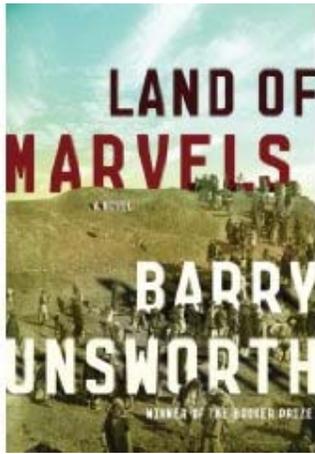


Land of Marvels Barry Unsworth (Hardcover - 6 Jan 2009)



Mesopotamia, once the site of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, boasted vibrant civilizations four thousand years before the Christian Era, and the ruins of these civilizations, many of them buried for six thousand years, dot the countryside. By 1914, when this novel opens, Mesopotamia (Iraq) is being ruled from Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire. Virtually every European country is in Iraq, however, waiting for the weakened Ottoman Empire to fall. The Germans are building a railroad from Basra through Baghdad to Constantinople, and they may excavate along the track, through vast oil fields. An American from Standard Oil is on site, the French are making noises, and the Russians and the Austro-Hungarian Empire hope to profit. With World War I looming, the need for oil and chrome ore (to make armor-piercing weapons) is pressing, and everyone sees Iraq as a source of materiel.

Trying to ignore this turmoil is John Somerville, a thirty-five-year-old archaeologist who has been working for three years at Tell Erdek, an ancient site near Baghdad that has so far yielded few artifacts. A broken piece of ivory, a carved flat stone, a reconstructed clay tablet with writing, and the beginning of a wall made of kiln-fired bricks are all that Somerville has to show for three years of work. Unfortunately, his excavations are in the path of the German-built railroad, and he is running out of money. As Somerville tries to protect "his" dig, he must deal with the Turks, and with deceitful British entrepreneurs and officials. The British believe that war is coming, and they are not going to interfere against the German railroad, even if it means the destruction of unique archaeological artifacts.

Passion in the Desert

Reviewed by CHRISTOPHER de BELLAIGUE

LAND OF MARVELS

By Barry Unsworth

Like the ancient mound its British protagonist excavates in Ottoman-run Mesopotamia on the eve of World War I, Barry Unsworth's new novel is made up of layers. First, there are the remains of long-lost empires, lying compacted under the archaeologist John Somerville's feet. Over that Unsworth places contemporary terrors, for Somerville the student of the past is beset by the realities of the present — not only the possibility of conflict between a new generation of imperialists, but also by oil prospectors and railway planners who see the land he is digging up as a source of wealth, not knowledge. Unsworth's 21st-century readers inhabit a third stratum. We read "Land of Marvels" exquisitely aware that the great American empire entered its own crisis as a result of its occupation of the vast territory where Somerville is digging, to which Unsworth affixes its modern name only when tapping out the book's last, portentous word: Iraq.

The suggestion here of history as an irresistible cycle, raising nations only to consign them to oblivion, is essential to Unsworth's knowing, detached brand of historical fiction. Occasionally in "Land of Marvels" a character muses rather too obviously about the transience of imperial might, or a history lesson is inserted into a section of dialogue to the disadvantage of both. Generally, however, Unsworth assembles his layers with the subtlety you would expect from a renowned, if restrained, historical novelist and [Booker Prize](#) winner. When a young woman named Patricia, who has joined Somerville's expedition fresh out of Cambridge, rues the "contrary spirit of dismemberment" that threatens the archaeologists, who are trying to "put things together, make sense of things, add to the sense of human community," her sentiment soars above the narrative. We see these interlopers and the other Westerners who surround them as frozen between the past and the future and between two instincts: to preserve what one has discovered under the sands or to unleash a destructive energy that may, even in its terrible crucible, have regenerative power.

Unsworth puts the second argument in the mouth of Alex Elliott, a young American geologist: tall, tanned, easy on the eye. Attaching himself to Somerville, who naïvely expects support from Elliott's backer, the financier Lord Rampling, the American passes himself off to the Ottomans as an archaeologist, while in fact he is prospecting for oil. Disenchanted by her husband's obsessive quest for the archaeological find that will make his career and riled by the precocious Fabianism of young Patricia and her new fiancé, a cuneiform expert named Palmer, Somerville's wife, Edith, is enthralled by Elliott's apparently guileless passion for oil. It's like a "genie," he tells her, trapped inside the earth, whose release "will bring prosperity and ease of life to millions of people. . . . He will light their lamps, warm their houses, drive their engines. This genie will be the harbinger of a golden age."

Unsworth repeatedly uses fire to suggest both passion and death. When Elliott seduces Edith, it is by the flickering, hallucinatory light of flaring gas in the middle of the desert: "His arms were around her and she still saw the fire through closed eyes, and the beauty of the fire was in everything she felt and did."

While Elliott and Somerville tramp about in search of their respective treasures, and the Englishman frets over the railway line the Germans are laying in the direction of his dig, threatening to obliterate everything in its path, an expanding cast of characters

gathers for luncheon and tea around the Somervilles' table. Already charged with the intensity of Edith's feelings toward her husband and her lover, these rituals get still edgier when Lord Rampling, cutting deals in Damascus, discovers that Elliott has been in contact with the rival Deutsche Bank. Incensed, Rampling deposes a British spy, Major Manning, to kill Elliott — but only after the American has committed his findings to paper.

In a fitting plot twist, Manning has a rival, the gnostic Spahl, a Deutsche Bank agent who is similarly concerned about Elliott's divided loyalties. But both are upstaged by a priceless pair of Swedish missionaries who plan to open a luxury hotel on the very place, quite near the excavated hill, that the Society for Biblical Research has determined to be the original site of the Garden of Eden, and whose idea of dinner table conversation is to predict a rain of fire and brimstone on modern-day sinners.

Amid the tension, and some deft characterization — Edith's exasperation at Patricia and Palmer is especially well done — Unsworth's themes of extraction and exploitation are irresistible. Somerville is fired by the spirit of an actual historical figure, Sir Austen Henry Layard, the Victorian adventurer and diplomat who excavated the sites of ancient Nimrud and Nineveh and, in the process, amassed the [British Museum](#)'s priceless Assyrian collection. But the comparison does not flatter Somerville. Layard loved the Near East, where he put himself through countless perils and made fast friendships. Somerville, by contrast, finds no joy in his environment and longs only for the applause of the Royal Society back in London. It's a pity that Unsworth's only local character of note, the duplicitous hireling Jehar, lies flat on the page next to the book's Western characters.

Lord Rampling is a much fuller beast: rich, virile and indecently cosmopolitan, living in luxury in Constantinople and London, an embodiment of the sense of boundless opportunity that fires global capitalism and a brother in literature to the fabulously wealthy real-life oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian. Born in Constantinople of Armenian ancestry, educated in Britain, Gulbenkian helped set up Royal Dutch/Shell and was a prime mover behind attempts to exploit Ottoman oil fields.

The early summer of 1914, when the novel's action takes place, is the last outing for what Edith Somerville endearingly calls “splendidness,” a strikingly Victorian combination of “power and strength and passionate certainty,” before Europe is plunged into darkness.

Unsworth's denouement is dramatic and richly symbolic, if rather abrupt. And, as is only to be expected, it involves an incendiary meeting of the railway project, the dig and the as-yet-untapped oil fields. Unsworth's description of the conflagration that ensues, a river of fire “stinking and shrieking” and consuming everything in its path, brings to mind the fire and brimstone of the book of Genesis, the burning oil fields after the 1991 gulf war, the seemingly ever-present images of the charred remains of Iraqi civilians on the television news. In “Land of Marvels” — and particularly in this final scene — Unsworth succeeds in summoning the demons and the angels of Iraq's present and past. Not bad for a volume you could read in an afternoon.

Christopher de Bellaigue's new book, “Rebel Land: Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples,” will be published next fall.

