

THE OSTRACON

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Barbara Mertz, Reviewer

House of Scrolls

The Egyptologist by Arthur Phillips

Hardbound, 383 pages Random House, 2004 \$24.95 ISBN: 1400062500

In 1922 Howard Carter made arguably the most exciting archaeological discovery of all time: the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun, with its fabulous grave goods relatively undisturbed. The objects from the tomb have traveled from continent to continent and been endlessly photographed, discussed and reproduced.

The Egyptologist who is the title character in Arthur Phillips's second novel isn't Howard Carter, though Carter does appear in the book. Ralph Trilipush is an anti-Carter, a caricature, a Carter from another planet. Like Carter, he is in search of the tomb of an ephemeral pharaoh. Trilipush's missing pharaoh is named Atum-hadu, which translates as "Atum is aroused." ("Hadu" is derived from a perfectly good Egyptian word; the reference is to one of the many creation myths the Egyptians came up with. In this particular myth, the sole, original god Atum, rising from the primeval waters, created the first pair of male and female gods by masturbating. The fact that no Egyptian pharaoh would have such a name is just the first of many little jokes.)

We meet Trilipush in the very first pages of the book, in a letter he writes from Cairo to his fiancée back in Boston, and it doesn't take more than three pages to alert the reader to Trilipush's character—egotistical, hypocritical, more than a little paranoid (like many other Egyptologists?). His letters and diary form part of the narrative. His scholarly reputation, such as it is, rests primarily on his translation of Atum-hadu's erotic poetry. (These translations, quoted *in extenso*, constitute another of the author's little jokes; Trilipush's ribald versions contrast entertainingly with the prim Victorian euphemisms employed by earlier translations of the material.) Using his academic background as leverage, Trilipush has gotten engaged to a Boston beauty named Margaret Finneran, whose daddy is a millionaire snob. With Daddy's help, Trilipush forms a company (The Hand of Atum, Inc.—get it?) to finance his search for the lost tomb. It's left to the reader to decide to what extent Trilipush is motivated by chicanery rather than self-delusion.

A soured, retired Australian P.I., Harold Ferrell, writes a second, parallel narrative, reporting on a case he investigated 30 years earlier. Ferrell doesn't suffer from false modesty either; in fact, it would be difficult to find a single character in the book who isn't self-serving or cynical or miserable. The case Ferrell investigated was on behalf

of a millionaire brewer, Barnabas Davies, who, having learned he had only a few months to live, decided to leave part of his estate to offspring he might have produced in temporary liaisons during his busy youth (38 and still counting, according to Ferrell). Ferrell's assignment is to trace one of the potential mothers, who is living in Sydney. He finds her, broken-down and repulsive, and learns that she did indeed produce a Davies son, Paul Caldwell. Ferrell's search for the boy leads him from circus to library to prison, and finally to the Australian Expeditionary Force in Egypt, in which Caldwell served during World War I. Unfortunately for Ferrell, who is making a killing on expense accounts, Caldwell disappeared in 1918 and is presumed dead.

Well, mystery readers can spot clues like that a mile away. I won't spoil the fun by further exposition, since the mystery is not so much about what happened as how and especially why it happened. *The Egyptologist* can be viewed as a penetrating study of human frustration and obsession, and, since we're talking about ancient Egypt here, man's quest for immortality. However, Trilipush's quest takes him so far beyond the bounds of normal lunacy that it becomes black comedy rather than tragedy. The reader who is uninformed about Egyptology may miss some of the humor, but there is plenty of it; the most entertaining arises from the unwitting self-exposure of Ferrell and Trilipush—one of the challenges of a first-person narrative, which Phillips pulls off triumphantly.

The book is a tour de force of plotting and narrative technique; the intertwining storylines lead with mounting inevitability to one of the most horrendously, hideously humorous endings in modern fiction. It isn't an ending for the faint of heart, but if you appreciate Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*, this one will knock you out.

Reviewed by Barbara Mertz

Barbara Mertz, who received her doctorate degree in Egyptology from the University of Chicago, writes mysteries under the name of Elizabeth Peters. Her latest book is The Serpent on the Crown, an Amelia Peabody mystery, due out 29 March, 2005.

This book review first appeared in the New York Times and is republished here with the gracious permission of Barbara Mertz.