

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

# From this day to the ending of the world

Fiction meets fact in Bernard Cornwell's novel about Henry V's victory at Agincourt

BY DAVID HENDRICKS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN ANTONIO

Following two recent historical studies of English King Henry V's improbable military victory on a muddy French farm in 1415, it is not surprising an historical novel would appear to tell the story in a more visual, personable manner.

With *Agincourt*, prodigious novelist Bernard Cornwell presents a wonderful fictional version of the English army invasion of France and the subsequent showdown battle. Cornwell, already widely known for his medieval historical novels and his Richard Sharpe series, which follows an English soldier through the Napoleonic wars, picked names off the 1415 rosters of soldiers and invented backgrounds, personalities and interrelationships.

Cornwell blends his characters into the fragrant and coarse Middle Ages civilization and rounds out his story with appropriate timeless themes.

English archer Nicholas Hook is Cornwell's lowborn protagonist in a story balanced with English and French characters.

Hook's strength and archer training leads him first to Soissons, France, where the French re-conquer the English-occupied town. The atrocities Hook witnesses motivate him as he is recruited into the English army summoned by Henry, who seeks to strengthen his claim to France's throne.

A generation before Joan of Arc, Hook, too, hears "voices" that guide him through his adventures and the heat of battle. He believes his guardian angels are the martyred saints Crispin and Crispinian.

The climactic Agincourt battle, as noted by William Shakespeare's play, occurred on the feast day of those saints, Oct. 25, 1415.

Cornwell's narrative vividly tracks the historical plot as Henry's army sails to the mouth of the Seine River and begins a prolonged siege on the walled city of Harfleur.

The siege takes longer than expected, and Henry's army is widely infected and weakened with dysentery before it can march inland for the return trip home via Calais, France.

The French confront Henry's small, starving 6,000-member force with about 30,000 men. Cornwell's extended battle narrative articulates the historical explanations of how Henry's outnumbered army resoundingly

## Publication Notes



AGINCOURT: A NOVEL

BY BERNARD CORNWELL

464 PAGES

HARPERCOLLINS

defeated the French — the muddy battlefield and the tactical use of the English archers vs the leaderless French forces overweighed by their own armor and weapons.

Cornwell's narrative is grisly at times, and the author displays a flair for inventing colorful and obscene medieval insults.

Cornwell populates the novel with good and evil characters from both sides. Even Henry is not black and white. A humane and grateful leader, Henry also judges harshly, ordering the execution of a soldier wrongly accused of stealing a religious artifact.

The unfortunate soldier happens to be Hook's brother, in Cornwell's story.

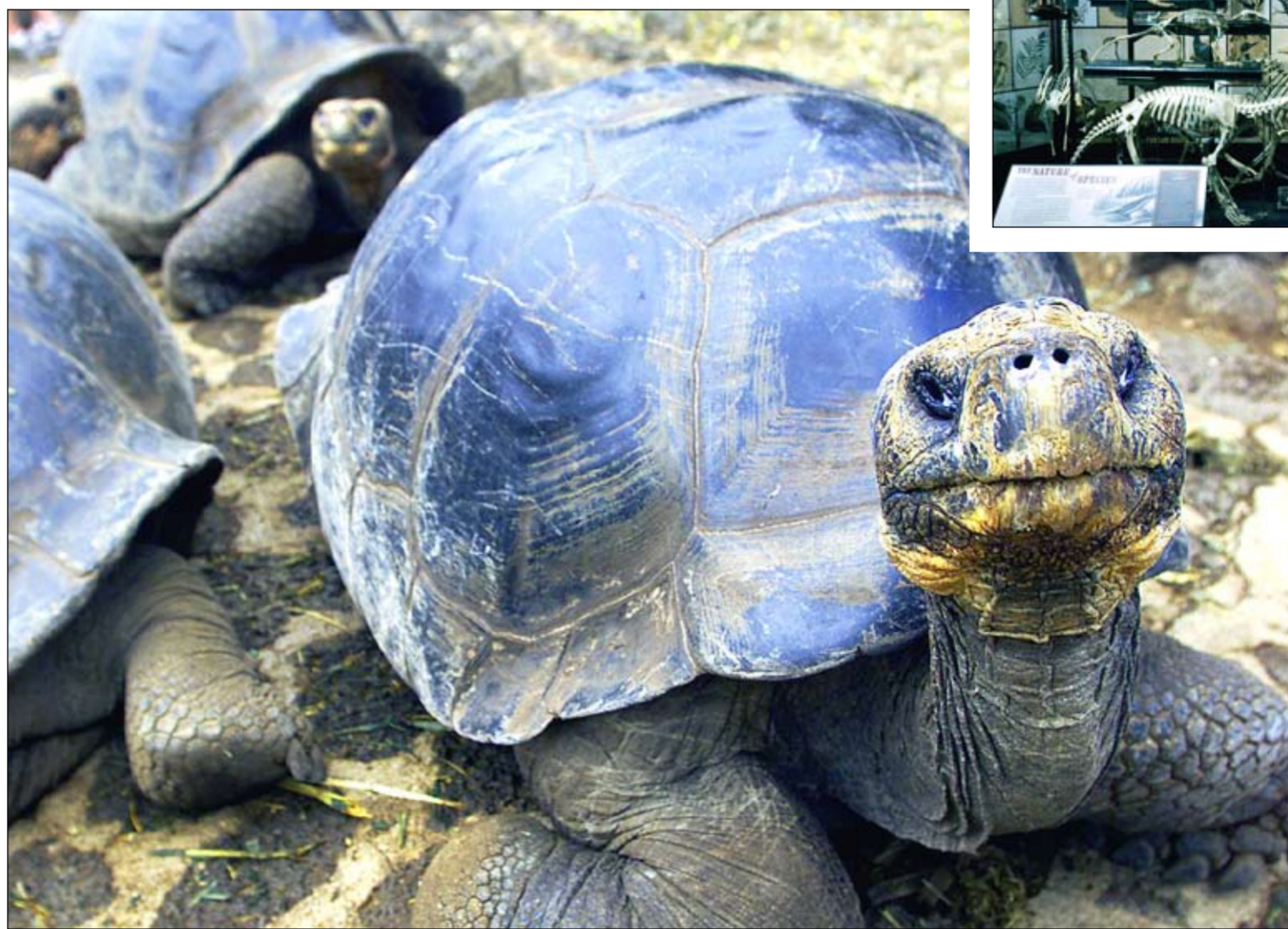
The ranks of the Christian priests vary from the purely evil — one English priest loves to rape — to the comforting and empathetic.

The extraordinary Agincourt battle continues to fascinate because it stands more for what happened than why it happened. The English continue to draw national identity from it. The Laurence Olivier movie during World War II, based on Shakespeare's play, was government-financed for propaganda purposes.

For a three-dimensional view of the event, readers should devote time to consume three works: Cornwell's novel, Juliet Barker's 2005 history, also titled *Agincourt* and, of course, Shakespeare's history play, *King Henry V*.

## SUNDAY PROFILE

A giant Galapagos turtle walks along the Charles Darwin Station in Ayora Port in the Galapagos Archipelago, Ecuador. Home to unique flora and fauna, the Galapagos Archipelago, which was visited by Darwin, is a cluster of some 13 islands and smaller islets and rocks, located 1,000km west of the continental shore.



Top and above: Sections of an exhibition on Charles Darwin held at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. PHOTOS: AFP

# Darwin's dawn

He may be long dead, but Darwin's theories live on as the foundation of biology and the curse of creationists

AFP, LONDON

Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution changed the face of science forever, but he was a modest, shy man who preferred to stay at home with his work and family than revel in celebrity. "I have no great quickness of apprehension or wit," he once wrote. "My power to follow a long abstract train of thought is very limited ... my memory is extensive but hazy."

Darwin was born on Feb. 12 1809 in Shrewsbury, western England, to a wealthy family — his father was a doctor, one grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was a noted natural philosopher and another, Josiah Wedgwood, set up a famous pottery.

He was a reluctant student. After school, he went to Edinburgh University to study medicine like his grandfather, father and brother but was bored by lectures and horrified by watching surgery without anesthetic.

He started studying natural history in his own time, taking long walks on beaches near Edinburgh, where he hunted for shells and watched wildlife.

Darwin quit medicine and his furious father sent him to

Cambridge University where he studied to be a clergyman, but it was the same story: he was more interested in collecting beetles than hitting the books.

Then his life — and, in no small measure, the history of the world — was turned on its head.

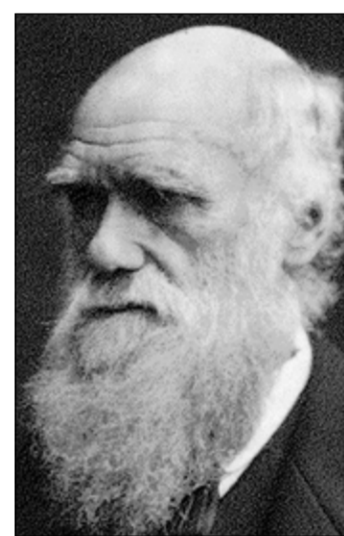
One of his professors recommended him to Robert FitzRoy, captain of *HMS Beagle*, who wanted a companion for a two-year, round-the-world surveying mission.

The *Beagle* set sail in 1831, when Darwin was aged 22. The voyage extended to five years, taking in places like Brazil, the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, New Zealand and Australia.

Despite chronic seasickness, the young man was thrilled. "My mind has been, since leaving England, in a perfect hurricane of delight and astonishment," he wrote.

Darwin collected a mountain of flora and fauna specimens, all of which were carefully tagged, and resolved to write a book on his discoveries when he returned home.

The *Beagle* docked in Britain in 1836 and Darwin, who never ventured abroad again, buried himself in work.



Thursday is the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. PHOTO: AFP

He published *Journal of Researches Into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by HMS Beagle*, the book which made him famous, in 1839.

But stress began to take its toll and the ill health which dogged him for the rest of his life took hold.

He agonized over whether to get married to ease his anxiety and drew up a list of pros ("constant companion ... better

than a dog, anyhow") and cons ("terrible loss of time") before concluding he must wed.

He married his cousin Emma Wedgwood in 1839 after a quick courtship. They were a contented union that produced 10 children.

After his *Beagle* voyage, Darwin became more and more convinced that species were not static but evolved, and that this process was molded by individuals who had adapted best to their habitat.

He was finally forced to make his ideas public after another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, wrote to him in 1858 outlining ideas similar to his own.

Darwin was stunned, but it was decided that the two men's theories should be made public side-by-side at a London scientific society.

He then condensed his theories into *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859.

The book was a massive popular success, prompting widespread debate, angry opposition from theologians and references to Darwin in a slew of cartoons, songs and advertisements.

His fame grew further with *The Descent of Man* in 1871. It argued that Man and ape

shared a common ancestor and expounded on the theory of sexual selection — that certain traits such as strength and good looks improve an individual's success at mating.

Darwin was endowed with extraordinary patience and diligence, as well as a mental agility enabling him to see both fine detail and the big picture.

But he also had the luck to have independent wealth, which gave him the time to research and reflect, and to be living in Victorian England, within a train ride from academies and institutions in London, then the world's scientific hub.

"He was a quintessential British amateur in the best possible sense," said German historian Wilfried Rogasch. "He had the means and the time and the intellectual capacity to follow what was going on."

Darwin died in 1882, aged 73. Typically, he wanted to be buried near his beloved home, Down House in Kent, southeast of London, but his contemporaries campaigned for a grander send-off.

His funeral was at London's Westminster Abbey, also his final resting place.

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

# Yu Hua laughs in the faces of Chinese characteristics

Modern China turns out to be a weird, perverse, more than half-crazed and wholly unique phenomenon in the work of this profound satirist and sensationalist

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

This huge novel, half a million Chinese characters long in the original, was a national sensation when it first surfaced in China three years ago, its two parts together selling over a million copies. Its fleshy sensationalism also appealed to Western critics who hailed Yu Hua (余华) as a profound satirist who'd peeled away the veneer of respectability that had concealed the realities of some of the most bizarre decades in all China's history.

*Brothers* (Xiong Di, 弟兄) was first published in Chinese in two parts — with the second very much the longer — in Taipei in 2005 and 2006. This vigorous and racy English version is translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (周成蔭) and Carlos Rojas, both American academics. Interestingly, the latter was one of the editors of *Writing Taiwan*, reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on Jan. 18, and the two have in addition edited *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2008) together.

This new translation was

short-listed for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize, and the only response possible to its not winning is that the novel that did win must have been magnificent indeed.

The story involves two stepbrothers, the maverick Baldy Li (so-called because his mother told the barber to shave off all his hair as a child to save money) and the more philosophical Song Gang. Their shared passion for the beautiful Lin Hong snakes its way through the book.

Sexual detail is everywhere, but narrated in a brash, farcical way. Unprecedented orgasms, fake bust-enlarging creams, artificial hymens and silicone implants are strewn through the novel's many pages.

Eating, too, features prominently, along with the sex and violence — all three directly physical things, and the opposite of the mental subtleties involved in aesthetic appreciation or metaphysical speculation, neither of which constitute Yu's natural strengths.

This widely-ranging and ironic portrait of modern China evokes the very feel of the place, with

its popular Korean TV soaps, Eternity bicycles, factory labor, Big White Rabbit candles, neon lights and raucous music, plus — for the successful — French wines, Italian furniture and a new white Mercedes.

The novel as a whole prompts the thought that China isn't so much a socialist country busy embracing hyper-capitalism as a weird, perverse, more than half-crazed and wholly unique phenomenon. The "Chinese characteristics" described by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) include, for this author, the furthest reaches of sexual inventiveness and the most bizarre of plastic surgery techniques. Toilets, gold-plated or otherwise, feature prominently, as do hymen-reconstruction surgery (no imaginary procedure) and get-rich-quick schemes in the spirit of the modern Chinese enthusiasm for all aspects of capitalism.

Confucian values of modesty, respect for elders and selfless integration into the social order couldn't be further from the world described in this ribald, lurid,

## Publication Notes



BROTHERS

BY YU HUA

642 PAGES

PANTHEON

zany narrative.

Individual re-invention mirrors a national re-invention in which both a 5,000-year-old civilization

and a shorter-lived Maoist construct are both ditched in favor of something more surreal, plastic and absurd. This is classic comic writing, where the grotesqueness found in real life is concentrated and intensified by a process of relentless accumulation to portray a world gone mad. And yet much of this gross fantasy is rooted in fact — there really was a Miss Artificial Beauty Contest in China for recipients of plastic surgery, for example. As for the Virgin Beauty Contest at the center of Part Two of the book, the reality it covers isn't hard to imagine.

Much of the novel's comedy springs from the portrait of a society of the newly rich who can't quite shake off their peasant ways. And the essential style remains cartoon-like, as the names of the characters testify — Popsicle Wang, Success Liu, Victory Zhao, Yanker Yu, Scissors Guan, Writer Liu (who thinks up advertising phrases for his factory) and Poet Zhao (who's only ever published four lines of verse in a mimeographed cultural

center magazine).

Part One covers the boys' youth during the Cultural Revolution. Baldy Li discovers his sex drive at the age of 8 and finds out about revolutionary Struggle Sessions at around the same age. This part of the story comes to a climax when the brothers' father has his left elbow dislocated and his home looted before being casually murdered by Red Guards while attempting to buy a ticket to Shanghai. The bravery of his wife is strongly presented, but she doesn't have much longer to live either.

A comic style would be inappropriate to such nightmares, so Yu veers instead into using the same kind of physical directness, only now to horrific rather than humorous effect.

The book as a whole raises memories of the English 18th century where Fielding's *Tom Jones* (also containing two boys brought up as brothers) and Smollett's scabrous and racy novels featured sensational, picaresque adventures with frequent punch-ups set somewhere between country

inns and fashionable spas. They may not have had characters falling into a cesspit in a public toilet while trying to catch glimpses of women's buttocks, as here, but their aims and techniques were similar.

There's now an established tradition in Chinese novel-writing of these garish, shocking, outrageous novels — *Please Don't Call Me Human* (千萬別把我當人), by Wang Shuo, (王朔), and the many novels of Mo Yan (莫言) are some other examples. Initially stigmatized as "hooligan literature," they today constitute part of the mainstream, and contrast with the sophisticated, urbane work of writers such as Wang Anyi (王安憶) and Dai Sijie (戴思杰), whose style perhaps derives from that of Eileen Chang (張愛玲).

Yu's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (許三觀賣血記), reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on Nov. 23, 2003, was very much in the same style as this new book. *Brothers*, though, is far more impressive. Indeed, it's a major achievement by any standards. Already published in the US by Pantheon, it will appear from Picador Asia in April.