

Hilary Mantel is the first woman to win the Booker prize twice.

Using the past to hold a mirror to the present

Time in Africa and Saudi Arabia proved a crucible for author's Cromwell novels, writes **Boyd Tonkin**

IN THE 1980s, after spending time in Botswana, Hilary Mantel lived for four years in Jeddah with her husband Gerald McEwen, then a geologist.

That experience of Saudi Arabia, which she likens to "living in the Middle Ages in some respects", underpinned the culture-clash satire of her 1988 novel *Eight Months on Ghazal Street*. It also helped to plant the seed that has led to such an abundant harvest for the novelist and her readers.

Mantel became the first woman to win the Man Booker twice when she scooped the prize this week for *Bring up the Bodies*, second part of the Thomas Cromwell trilogy on the Tudor House of the 1530s. The first part, *Wolf Hall*, won the prize in 2009.

"Living in a society where no one can speak freely is a powerful lesson," she said. "Because if no one can speak freely, then rumour and innuendo become the currency. I think it must have been

like that at Henry VIII's court. You'd always be checking out the person you were talking to. Could you trust them? Probably not. Living in [Saudi Arabia] gave people that feeling."

Mantel's Cromwell novels create an electrifying dialogue between past and present.

Readers will recognise at every step how near we stand to these elite intrigues of the 1530s – and how far away they remain.

The supreme fixer, charming and ruthless, Cromwell figures in the fiction – as in fact – as the bureaucratic pioneer of the modern English state after Henry's break with Rome, and of the hard-headed alliances that made, and make, it run.

Yet Mantel also gives the fierce, divisive faith of the age its due. She says her characters must live "in two worlds... on the scale of time and of eternity. Almost everyone

believes that there's a reckoning to come and most people believe, literally, in hellfire... What we find difficult now is how deeply they cared about theological ideas – at what a deep and primal level this battle between the Catholics and Evangelicals was fought."

Mantel's Cromwell novels have drastically raised the bar for intelligent historical fiction.

Mantel, born in 1952 into a Catholic family of Irish descent and into a faith whose fading left her with a textbook sense of guilt, spent long years in Africa and the Middle East because of her husband's profession. The experience not only broadened her insight into other cultures but

allowed her, during spells of annual leave, to inspect her homeland with an outsider's gaze. "Being an exile makes you so much sharper. You come back and dip into the flow of the national narrative – and it can suddenly seem quite bizarre."

Mantel has suffered since youth

from endometriosis: the gynaecological condition whose devastating effects – from constant pain to weight gain and infertility – she recounted in an astonishing memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*.

Worse, her symptoms were for years misdiagnosed as psychosomatic. Yet, far from curling up in injured introspection, her novels stretched their settings and their sympathies ever wider.

It's Mantel's ecumenical understanding of the powerful as well as the powerless that lends such depth to the Cromwell novels.

"In a way I am sympathetic to politicians. It's too easy in hindsight to write people off as ruthless opportunists. What I'm trying to do is to get my reader to walk forward with them.

"They didn't know the end of their story. They couldn't draw the moral. They didn't know the consequences." – The Independent

If no one can speak freely in society, rumour and innuendo become the currency

BATTLE FOR THE PRESIDENT'S ELEPHANTS

Author: Sharon Pincott

Publisher: Jacana

REVIEW: DEBBIE REYNOLDS

WITH so much attention focused on the destruction of Africa's rhinos, it is easy to forget how the ivory trade threatens the continent's elephants. Conservationist Sharon Pincott is hell-bent on not letting us forget.

In 2009 her first book, *The Elephants and I*, captured the imagination, telling of her battle to preserve a clan of wild Hwange elephants.

She persuaded Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to issue an edict protecting the giant mammals, and the elephants are now known as the "Presidential Elephants" of Zimbabwe.

But as Pincott's second book reveals, not even a presidential decree can keep her beloved elephants safe.

January last year was a watershed in this amazing woman's life.

Evicted from her Hwange Safari Lodge rondavel through internal politics, stupidity and greed, Pincott is forced to shack up

with friends in Harare while deciding how to rebuild her life.

The news that her home town of Grantham in Queensland, Australia, has been wiped out by a flash flood sends Pincott home, grateful that her parents have survived, although their home has not.

Having lost everything in Zimbabwe, Pincott is devastated to find that her entire pre-Zimbabwean life, including irreplaceable photographs, books and personal items – stored under her parent's home – has been destroyed.

Ever resilient, and determined to be near her elephant family, Pincott returns to Zimbabwe to start again.

With the gift of a rustic cottage from the Miombo Safari Camp, she resumes her voluntary work, showing off the Presidential Elephants to awestruck tourists. More important, she successfully badgers Mugabe into reaffirming his protection order.

"Anyone who shoots at the Presidential herd is as bad as someone shooting at the president. When you shoot at these animals,



you can expect to be shot back at. If you kill them, you will also be killed. No one should compromise the Presidential herd."

And Pincott is able to continue in her starring role for an international television documentary about her work, *All the President's Elephants* commissioned by Natural History Unit Africa, for screening this year.

If it's anything like her book, you'll laugh with her as she tackles termites, snakes and scorpions, cry with her as she battles snares, drought and human cruelty, and be captivated by her passion.

"I put my face against the long leathery nose of this wild giant and kissed her gently. I looked up over the rim of my glasses, into Willa's eyes, and held her gaze. I kissed her again and again. Willa stayed just as she was, looking down on me with kind, wise eyes."

You will marvel at the connection Pincott has with these African giants and pray that when she is no longer able, someone like her will take her place.

BLOOD SISTERS

Authors: Roelien Schutte and Eileen de Jager

Publisher: Lapa Publishers

REVIEW: LINDSAY SLOGROVE

BOOKS frequently hype their contents with words such as "chilling", "terrifying" and "brutal"; and just as frequently are not anything of the sort.

This one, however, more than delivers what it promises on its cover banner – warning: may disturb sensitive readers.

It is an astonishingly readable account of two sisters who make their living cleaning scenes of crimes and other deaths.

They detail how their unusual career started and explain that this is not a job about just using a scrubbing brush, mop, bucket

and some liquid detergent.

It takes serious chemicals and routines to make sure that not a trace of gore is left behind, not only so that loved ones won't come across some awful and painful reminder of the death, but also so the hazards of body wastes are eliminated.

Those are just the technical details.

More fascinating, in a kind of car-smash-rubbernecking way, is their explanation of how they have and do cope with the horror of a death scene.

They never shy away from graphic descriptions of some of the horror scenes they have worked, from people who have committed suicide and lain undiscovered for ages, to murders

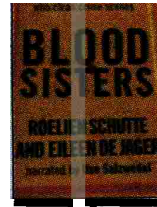
where the victims have been tortured and clearly fought for their lives.

There is nothing sensational about their story: it is told calmly and in a matter-of-fact tone, often leaving the reader gaping at the sisters' composure.

They are never cold and cynical, however, and every now and then you get a sense of the iron will needed to maintain mental and emotional well-being.

Apart from their amazing story, it is also, tragically, one which puts in sharp focus the violence of South African crime and the problems in some areas of policing.

It's not for sensitive readers, but it is a very good read.



BOND ON BOND

Author: Roger Moore

Publisher: Michael O' Mara Books

REVIEW: VENILLA YOGANATHAN

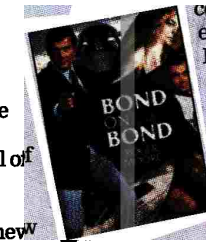
IT IS 50 years since secret agent 007 sauntered onto the big screen in Dr No.

Since then, James Bond, he of the shaken-not-stirred martini, smooth talk, fast cars and fancy gadgets, has grown into a cult figure, and is one of the longest-running movie franchises.

Now, with the 23rd Bond movie *Skyfall*, released this year, the 007

figure still draws millions of fans across the globe.

Roger Moore, one of the most famous Bonds, pays tribute to the debonair hero in a decadent new coffee table book which is lavishly illustrated and chock-full of Bond details, including sexy Bond girls (with ridiculous names like Chew Me, Octopussy and Bibi), villains, gadgets, stunts, cars and the dashing stars who have played the hero over the decades.



Moore provides a highly entertaining and comprehensive overview of everything Bond and in true Bond style, throws political correctness out of the window.

Of course with Moore a former Bond himself, the book is rich with anecdotal and insider information, including some previously unseen photographs from Moore's own private collection. If you're a Bond fan, get this book.