick out of courting danger, and during the Blitz Thompson had to constantly drag him down from the roof of the Annexe (two blocks from Downing Street, where the government moved for the duration of the war). You may be given pause by the danger in which Churchill was willing to put those around him, Thompson first and foremost.

In all the millions of words written about Winston Churchill, Walter Thompson has previously barely been mentioned. Hickman's moving and often funny book is an essential piece of Churchilliana.