

[ **HARDCOVER: US** ]

# Sex, lies and ticker tape

*Iain Pears' finance mystery contends that it's politics that corrupts money, rather than money that corrupts politics*

BY **HEPHZIBAH ANDERSON**  
BLOOMBERG

A spy doubling as a Barings banker, a courtesan posing as a countess and an arms dealer manipulating stock markets propel the plot of Iain Pears' sprawling tripartite mystery, *Stone's Fall*.

Yet the most compelling protagonist in this novel is money.

Pears is best known for *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, a best-seller that meshed mathematics and early medicine with revolutionary politics in Restoration England. In *Stone's Fall*, he tells the story of late 19th- to early 20th-century capitalism through the rise and fall of one man, John Stone.

Being Pears, he starts with the fall and works his way back in time to the rise.

The place is London, the year 1909. Stone, an arms maker and financier with the title of Lord Ravenscliff, is found dead, having tumbled from a window of his study. Stone's last will and testament contains a surprise bequest of \$250,000 to a child who nobody — least of all Elizabeth, his wife of almost 20 years — knew existed. So she hires a crime reporter, Matthew Braddock, to track down the heir.

Braddock disguises his investigation as research for a biography about Stone. As he narrates the first part of the novel, the journalist eases the lay reader into the world of finance through his own clumsy attempts at understanding the figures that swim before his eyes.

"Clearly this capitalism was a more complicated beast than I had thought," he groans.

Though at first amusing, his incomprehension soon grows annoying. Braddock is such a nebbish that it never seems credible that he will get to the bottom of the mystery.

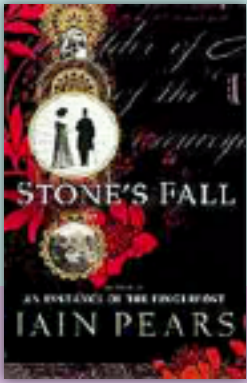
## TWO MEMOIRS

Almost half a century after he abandons his inquiries, Braddock receives a package containing two bundles of papers — memoirs that form the second and third parts of the book. One was written by a man named Henry Cort, the other by Stone.

Cort turns out to be a Barings bank employee who doubled as a spy. Working for the British government he became a broker of military intelligence who in the 1880s added a shrewd young streetwalker in Calais to his payroll of informants. When he next sees her, she's passing herself off as a Hungarian countess — Elizabeth Hadik-Barkoczy von Futak uns Szala — and moving in lofty social circles. She captivates the rich and powerful, including Stone.

Cort's big moment comes when he gets wind of a Franco-

## Publication Notes



STONE'S FALL: A NOVEL

BY IAIN PEARS  
608 PAGES  
SPIEGEL & GRAU

Russian plot to oust London as the world's financial capital by engineering a run on the Bank of England. Stone proves vital in averting the crisis and — no surprise given his access to inside information — emerges from the rescue all the richer.

## TORPEDO PATENT

In the third stretch of the book, Stone's memoirs take us even further back in time. The son of an English country curate and his Spanish wife, Stone comes into a moderate inheritance in the 1860s and sets forth on a Grand Tour of Europe.

Before the riddles of Stone's death and secret child can be resolved, the narrative slithers through a tangle of melodramatic twists, transporting us from anarchist meetings and shipyards to Parisian salons and seances. Blackmail and intrigue figure in the plot, as do murder, explosions and forbidden love.

## HAZY MOTIVATION

For all its abundance of action, the novel plods under the weight of Pears's research. While you'll learn how much coal a fleet of 19th-century battleships consumed in a month (40,800 tonnes), Stone's motivation remains hazy and key themes languish.

Among them is the notion that it's politics that corrupts money, rather than money that corrupts politics. The view is advanced by various characters, from a European banker to Stone.

It's an argument of prescient topicality, and a less diffuse narrative might have permitted a more rewarding exploration. All the same, Pears deserves recognition for awakening to the reality that most novelists miss: Finance impinges far more powerfully on daily life than politics.



SUNDAY PROFILE

Below: Yayoi Kusama, *Dots Obsession*, 2004.

PHOTO: YAYOI KUSAMA STUDIO

# Dotty for dots

BY **JUSTIN MCCURRY**  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

## Yayoi Kusama

has created an estimated 50,000 works during a career spanning half a century, is feted in her native Japan and in the US — yet in Britain she remains relatively unknown. Kusama turned 80 in March, but when we meet at her Tokyo studio, she is a vision in a bobbed, blood red wig and a red one-piece dress covered in her beloved polka dots.

It is impossible to discuss Kusama's work without making mention of those dots and the omnipresent lined meshed patterns she calls "infinity nets." They appeared in her early paintings, on "living" installations comprising her own naked torso and those of her friends, and, more recently, wrapped around tree trunks in Singapore. Later this month, trees along the River Thames will also be given the polka-dot treatment, as part of a collaborative exhibition with nine other artists at central London's Hayward Gallery.



The motifs first came to Kusama in childhood. Born in 1929 in Matsumoto in the Japanese Alps, she started seeing a psychiatrist at the age of 10 after she became gripped by visions of dots, nets and violet flowers that covered everything she saw. "I call them my repetitive vision," she says. "I still see them. [They] cover the canvas and grow on to the floor, the ceiling, chairs and tables. Then the polka dots move to the body, on to my clothes

and into my spirit. It is an obsession."

Hers was an unhappy childhood. "Not a single day went by that my mother didn't regret giving birth to me," she says. "She was the only daughter of a wealthy family, so my father, as the son-in-law, was able to lead an extravagant lifestyle. He ended up having an affair with a geisha and deserted us to be with her in Tokyo. It damaged my mother. I was stuck in the middle of a long-running feud and I felt mentally cornered. That's why I started hallucinating. I started seeing a psychiatrist, and it was he who first encouraged me to develop as an artist."

She studied, against her mother's wishes, at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts, and by 1950 had moved from traditional Japanese painting to abstract natural forms. In her most fevered periods, in her 20s, she was producing dozens of paintings a day, leading to more conflict at home. "My mother was strongly opposed to my becoming an artist. She was from a very old, conservative family. She was a collector of art and desperately wanted me to become one, too. Whenever I drew or made sculptures, she would fly into a rage and throw paints and canvases at me."

Eventually, in 1957, Kusama left Japan for New York, following a lengthy correspondence with the American artist Georgia O'Keefe. "I had been a great admirer after coming across her work in an old book I found in a store in my hometown. Her works are wonderful, moving. I spent six hours traveling to Tokyo so I could find her address in Who's Who at the US embassy. Amazingly, she wrote back, and we kept

writing to each other."

In America, Kusama's installations caught the eye of critics and collectors. Her *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* — a real rowing boat encrusted with phallic protuberances — caused a sensation when it appeared at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York in 1963. "That kind of exhibition was extremely avant garde at the time," she says. "Jackson Pollock and abstract expressionism were the big thing then. But they all came to see me and asked me why I did what I did. I said I just do Kusama art." Andy Warhol, she says, asked her permission to use the patterns in his silk screens. She refused. "People were queuing in the streets, waiting to see a Kusama original," she says. "After my mirror room show, other artists like Claes Oldenburg started making soft sculptures. So many artists have been influenced by my art and repeat my vision."

But Kusama's mental health deteriorated to such an extent that, in 1973, she returned home for treatment. In 1975 she checked herself into the psychiatric hospital she still calls home,

finding that the routine gave her the order she needed to concentrate on her work. She slowly crept back into the public consciousness, and in 2006 she was awarded the Praemium Imperiale, one of Japan's most prestigious arts prizes.

Kusama has often said that if it weren't for art, she would have killed herself long ago. "I only slept two hours last night. When I get tired from making pictures, I find it really difficult to go to sleep. But it's how I get away from my illness and escape the hallucinations. I call it psychosomatic art." So why does her work seem more like a celebration of life's euphoric moments? "I don't really think about what my emotions are. I don't plan to make them nice and cheerful, but once I start, they just move in that direction. My hands start moving before I can think anything."

Kusama will be happy if the new exhibition "brings people around to the idea of the infinity of the cosmos and the beauty of life. Nothing I do stays in the gallery space. Everything I do is a walk in my mind. There are no limits." It seems almost inappropriate to ask if she ever considers retiring. "No. As long as I have the energy, I will carry on. I'd like to live 200 or 300 years. I want to leave my message to my successors and future generations."

Walking In My Mind is at the Hayward Gallery, London, from June 23 to Sept. 6 ([haywardgallery.org.uk](http://haywardgallery.org.uk)).



Left: Cellphone accessories designed by Yayoi Kusama.

PHOTO: APP

Far left: A design by Yayoi Kusama is projected onto Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art last month.

PHOTO: EPA

[ **HARDCOVER: US** ]

# Lands of erotic fantasy and their grim reality

*Richard Bernstein examines how Western notions of the East as an enticingly different sensual paradise have been supplanted by today's meat market*

BY **SIMON WINCHESTER**  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

An adventurous English friend named Belinda, searching some years ago for sensual ecstasy in the East, once described finding a special salon in upcountry Thailand, where she was invited to allow herself to be restrained quite naked on a cedar table and have three young female attendants gently apply a sweet-smelling unguent to her more delicate parts.

The trio silently withdrew, bidding my friend to keep still. Seconds later she heard a door slide open, then a rushing sound, and felt the air itself throbbing with movement. She was then swiftly overcome by pleasing physical sensations of an almost unbearable intensity.

She lifted her head slightly, and was just able to see why: portions of her body had become suddenly covered with thousands upon thousands of brilliantly colored captive butterflies. All of them were engaged in licking away the ointment with what felt, as she later said dreamily, like a million tiny tongues.

Things like this just don't seem to happen in Dubuque or Stow-on-

the-Wold. And as Richard Bernstein suggests in his provocative and intriguing book, *The East, The West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters*, it is tales like this that over the years have helped construct today's notion of the East as a sensual and sexual paradise. Tales of the odalisque, the harem, the seraglio, the concubine, the geisha and the *Kama Sutra* have all become combined in the past century or so into a sweetly perfumed melange of exoticism and eroticism, presenting "the Orient" as a realm of languor and loucheness, where concupiscent curds run in the streets and nostalgia de la boue is perfectly de rigueur.

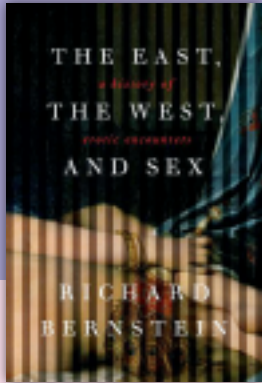
This idea — of the East as the center of a "harem culture" so enticingly different from what is parodied as our own Judeo-Calvinist dreariness — has captivated Westerners since the first imperialists planted their flags in the heat and dust of far away. In recent years, however, it is a notion that has spiraled frighteningly out of control. Nowadays there is precious little that passes for romance about the picture: The charming 19th-century image of Kipling's temple girl at the old pagoda in

Moulmein, the "neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land," has been replaced by today's obese American pederast trolling for catamites in the bars of Zambonga, or of middle-aged sex tourists buying infants in Phnom Penh or on the beaches outside Colombo.

Precisely how we regressed from the delights so well-described by writers like Gustave Flaubert a century and a half ago — times when, dare one say it, true love did occasionally blossom among the bougainvillea and the date palms — to the grim realities of today's meat markets in Thailand and the Philippines is the main thrust of Bernstein's properly high-minded book. That we get rather less than a fully considered answer — but a good deal of alluring and titillating description in its place — is the single shortcoming of a book that is based on a very good and eminently discussable idea.

Bernstein, a columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*, sees Richard Burton, a British Arabist, as perhaps most to blame, being among the first to popularize the notion of the East as offering an endless procession of licentiousness and abandon. As Burton

## Publication Notes



THE EAST, THE WEST, AND SEX: A HISTORY OF EROTIC ENCOUNTERS  
BY RICHARD BERNSTEIN  
325 PAGES  
ALFRED A. KNOPF

saw it, India, the Middle East and Africa were places where, in Bernstein's words, "the cultivation of love far surpassed the low and unsatisfactory levels attained in frigid, Christian Europe." He adds, "The East was a place where the erotic and the poetic mingled,

where, stripped of its taint of immorality, it could be the subject of a kind of connoisseurship, a learned cultivation."

Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights* gave us Scheherazade and Sinbad and Ali Baba, of course, but it also gave us what Philip Larkin later hinted at with his poem relating the "16 sexual positions on the sand": the idea that the conquest of the hot and distant could be made a lot more bearable for the visitor if one only got to understand the locals' curious customs.

And though white imperialists did plenty of frightful things, a good many of their accounts speak of their total enthralment with what they found: the Taoist idea that intercourse, for example, permitted a man to absorb life-enhancing yin forces, undeniably offered a degree of justification for foreigners to have a great deal of fun. Steadily, from soldiers and district commissioners, this habit passed downstate and into the world of commerce: "Do anything you like out there, old boy," was for decades the watchword of all the great British China trading companies, even when I lived in Hong Kong a decade ago. "Whatever you like — so long

as you don't bring it home."

Perhaps that is when it all began to change; perhaps it was long before the wars, in Japan and Vietnam, that brought so many sex-starved soldiers into contact with this apparently magical world. Perhaps the change happened when rich young businessmen, men armed with cash rather than carbines, came East and began to wield more freely what this exchange between Western men and Eastern women was already truly all about: power.

For that is what this book seems to miss, or if not to miss, then not to make as obvious as it should be. Perhaps there is a kernel of truth, as Bernstein observes, that "the sexual advantage of the Western man in the East is an aspect of Western dynamism, the questing spirit of Europeans, compared with the relative passivity of Asian in these matters."

But some will find this an almost insultingly trivial explanation, compared with what is a far more tragic certainty: that whether these sexual transactions occurred centuries ago and involved a sultan with his harem or a daimyo with his geisha, or whether they took

place during the Vietnam War and involved a GI with his Hong Kong go-go girl, the central truth is always the same. The transactions have always ultimately been based on the same pathetic reality: poor women — and lots and lots of them in those countries that have large populations and place too little value on the female sex — must peddle their bodies and their dignity to whomever has the power to demand them.

In recent years Eastern entrepreneurs, perhaps the tawdriest of all players in an increasingly tawdry business, have cashed in on the trade, creating for millions of foreign visitors the fancy that what is on sale in today's bars and brothels is somehow mystical, magical and a traditional sacrament of the Orient. It isn't: It is every bit as much about power and exploitation as if it took place on Eighth Avenue or north of King's Cross Station. There is absolutely nothing Eastern, nothing magical and nothing exotic about it. It is all just quite desperately sad.

Simon Winchester is the author of *The Professor and the Madman* and, most recently, of *The Man Who Loved China*.