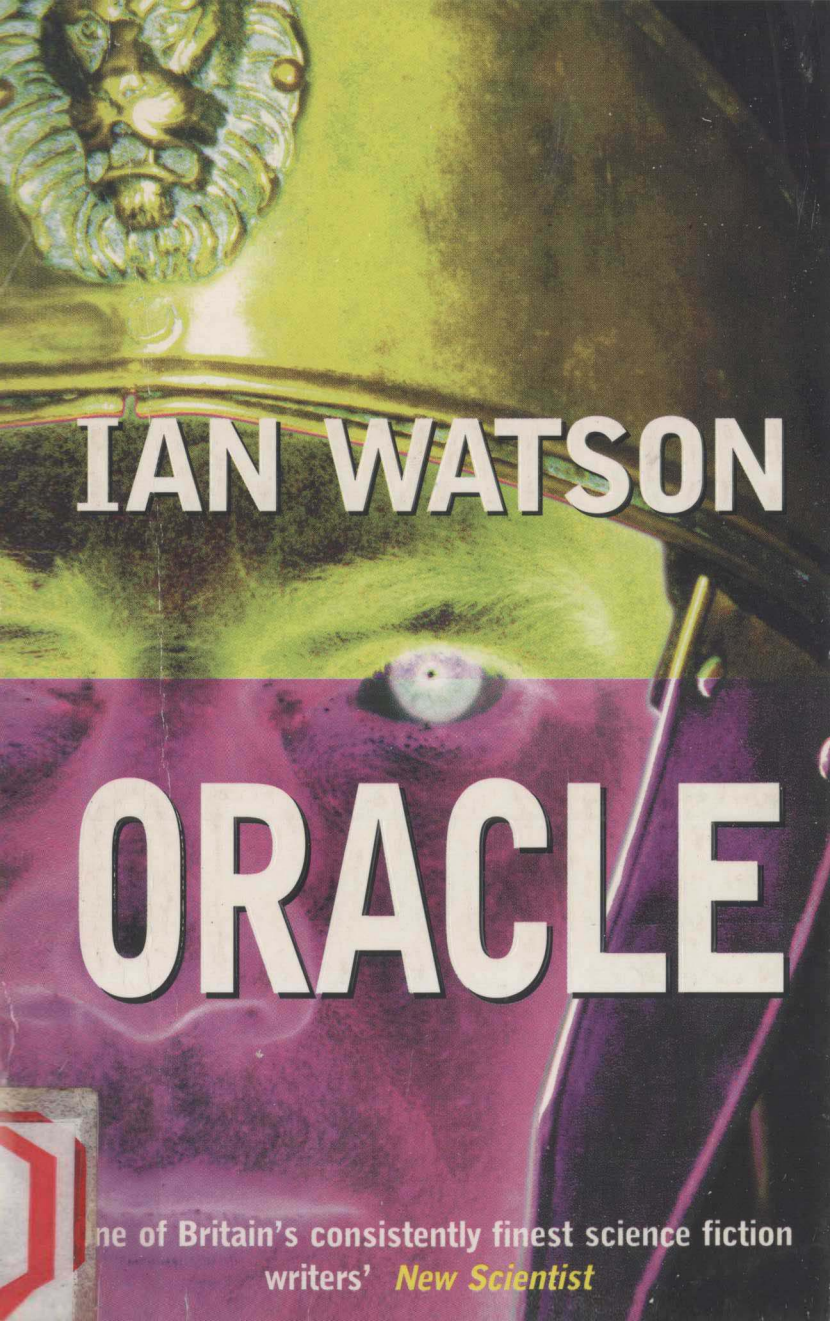




IAN WATSON

ORACLE

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All over, his skin tingled. The air, of a sudden, smelled as pungent as sea-air. Blue light danced around him dazzlingly. Terror gripped him. *Could you be nearby?* Nausea twisted his guts.

A thunderclap of darkness. As thunder would have been to the ears, so was this vanishing of light to his eyes. Momentarily he lost all sense of weight or of substance.

There were stars above. *It was night.* A god had snatched him away and put him where it was night, not day.

'Great Isis—' he cried out, shaking.

Here was a road. Obviously a road. It stretched arrow-straight in both directions. Yet it was so wide. And so smooth – not made of flagstones, but of continuous metal. Or some kind of dark concrete. A road for celestial chariots to race on. A few trees loomed against the stars.

Far down the road, two bright eyes of light appeared. Those were coming so fast, casting a brilliant beam ahead of them. They rushed towards him faster than a galloping horse.

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HARD QUESTIONS

IAN WATSON
ORACLE

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*For Graham and Agnes,
and with thanks to Bucco*

PART ONE

1

In the distance Marcus glimpsed the rebel British queen. She was careering about in her wicker chariot and screeching like a harpy, by the looks of it. Bloody Boudicca, butcher of Camulodunum colony and defenceless Londinium and Verulamium – strapping and big-boned, in a tunic of mixed colours and a sleeveless cloak. Her long tawny red hair flew loose.

Sweat stung Marcus's eyes. Now you see Boudicca, now you don't. He slammed his shield against another raving mustached long-haired blue-daubed lout. The Brit simply had no place to swing his unwieldy sword. Marcus stabbed his own gladius into the fellow's bare belly just above the trouser line.

As the Brit doubled over, Marcus thumped the bowed head with his shield. The man toppled. *Don't let the routine become so automatic that you're unready for novelty.* The cacophony of warcries and screams swamped any additional noise from the fallen Brit. Legionaries, advancing ever deeper in wedge formation, were certainly not wasting any breath. Slam, stab, slam, stab.

Those Brit charioteers would soon have no room for manoeuvre. Gallop headlong, dismount and wade in, then rush somewhere else: that was the idea of tactics among the barbarian nobs. Gradually, tens of thousands of armed farmers were being pushed back towards the great barrier of booty wagons. The chariots would be caught in the squeeze.

Hundreds of stupid wagons, crowded with families. Wives and kids were goggling at what they had expected would be

another fine slaughter – to be followed by burnings alive and impalings and plenty of severed heads to embalm in cedar-oil. That barricade would be the death of the Brits.

Suetonius Paullinus had chosen a fine site. Top end of a tapering valley. Thickly wooded to the rear and sides – so that there would be no surprises. Simply stand still. Wait for the horde to crush forward pell-mell with all their best bronze shields to the fore. Hurl your first javelin. Then hurl your second javelin.

Bendy iron to hook through the shield; shaft to drag it down. Lots of those flamboyant Brit shields had sprouted long rud-ders. Just try using a shield with a javelin stuck in it. Bye-bye, shield.

Up swords, and out. Wade forward, wedge-formation, into the bare human sea. Slam, stab. That's how it had been, just as per drill.

Blood slicked the grass under Marcus's iron-shod sandals. A couple of casualties among his own men had been due to them slipping, exposing themselves to a wild swipe from a frenzied Brit. The air stank of sweat and voided bowels. Flies and midges swarmed.

Blood spattered his cuirass, which had shone so brightly a few hours earlier. Like most sensible centurions, for combat he had swapped his jerkin of fine mail with its discs of honour for the segmented laced-up metal lorica of an ordinary soldier. Of course, the white crest on his helmet still identified him.

'If I die,' he had prayed, earlier on, to kindly Isis in her aspect of queen of war, 'may I live once more in another world.'

It looked as though he would continue living in this world for a few years longer.

His own prayer, while they had waited, had been silent. Some of the lads had called out their appeals to the Mars of Vengeance or to manly Mithras. If Nipius or Flavius came through the day alive and uninjured, they would dedicate an altar.

Marcus had hushed those chaps, his word like a flick from the swagger-stick. It was important to remain utterly impassive and contemptuous.

It seemed hours now since they had first stood waiting in

perfect formation. Thankfully the sky continued to be overcast, no sun shining through.

And by now Marcus was very unlikely to die. Not so the native rebels. For those teeming thousands, extinction was certain. For their wives, for their brats, for their draught-oxen too.

Serve them bloody well right. With the torching of the civilized towns, Marcus's hopes had gone up in smoke. Retire at last; collect bonus and land-grant; settle down with Corellia – that had been his dream. Now he would be camping under goat leather for a few more years.

Mad barbaric bastards.

Arguably, there had been some heavy-handedness on the part of Rome. Native chiefs had not realized that loans are repayable with interest. Colonists got greedy. The king of the Icenii imagined that he had taken out insurance by willing half of his cash to Nero, but as soon as Boudicca's husband croaked, the Procurator grabbed all of Prasutagus's wealth and lands, including his vassals' assets.

Then there was that business about caning the dead king's widow and raping her teenage daughters for whom she was regent. That was to disqualify the girls. The episode had not gone down too well, but principally land and money were the big grievances. As usual.

You have to pay for civilization and for law. Hard times at first, then wealth cascades – witness Londinium, now a heap of ashes. Wealth cascades upon some; but not all men are equal.

Tribesmen were not remotely equal to legionaries – not even at ten-to-one. Not in a good place like this, with no risk of ambush. The odds were probably five-to-one by now.

Marcus stabbed downward at a groaning body in case the warrior was still capable of some act of hostility. Despite tiredness, Marcus felt purified, as if he was sacrificing – maybe to fickle Fortune. Fortune had thrown everything into chaos. Duty, honour, purpose: those were the refuge. Their instruments: cold rage, short sword.

When the men at the front of each wedge grew fatigued with slamming and stabbing, they rotated to the rear.

Trumpets pierced the din, signalling advance, advance.

Scarlet flags waved. The cavalry were out on both wings, harrying remorselessly. Marcus quickly checked the disposition of his squad leaders.

He rammed his shield forward.

2

After the end of the conference and dinner in the restaurant of the Hinkley Pool Hotel, Tom Ryan had lingered in the bar until midnight, drinking with the Finnish woman, Eeva Pennanen.

After a pint and a half of Directors bitter, Tom was nursing lemonades. He planned to drive home that night to Milton Keynes. Eeva remained on the beer. Even at hotel prices the ale was quite a lot cheaper than in her native land – so she emphasized, as if this conferred upon her a duty to imbibe.

Eeva was dark-haired and chunky and vivacious. For a while before switching back to English they had talked in Latin. Tom had been amazed to learn that a Finnish radio station transmitted a news programme once a week in Latin, to a devoted – if minority – audience.

Eeva had worked for that radio station for a couple of years before she became a translator in Brussels. Not an interpreter, but a translator of documents, from Dutch and English into her mother tongue. Of course Eeva also spoke good French, being based in Brussels, and was fluent in Swedish. When her country joined the European Community, the Finns had graciously opted to conduct all business requiring interpreters in Swedish, their second official language.

With her unusual Dutch-Finnish linguistic combo, Eeva was part of an elite vanguard. Apparently not enough Finnish translators had been prepared to come to Brussels, after Finland's accession. So most of the document-crunching went on in Helsinki, with couriers shuttling to and fro, as well as electronic transfer. The unions were not happy about this situation. They did not want Finns to be separate.

So what was it like living in Belgium, then?

'It's so bourgeois on the surface. But underneath—'

'Language riots and rivalries and corruption?' He was thinking about the various scandals which had unfolded.

'I don't let those things bother me too much, Tom. I was going to say, it's quirky. Where else would you find a museum of underpants? Where else would schools have classes in pigeon appreciation?'

He laughed.

Actually, Eeva was thinking of switching from translating to interpreting. How many languages she seemed to know. Her fluency in a tongue which was almost dead outside of the Catholic Church was certainly part of her attractiveness to Tom; and vice versa, it seemed.

And herself too, her lively self, fifteen years his junior! She wore a black velvet skirt and a sweater with a reindeer motif.

Damned uncomfortable little chairs in the bar, like padded buckets which cramped you tight.

Assisted by the formality of Latin and by the probability that their paths might not cross again, Tom had found it easy to confide in Eeva.

Of course, their paths *might* cross. Conceivably a client of Tom's might want some brochure translated into Finnish. Tom had Eeva's card. One thing might lead to another. Could that even have happened tonight?

Most of the foreign contingent at the one-day conference were staying overnight in the hotel, so the bar remained busy. Most of the British had left. If Tom had not told Mary that he would be coming home . . . If she had not begun having the nightmare, about which he had already told Eeva . . .

Might he perhaps have found himself sharing the Finnish woman's room? Murmuring to one another: *Vivamus atque amemus*, let us live, let us love. Quoting Catullus at one another: *Da mi basia mille*, give me a thousand kisses. Making love in Latin, unlike anyone else in the whole wide world, uniquely, for a night.

Earlier, Eeva had asked him, 'So did you never fall in love because you had intended to be a priest? Even if you never became one, you still felt, hmm, celibate?'

Tom's reply had sounded too austere and stern.

'Love leads to marriage. Marriage leads to kids. I did not want to bring kids into this world—'

'Where they can lose their parents so suddenly and terribly?'

He had already told her about the terrorist bomb on the Aer Lingus flight from Belfast to the Holy Land back in 1974, which had killed his mother and father and two hundred other tourists, most of them Catholics like his parents, but some Protestants as well, and quite a few Jewish denizens of Belfast. The shocking futility of that tragedy had certainly been one reason why he never married. The incident was symptomatic of so much else.

'The world is coming apart, Eeva. So many atrocities, ethnic cleansings, hatreds. The environment going to hell. Chernobyl. Holes in the sky. Kids knifing each other in schools. Far too many people jostling for a cake that gets smaller all the time.'

'If you had become a Catholic priest,' she pointed out, 'you would have been forbidding population control.'

'The church's position on birth control might have changed! John Paul the First was probably going to overturn *Humanae Vitae* – that's the prohibition on any sort of contraception. But he died so soon. Just thirty-three days as Pope. Do you know, a lot of people say that John Paul was poisoned? Did you know that?'

She shook her head. She knew little about church affairs.

'They say John Paul was about to expose scandals about Vatican finances and Mafia links. To think that he was killed! That's what I mean about evil stupidity dragging the world down the drain.'

'It's also a beautiful world,' she insisted. 'We Finns have known horrors. The civil war, the Winter War. We still rejoice. When we are not weeping silently.'

He knew nothing about her civil war or her Winter War. Yet, God, he felt such an affinity for this woman.

God? So who is God, when he's at home? God absented himself when Ma and Da died. And if Mary was becoming unstrung again, almost twenty-five years after she recovered from her breakdown, Tom had a duty not to abandon her emotionally.

Eeva voiced a wish. 'If only we could look ahead and know what will happen. And change things in time. At least you contribute a bit to mutual understanding with your translation service. And me too.'

On such a tiny scale.

And maybe soon to be obsolete.

This conference, funded by Euro money, had been about the practical prospects for machine translation. Speech synthesis. Smart neural networks which could cope with all the ambiguities and nuances of human language. A team from the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence had come over from Saarbrücken to do a presentation about the Verbmobil project. In twenty years' time, no one might need to learn a foreign language. We would all wear a little box and earphones, like a Walkman. A Speechman. We would all be Speechmen. Subtitles and hypertext footnotes might be projected on to your retina while a perfectly fluent computer voice recited poetry by Dante or Virgil. Lenses incorporated in a lightweight headset would scan the copy of *Die Welt* you were holding and instantly project a version in English. While you sub-vocalized in your mother tongue, your box would speak out aloud for you in Hungarian or Cantonese.

This hotel, custom-built as a conference centre half an hour by motorway from both the East Midlands Airport and Birmingham Airport, was an oasis set in landscaped isolation beside the A5, the old Roman Watling Street which stretched from London to North Wales. Soft muzak played endlessly in the bar – saccharine instrumental remixes of *The Sound of Music* – and in the corridors between the conference rooms. Lining the corridors were arcades of bay-windowed shop frontages, dummy shops to which there were no doors, displaying designer lingerie, lacework, deerstalker hats, Royal Doulton models of Victorian street traders, bottles of single malt, all available from Reception. This whole place could have been a soothing, seductive airport lounge, utterly disconnected from the farmland nearby.

It was high time for Tom to leave. As he stood, so did Eeva. Stretching up quite a way, she kissed him briskly on the cheek.

'I think I'm a bit drunk,' she announced. 'I must go to sleep.'

Not, ambiguously, to bed. But to sleep.

Should he kiss her too, in return? Probably not.

'So, goodbye, Eeva.' He hoisted his black leather bag over his shoulder.

'Drive safely. You take the M1?' People parting often talk neutralizingly about the means of doing so.

He *could* join the motorway just a few miles south at Lutterworth. But he would not do so.

'I'll stay on the A5 all the way. It's a living road, with a history. I felt disconnected all day long.'

He was referring to this hotel and to the sanitized vision of a harmonious world of Speechmen. Could Eeva suppose that *she* had disconnected him, and that now he was deliberately rejecting their affinity?

'The motorway seems unreal,' he explained. 'It's so separate. The A5's a good road. It's wide and straight.'

Watling Street ran almost parallel to the motorway. The need to make driver decisions – although not too many – and the moderate variety would keep him alert. Not that he felt weary, yet.

He grinned. 'I could travel faster on the M1. I know which bridges have speed cameras on them. But I might forget, thinking about us talking together.'

'*Vale!*' she said. '*Bene habet!*' Which was almost Roman for have a good day. Or have a good life.

3

He walked out to his parked Rover. Floodlights played on the hotel and upon a colonnade and statuary beside an artificial pool. It was as if a sprawling Grecian temple had appeared in the middle of nowhere, to amaze and mesmerize passing drivers. A still night; stars and stray clouds. The air was verging on chilly, for the first week in May. Could be a ground frost later.

Soon, the car and its headlights were cutting through the night at a steady eighty.

Falling in love was a risk Tom had never taken. And Mary had fallen in love with nobody since her time as an adolescent tearaway and rebel – which came to an abrupt halt with their Ma and Da's death. Their *murder*, their political murder – although the elder Ryans were only a random statistic, and not

even in an Irish cause. The hijacking and the explosion had been the doing of Palestinian sympathizers.

Two years Tom's junior, Mary had mocked his intention of becoming a priest, and mocked religion itself. Blessedly, rebel Mary had never been allured by the IRA, with its roots in the everlasting Catholic-Protestant hatreds, never mind the social divide these expressed. If her youthful causes were political, they were of an anarchist stripe. A plague on both the houses in Ulster, and on the British establishment too, and on all establishments wherever.

At seventeen, off she had decamped to London, to live in a squat and sleep around and smoke hash. Expressing her own rebellion against society. This was much to the sorrow of her Da, Brian, who ran a corner newsagent's shop, and of Agnes Philomena Ryan, who prayed often for her daughter. Tom was their consolation. Yet their daughter's conduct was a contributory factor to a long-intended and long-saved-for holiday in the Holy Land. As Agnes Philomena explained painstakingly in a letter to her daughter, if she could pray in Bethlehem, a miracle might save Mary's soul.

After the plane exploded over the eastern Mediterranean, Mary's soul had come asunder. If it had not been for her behaviour, her Ma and Da would not have been on that flight! She spent the best part of two years in a psychiatric hospital. In due time she came to a more balanced view.

Tom had likewise moved to London, in his case to study Italian and French, and to be near Mary. His faith had flown.

When Mary belatedly became a student, it was of international relations. Now, at the age of forty-five, a little plumper but still a fine looker, with her green eyes and her freckles and her long rich red hair, she was pioneering a module in conflict resolution as part of a degree in politics from the Open University. Since the Open University was in Milton Keynes, and Tom's translation agency could be based anywhere at all, it had made sound sense for the brother and sister to buy a house together there.

Lovely hair Mary had; there was a bit of that colour in his own moustache. Her causes were Amnesty and Prisoners of Conscience and freedom of information, and a particular bee in

her bonnet was that Britain ought to have a written constitution and Bill of Rights such as America had.

'Britain,' she would declare, 'is the most secretive country in Europe, now that Albania has seen sense!'

Tom would point out that despite a Bill of Rights America was capable of the most outrageous secret activities. Subverting regimes. Testing mind-control drugs on unwitting human guinea pigs.

'Ah, Tom, but in America it all comes out in the end. Whereas here, nothing need ever come out.'

Although Tom was thinking dutifully about Mary, his mind kept veering back to Eeva, regretfully.

Hardly another car on the road. Open fields. A light in some lonely farm. Sometimes you could believe that this country was half-empty, though of course every square foot is owned.

He had made good time. Already he had covered twenty-five miles. He was halfway home.

A sign advertising a country craft centre pointed up a narrow hedged lane. On a low hilltop the silhouette of a church tower marked a village in darkness. That's the thing about a road such as this: the sense of available places off to the side, even if they aren't especially obvious.

The far reach of the headlights picked out something on the road. A badger? A tubby Muntjak deer? As Tom eased off the accelerator, a figure arose, jerkily. Someone had been kneeling on the road. Tom began braking. With his elbow he shoved down on the rim of his door to centrally lock, as a precaution. As the headlights illuminated the blinded figure, Tom stared, amazed.

4

The march had paused, so that the men could fall out for a snack of wheat biscuits washed down with vinegar-water. Their heavy backpacks, loaded with mattocks and turf cutters, rested on the rammed gravel of the road. Men relieved themselves on either side, where broad strips were clear of bushes. The day was misty. From his horse Marcus could see cavalymen out on