

## Hardcover: US

## For a master of the surreal, this cast feels real

Stephen King drops a dome over a small town, then manipulates those trapped inside with the impish glee of a kid in a candy store

BY JANET MASLIN  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

**U**nder the Dome gravely threatens Stephen King's status as a mere chart-busting pop cultural phenomenon. It has the scope and flavor of literary Americana, even if King's particular patch of American turf is located smack in the middle of the Twilight Zone. It dispenses with his usual scatology and trippy fantasy to deliver a spectrum of credible people with real family ties, health crises, self-destructive habits and political passions. Even its broad caricatures prompt real emotion, if only via the damage they can inflict on others. Though the book's broad conspiratorial strokes become farfetched, its ordinary souls become ever more able to break hearts.

This book has the heft of a brick. It also has a premise that can be summarized in seconds. On a beautiful autumn day in Maine a transparent dome materializes over the town of Chester's Mill. Once the Dome falls, all vestiges of normal life are suspended. Things run amok. They get scary. The townsfolk become fate's playthings. And King, who can manipulate this crisis in any way that occurs to him, becomes a kid in a candy store.

The premise provides so many options that King's decisions about how to tell this story are of special interest. The King book that is most readily brought to mind by *Under the Dome* isn't an earlier large-scale apocalyptic fantasy like *It* or *The Stand*; it's *On Writing*, the instructive autobiographical gem that cast light on how King's creative mind works. In the spirit of *On Writing*, *Under the Dome* takes a lucid, commonsense approach that keeps it tight and energetic from start to finish. Hard as this thing is to hoist, it's even harder to put down.

Consider the book's step-by-step way of defining the Dome. King isn't about to do the easy thing, which would be to give a straightforward description of what it is and how it works. Instead he offers a textbook demonstration of how to make action and explication one and the same. First step: A woodchuck on the ground and a pilot in the air named Chuck are sudden victims of the Dome's guillotine-like slicing descent. Second step: The book's hero to be, a short-order cook and Iraq war veteran named Dale Barbara, looks upward. He sees the front of Chuck's plane fall off and the back get crushed by the invisible barrier that, we now know, reaches sky high. Big sigh of relief here: Dome calamities, while definitely deadly, will not be (by King's high standards in this area) described gruesomely at all.

Third step: Barbara, aka Barbie, waves frantically to a stranger for help. The stranger walks right toward him — and smashes into an invisible wall. So the Dome's extent is making itself known. Then King defines the perimeter by ticking off the various roads that lead to Chester's Mill. "And shortly before noon on Dome Day," he writes, now attaching a name to this calamity, "every one of them snapped closed."

With the same tight efficiency, King goes on to introduce the various businesses (restaurant, newspaper), institutions (hospital) and officials (police and town selectmen) on the Chester's Mill map. *Under the Dome* even comes with a map, but the town in the narrative is much too sharply drawn to need one. Special editions of this book also come with playing cards featuring illustrations of the main characters in this story's huge cast, among them its mega-villain, a used-car salesman and diabolically devious second selectman known as Big Jim Rennie. He has been drawn to look just like Dick Cheney.

The Dome traps the air in Chester's Mill. But for Big Jim, it creates an exploitable vacuum. His power grab is soon under way, and just in case that isn't sinister enough, Big Jim's son, Junior, turns out to have homicidal tendencies. Meanwhile King's neighborly array of well-sketched locals intertwine in dozens of subplots, to the point where Chester's Mill really does seem to operate as one

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UNDER THE DOME  
BY STEPHEN KING  
1,074 PAGES  
SCRIBNER

cohesive organism. When the local storekeeper and huckster decides that Dome Day's famine-inducing possibilities can help him unload a lot of old hot dogs, someone at the hospital is told to "expect an influx of gastroenteritis patients this evening."

All of this — along with the smog that starts to choke off Chester's Mill and make the Dome as visible as a dirty windshield — is a way of blowing smoke. It gets King through nearly 1,100 fast-moving pages without his having to answer the obvious questions: What is this thing? How did it get here? Why did it get here? What if it doesn't go away? *Under the Dome* can't avoid these thoughts forever. But it can postpone them with an ease that is one more measure of its author's having placed more value on humanity than on horror.

*Under the Dome* has a well-stocked emotional arsenal. It also has a great capacity for escapist fun, without which King could never lure readers through such a long trek. As usual he takes every opportunity to dispense winks and shout-outs, and he summons whichever cult-favorite references strike his fancy. A Warren Zevon lyric crops up; so does James McMurtry's red-hot *Talkin' at the Texaco*, which immortalizes a gritty, sidelong small-town spirit and might as well be this book's theme song.

The local Christian radio station usually plays music that is, in King's opinion, straight from hell. And one tough female police officer has been hired on the recommendation of a certain Jack Reacher, said to have been the toughest darn cop the Army ever saw. Big currents flow through this book along with the small ones. There are echoes of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and Iraq that help to shape this small town's view of the wider world. News crews (notably CNN's) arrive at the perimeter of the Dome to stake out this colossal human interest story. And what they observe, on a visiting day when loved ones outside

of Chester's Mill are allowed to venture near the Dome's dangerous surface, conveys genuine tragedy. As King puts it, describing what the TV cameras see:

"They observe the townspeople and the visitors pressing their hands together, with the invisible barrier between; they watch them try to kiss; they examine men and women weeping as they look into each other's eyes; they note the ones who faint, both inside the Dome and out, and those who fall to their knees and pray facing each other with their folded hands raised; they record the man on the outside who begins hammering his fists against the thing keeping him from his pregnant wife, hammering until his skin splits and his blood beads on thin air; they peer at the old woman trying to trace her fingers, the tips pressed white and smooth against the unseen surface between them, over her sobbing granddaughter's forehead." Nowhere in King's immense body of work has his real and fantasy worlds collided with such head-on force.

## Crowd Lu (盧廣仲)

Seven Days (七天)  
Team Ear Music

**A**s the follow-up to his Golden Melody award-winning debut album, acclaimed singer-songwriter Crowd Lu's (盧廣仲) *Seven Days* is as refreshing and energetic as his previous work. An unconventional indie icon with a mop-top, black-rimmed glasses, trademark shorts and long white socks, Lu has become the spokesperson for the everyday Joe.

Endearing himself to fans with his unostentatious and often light-hearted and comedic stage manner, Lu makes music that's as unassuming and sincere as his guileless smile. What really sets him apart from the pack of indie singers is how he finds musical poetry in the mundane. Whether exploring daily life's triumphs or tribulations, he delivers his jester's wisdom with simple, accessible lyrics and infectious melodies.

Lu sings about love and ambition with a stripped-down, earnest folk-rock sound, backed mostly by a simple guitar. Reminiscent of his signature *I Love You* (我愛你), the opening track *Oh Yeah* is a rock ballad that celebrates the joy of love with an undeniable joie de vivre. In the same vein as his hit *Good Morning, Beautiful Dawn* (早安·晨之美), the title track *Seven Days* (七天) is an empowering anthem in which the narrator asks for more time to make changes in life. With the later tracks, the album swerves from happy-go-lucky vivacity to pensive contemplation. *The Loneliest Moment* (最寂寞的時候) is a rare piano-led ballad in which Lu mourns unrequited love with understated poignancy. *Have You Heard It* (聽見了嗎?) is a synth-driven, atmospheric ballad where Lu begs the object of his love to accept his affection.

Blessed with an emotionally contagious voice, Lu sounds like he is literally begging in his down-tempo ballads and as if he is jumping for joy in his more energetic rock numbers. Well-crafted and heart-felt though it is, however, *Seven Days* unfortunately revisits much of the territory already covered by Lu in his first studio and live albums. For a singer whose stock in trade is his rapport with ordinary people, fame and success pose a certain threat to creativity. One looks forward to seeing what new terrain Lu will chart when life's triumphs aren't so small any more.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG



## Angela Chang (張韶涵)

The Fifth Season (第五季)  
Linfair Records

**N**ot quite a "lesser Queen of Heaven" (小天后) and almost a better actress than she is a singer, Angela Chang (張韶涵) has always been curiously hard to pin down. A magnetic pop princess with a celestial elegance, she has yet to deliver a signature song thus far in her career. Returning to the music market after a two-year hiatus, Chang's latest album *The 5th Season* (第五季) does little to distinguish her from the current pack of Mando-pop divas.

As a standard outing for a commercial star, this album is about as groundbreaking as a Hello Kitty doll. Thematically, it alternatively mourns unrequited love or celebrates the joy of love. To target different market segments, it features a grab bag of musical styles.

The album starts off with *5th Season*, a guitar-driven rock ballad, and *White* (白色的), a pallid Mando-pop ballad about lost love. *The Most Distant Land* (看的最遠的地方) is an uplifting anthem that celebrates love and life with irresistible pop hooks. *Sometimes* (偶爾), a stark piano-based ballad, is a "Dear John" letter in which the narrator finds closure and lets go of an old flame.

Chang possesses a delicate voice and is at her most appealing when she reaches a firm higher register in atmospheric ballads with striped-down sounds, such as in the mesmerizing *Flower in the Dream* (夢裡花). Unfortunately, no ballad on this album reaches that level of poignancy.

Veering away from slow-tempo ballads, she falters badly in the guitar-propelled rocker *Head Shaker*, the whimsical circus ditty *Seeking Ameli* and the disco-infused *Even Happier*. Like most Mando-pop singers, she has neither the substance nor the attitude necessary to pull off these up-tempo numbers.

Six out of the 10 tracks *The 5th Season* were written and produced by Chen Wei (陳偉), who was responsible for most of Elva Hsiao's hits in her Virgin heyday but who fails to ignite sparks with Chang. Even on her sixth outing, Chang still hasn't found a distinct sound for herself.



— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

## Totem (圖騰)

Sheep Boy (放羊的孩子)  
Wonder Music

**T**otem (圖騰) gives Aboriginal music an indie-rock tilt with their second album *Sheep Boy* (放羊的孩子), which was released earlier this fall.

Even though their music proudly acknowledges the bandmembers' Amis, Paiwan and Puyuma heritage, Totem sits squarely in modern rock territory. Frontman and lead vocalist Suming (姜聖明) combines a singer-songwriter sensibility with slick pop arrangements that have mainstream appeal.

The title track, which refers to the folktale about the shepherd boy and the wolf, starts the album at a dreamy, ethereal pace. The song's allure comes from Suming's soft yodeling, backed by an icy cool mix of acoustic guitar strumming, electronic-sounding drums and pianos.

The band revs things up with *Crazy Apple* (瘋狂Apple), a joyful emo-punk track written and sung by guitarist/vocalist Zamake (胡祝凱). *Wind Picks Up* (起風) is a folk rock tune with a bluesy chorus that brings to mind Wu Bai (伍佰); Suming tops the song off with a catchy refrain: "There's no wind until you start to walk" (走路才有風).

Hard-core folk fanatics might scratch their heads at *Our Friends Are in Front of Us* (朋友在前面) and *La Qian Xi* (拉千禧), which update the traditional "Ho-Hai-Yan" chorus with electronica sounds and disco-rock beats. But the indie-pop instrumentation works well, offering an original take on a familiar melody, and the harmonies are pleasing and tight.

Totem says it loud and proud in *Conclusion* (結果), a rousing funk-rock tune in which Suming playfully sings about his Aboriginal identity. "Others go for the night markets, the shops, the nightlife/I like the [tribal harvest festivals], where I kill chickens and ducks."

The album showcases the band's ability to switch styles and moods, to mixed effect. The pop ballad *Blue Star* (藍星) get a little old after repeated listenings with its "I love you" refrain. The band ultimately shines on rockers like *Baby Doesn't Love Me* (寶貝不愛), a Beatles-esque tune with a satisfying electric guitar romp.

— DAVID CHEN



## Ze' Hwang (黃小楨)

No Budget  
A Good Day Records

**A**dd this quiet, quirky album to your list of music for rainy days by the windowsill. *No Budget*, a reissue of singer-songwriter Ze' Hwang's (黃小楨) 1996 debut, is one of Taiwan's classic indie-folk recordings.

Hwang would have been the person who stood out at a coffeehouse open mic or poetry slam. Her lyrics read like snippets from a lonely, lovesick teenager's diary, while her breathy, syrupy sweet voice and acoustic guitar convey genuine drama, wit and humor.

The slow and gentle #3 could be seen as a take on unrequited love. When Hwang sings "love is such a wonderful thing," it sounds as if she's just learned a sad truth. But she isn't always feeling dejected. On another song of yearning, *December Night*, Hwang waxes optimistic that "I'll be yours for a long, long time."

A few idiosyncratic numbers add spice to the album. *Sister ... Couple Things About Her Vege Garden*, which sounds like she's channeling Juliana Hatfield, is a funny vignette about a holier-than-thou vegetarian sister. *Cultural Shock* is an agitated rock number, and one wonders whether the title is inspired by Hwang's background: Taiwan-born, raised and educated in the US.

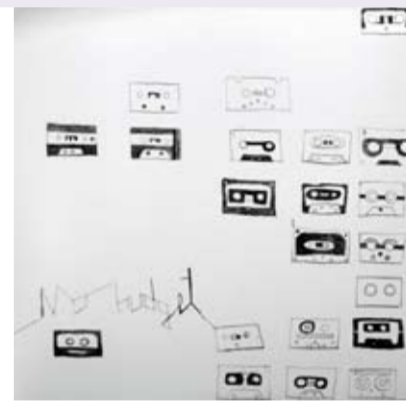
While most of Hwang's songs are in English, she has a few Mandarin tunes that carry their own and are well suited to her voice and character. *Elope* (私奔), the lyrics of which are credited to "Finninipannini," is a beautiful, atmospheric number with piano backing.

In *15 Second Practice Tune* (15秒鐘練習曲), which actually clocks in at 48 seconds, Hwang packs a story within a single moment. The entire lyrics read "You had me standing here for three hours and 20 seconds/ But you were just hiding at home, watching TV, with the AC on/ You broke my heart."

*No Budget* is also a throwback to the beginning of the do-it-yourself days. Hwang got started at a time when the speed of distribution and recording process for an indie musician was much slower without the instant access of MySpace or affordable home computer studios offering relatively high production values and quick turnover. Originally released on cassette, Hwang and her friends individually hand-packaged each of the 200 copies.

Even today, Hwang, who, hasn't released an album since 2001, remains one of a kind.

— DAVID CHEN



## Hardcover/Softcover: UK

## It's all Greek to modern man

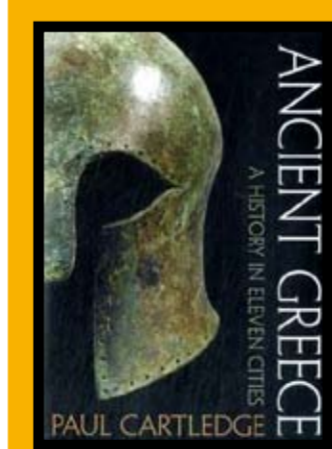
## Greece and Rome find two stalwart champions in the forms of Mary Beard and Paul Cartledge

BY CHARLOTTE HIGGINS  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Mary Beard and Paul Cartledge are twin giants of Cambridge University classics, she bestriding Roman history, he Greek. With very different styles, they share a commitment to broadening interest in their subjects; hence the (coincidental) publication of these two volumes aimed at the non-specialist. Beard, with characteristic earthiness, even suggests that her effort might find a happy home next to the toilet.

It would do both these books an injustice, though, to suggest that either presents scholarship watered-down. If they share an approach, it is one of skepticism. Both authors are keen to quash that oft-repeated canard of the lazy popularizer, that we are "just like the Greeks/Romans." Antiquity, says Beard, is "very different in almost every possible respect" from our own times. For Cartledge it is "frankly alien, desperately foreign." Rather, both authors want to map the gulf that separates the modern "us" from the ancient "them," while

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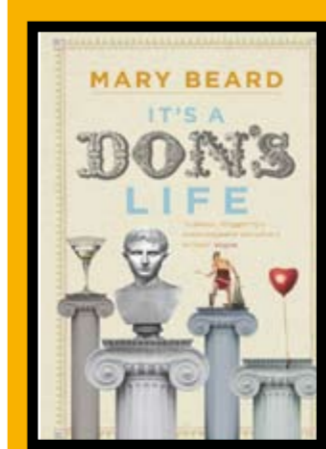


ANCIENT GREECE:  
A HISTORY IN ELEVEN CITIES  
BY PAUL CARLEDGE  
176 PAGES  
OXFORD

acknowledging that "they" can illuminate our times, often by making strange our own mores.

In her volume of miniatures taken from her *Times Literary Supplement* blog, Beard describes giving a talk in a prison on the subject of gladiators. One of the inmates jokes that had he been an ancient Roman, he might have ended up in the arena. Which leads Beard to think about the oddness of our

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IT'S A DON'S LIFE  
BY MARY BEARD  
224 PAGES  
PROFILE

own modern habit, largely alien to the ancients, of imprisoning criminals, and to speculate that in 2,000 years time incarceration may look as weird as gladiatorial combat does to us. But we take pride for granted — as Pindar said: "custom is king."

Pindar, the lyric poet born in Boeotia in around 518 BC, was commissioned by rich and famous Greeks from Thrace to Libya and from Sicily to Turkey.

Cartledge's program in his fascinating book is to press home the point that ancient Greece was not an easily definable landmass and scatter of Aegean islands, but a people spread from Spain and the south of France to the Black Sea, north Africa and the coast of Turkey, linked by language and above all by the concept of the polis, which can only clumsily be translated as "city state." (It is the word from which our "politics" derives.) Cartledge puts attention-grabbing Athens in its place, giving it one chapter out of 11. Each focuses on a different polis, starting with Knossos, whither Greek-speakers arrived in about 1450 BC, and finishing with Byzantium, a culturally Greek city until Ottoman conquest in 1453.

There are many pleasures to be had along Cartledge's mind-broadening route through time and space. In his chapter on Massalia (Marseilles) he argues that the Greeks brought vines to France (usually attributed to Etruria or Rome); in "Syracuse" he reminds us that there was a city astonishing in its power, size and wealth, with, for a time, a healthy democracy; by way of Alexandria he notes that the Greek polis got as far as modern Afghanistan and Iran in the wake of Alexander the Great.

The cosmopolitan mobility of these ancient Greeks may be exemplified by the so-called Vix Krater — a 1.6m-high wine-mixing

bowl, probably Spartan-made, that came to France via Massalia (a polis founded by settlers from what is now Turkey) and ended up in Burgundy, buried with a Celtic princess. Cartledge also dispatches many a myth — such as the idea that the Mycenaean Greeks have much to do with the Homeric epics, a mistaken notion popularized when Heinrich Schliemann claimed to have "gazed on the face of Agamemnon" when he excavated a beautiful golden mask in a Mycenaean grave from about 1650 BC.

A modern equivalent of the "face of Agamemnon" might be the Roman sculpted head that turned up in the Rhone last year, which was widely reported as depicting Julius Caesar. ("Come off it," countered skeptical blogger Beard.) Her collection of sharply observed, often hilarious slices of academic life (Profile) ranges from the apparently trivial (the joys of cocktail-making; why it took the fellows of Newnham College, Cambridge, three years to acquire a coffee machine) to the crucial (proto-racism in the ancient world; why Latin matters). Genuinely, some of the comments in response are included, although this reader, for one, is more inclined to agree with the erudite "regulars" such as Michael Bulley and Oliver Nicholson than with the person who advised: "Stick to making jam, Mary."