

*House of War* by Hamilton Wende (Penguin) R190

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*House of War* is a compelling blend of historical material and topical reference. Set in present-day Afghanistan, it features one Sebastian Burke, an ex-Rhodesian, now British, academic who is searching for the lost city of Ay Khanoum in Northern Afghanistan, where, he believes, Alexander the Great's Royal Diaries may have been kept in the temple of Ares, the god of war. With him on the quest is Claire Finch, an American documentary film maker, two photographers, and one Professor Abdulov, an Uzbek academic.

The story, then, is a classic quest narrative, complete with a fabulous, near-mythical prize. Afghanistan being Al Qaeda territory, there is also no lack of adversaries – in this instance apparently intent upon preventing Sebastian from perpetuating the non-Islamic aspects of Afghan history. For the rest, there is a lively cast of goodies and baddies, and bad-goodies and good-baddies, keeping the action revved up and reader hooked. The novel starts on the murder of two American servicemen in a hotel in Tashkent, and ends on a shootout in Afghanistan, with plenty of scares and spills in between.

Wende twists three separate skeins into a single yarn: there is Sebastian and his quest, consistently set against his past history in the Rhodesian war; then there is Claire, also burdened with memories of her past life, of atrocities in the Congo; these two narratives are in turn intertwined with extracts from the life of Alexander, his many victories and his polymorphously perverse love life.

It's an ambitious blend, involving quite a bit of backtracking at times impeded by an awkward plethora of pluperfects ("The girl had stared down at her. 'Ma'am,' she had said. 'I am requesting you to move along.' In the end they had been forced to give up and drive back .."). Also, the extracts, from Alexander's life, though fascinating in themselves, are really too extreme in their excesses of sex and violence to be as relevant to the modern narrative as the author seems to want them to be. We are told that Sebastian wanted "to uncover the pain in Alexander's life as a way, perhaps, of understanding his own", but really, the pain in Alexander's life, if there was any, was caused by his massacre of thousands upon thousands of people and by his simultaneous involvement with a male lover, a wife, a mistress and a eunuch, not to mention his love for his horse: there is surely no key here to Sebastian's own rather more conventional tragedy, poignant as that is.

But, technical quibbles aside, *House of War* is a riveting read, fast-paced and hard-hitting. It also seems thoroughly at home in its many locations: Wende, as a free-lance journalist and television producer, has clearly done the extensive footwork required to write a novel as wide-ranging as this one. The various locations, from Tashkent to Ay Khanoum, are vividly described, and the politics of American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, are sketched in with the light touch of somebody who really knows his stuff. Without haranguing us, the writer makes quite clear how spurious the grounds were for the invasion of Iraq, how deliberately blind the White House and its neocons were to the realities of the situation. Of course, this is not a new insight, but it is here conveyed with sober conviction. But the novel also reminds us that Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, were lovers, and the quest for Alexander's diaries is pleasantly paralleled by the

developing romance between the independent-minded Claire and the emotionally damaged Sebastian, who offer just enough resistance to each other's charms to make their eventual union as satisfying as it is predictable. By Alexander's standards, it's a very tame romance, but by the less extreme measure of modern fiction, it is all it should be. With Afghanistan once again chronically in the news, *House of War* is a fascinating reminder that it has always been the site of conflict, and that the present wrangle is just the latest chapter in an age-old and bloody history. Entertaining and informative, it makes a very readable adjunct to that history.