

Best-sellers

THE NEW YORK TIMES

NON-FICTION

- LIBERTY AND TYRANNY** by Mark R. Levin
A conservative manifesto from a talk-show host.
- ALWAYS LOOKING UP** by Michael J. Fox
The story of the star's struggle with Parkinson's disease.
- RESILIENCE** by Elizabeth Edwards
Dealing with life's challenges, including cancer and her husband's infidelity.
- OUTLIERS** by Malcolm Gladwell
The author of *The Tipping Point* examines what makes a highly successful person.
- THE GIRLS FROM AMES** by Jeffrey Zaslow
An enduring friendship among a group of women in midwestern America.

FICTION

- DEAD AND GONE** by Charlaine Harris
Sookie Stackhouse searches for the killer of a werpanther.
- THE 8TH CONFESSION** by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro
Detective Lindsay Boxer and the Women's Murder Club investigate two killings.
- PYGMY** by Chuck Palahniuk
In this satire, terrorists from a totalitarian country enter the US disguised as exchange students.
- FIRST FAMILY** by David Baldacci
A birthday party at Camp David turns into a national security nightmare when a child is kidnapped.
- TEA TIME FOR THE TRADITIONALLY BUILT** by Alexander McCall Smith
The 10th No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series novel.

US hardback best-sellers, May 15

DYMCKS BOOKSELLERS

NON-FICTION

- PRISONER OF THE STATE** by Zhao Ziyang
The secret journals of late premier and the decisions that led to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.
- GWEILO: MEMORIES OF A HONG KONG CHILDHOOD** by Martin Booth
A tale of growing up in Kowloon's Walled City.
- NEVER ENOUGH** by Joe McGinniss
The murky tale of the Hong Kong high-society "milkshake" murder.
- EAT, PRAY, LOVE** by Elizabeth Gilbert
A depressed divorcee travels the world in search of pleasure, devotion and balance.
- THE SERIOUS HIKER'S GUIDE TO HONG KONG** by Pete Spurrier
How to escape the concrete jungle and discover Hong Kong's natural landscape.

FICTION

- ANGELS AND DEMONS** by Dan Brown
The precursor to the multimillion-copy best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*.
- THE PIANO TEACHER** by Janice Y.K. Lee
Set in Hong Kong in the 1950s. A newlywed's affair awakens devastating secrets reaching back to the Japanese invasion.
- SHANTARAM** by Gregory Roberts
A fugitive from Australia carves a niche in the Mumbai underworld.
- THE WHITE TIGER** by Aravind Adiga
The Man Booker Prize-winning confessions of an amoral, cynical, yet oddly endearing Indian village boy.
- THE APPEAL** by John Grisham
Legal skulduggery follows when a Mississippi court decides against a chemical company accused of dumping toxic waste.

Hong Kong best-sellers, May 16

FICTION



English
by Wang Gang
Viking, HK\$208
★★★★☆
Lijia Zhang

As with people, readers find certain connections with certain books, but not so with others. I found myself laughing, then suddenly crying, while reading Wang Gang's autobiographical novel, *English*, a Cultural Revolution tale with a refreshing twist.

It's a coming-of-age story set against that turbulent backdrop and narrated by an ethnic Han boy named Love Liu from Urumqi. Although Urumqi is the largest city and the capital of Xinjiang, the narrator considers it a backwater. He often wonders what life is like beyond the Tianshan Mountains.

As the book opens, Liu, 12, is fascinated by his sophisticated, cologne-wearing English teacher, Second Prize Wang from Shanghai. While his mother busies herself with designing an air raid shelter and his father is away working on developing a hydrogen bomb, the boy throws himself into learning English, forming an unlikely friendship with his diligent teacher. "Second Prize Wang was like a missionary in those days, only his religion was English," he says.

The key metaphor of the book, a Chinese-English dictionary, supposedly the only one in town, becomes the object of Liu's desire because it represents a new world he longs to reach. He even tries to steal the dictionary – breaking his leg in the process. Among the unfamiliar words he discovers are "mercy" and "compassion", baffling amid the cruel reality around him.

English doesn't focus on the brutality or violence; nor does it dwell on the suffering of the innocent at the hands of the bad, as many Cultural Revolution titles do,

notably *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai*. Contrary to western perceptions, many victims were also perpetrators. Wang, an established novelist and screenwriter, argues that just about everyone was implicated. The novel is partly the author's reflection on the mainland's shameful recent past, which still resonates.

The characters, many based on real people, are well drawn and conflicted, from Liu's father, arrogant yet weak in front of authority, to the beautiful Ahjitai, a teacher troubled by her identity as a "double-turner", Urumqi slang for half-Han, half-Uyghur. She is the only non-Han character, although the novel is set in Xinjiang. Then, as now, the Uyghur and Han lived segregated lives.

Despite the setting and the narrator's flawed ambition, there is something uplifting about the book: it shows that human dignity exists even during the darkest days.

Lijia Zhang is the author of *Socialism is Great!*

HISTORY



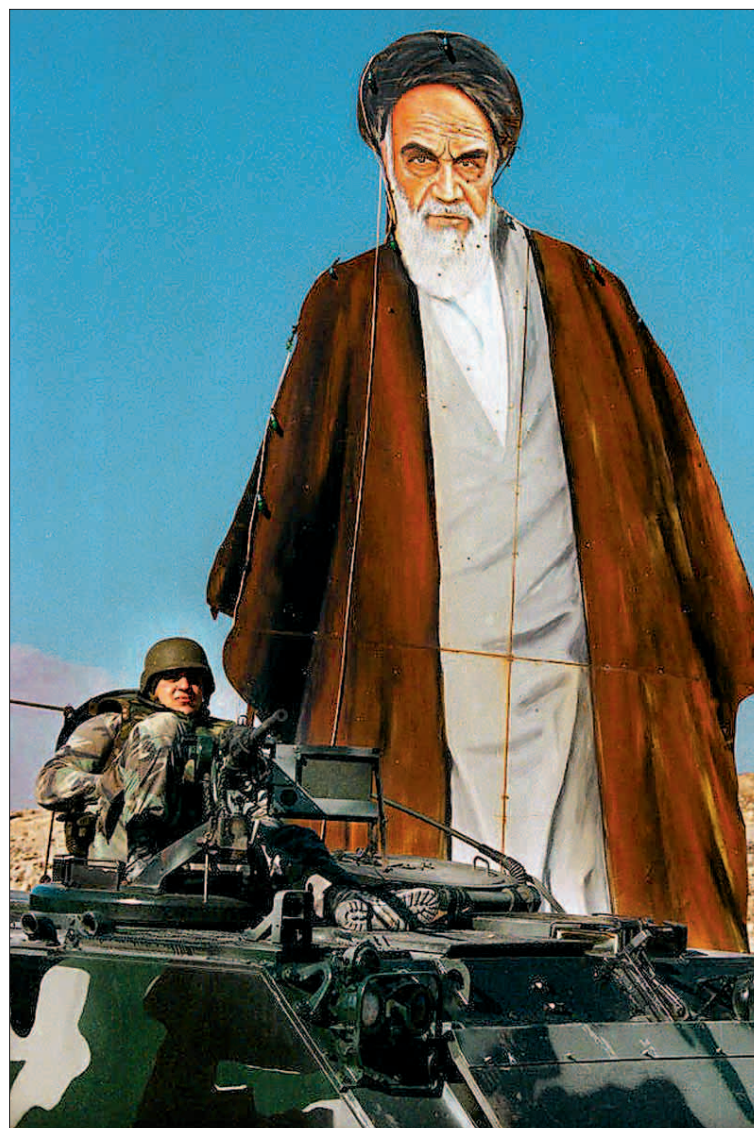
Khomeini's Ghost
by Con Coughlin
Macmillan
HK\$260
★★★★☆
James Buchan

This is a clear account of the revolution that destroyed the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran in 1979 and of the 30 years of clerical government since then. Con Coughlin has a flair for the long-lived or permanent in Iranian history and links such far-flung events as the constitution of 1906, the Abadan crisis of 1951, the revolution itself, the death sentence on Salman Rushdie in 1989 and the recent row with the west about Iran's uranium enrichment.

If the book has a fault, it is a feeling of distance. One of the consequences of the Iranian revolution has been an explosion of history. A country once known only from British consular reports and intrepid travel stories is now awash with historical documents, letters, diaries, grainy videos, weblogs and secret police files of questionable authenticity. Amid the blatant forgeries, the hand-wringing of the monarchists and the unctuous Arabisms of the clergymen, a new picture of Iran is taking shape, more intimate and, as it were, more Persian than the elegant diplomatic dispatch or the foreign correspondent's file. If Coughlin's book is, as his publishers say, "definitive", it is definitive of an approach now passing out of style.

For Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's career, Coughlin follows the ground-breaking biography by Baqer Moin (*Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, 1999), minus much of the theology. Though he follows Moin closely, it is not closely enough. For example, he says Khomeini held two meetings with the shah in the 1940s. That is improbable. Khomeini did not have the seniority, and anyway Coughlin relies for evidence on a single monarchist source.

On the basis of another single source, this time unattributable, Coughlin writes that Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was twice president



A Lebanese soldier lounges in front of a billboard of Khomeini. Photo: AFP

of the Islamic republic, supplied information in the 70s to the shah's infamous security service, Savak. Such mud-slinging is common in historical writing in the Islamic republic, but that is no reason to reproduce it. As for the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, Coughlin charges right at the capital taboo of revolutionary historiography, which is Khomeini's fateful decision to reject Iraqi peace offers after the recapture of Khorramshahr in May 1982. By mid-1988 Iran was facing defeat: Khomeini accepted the UN Ceasefire Resolution 598 and, as he put it, drank the cup of poison.

There follows a serious misunderstanding. Coughlin states that "Khomeini also made sure that

after his death Iran would continue work on its nuclear weapons programme" and quotes from a letter in which he says Khomeini called for "noticeable quantities of laser and atomic weapons". Coughlin says he is the first to publish the exact contents of this letter, but it was released by Rafsanjani in 2006.

Coughlin reminds readers that it was under president Muhammad Khatami as much as under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that Iran made advances in nuclear expertise. For a regime where the ideology has gone stale and the blood of the martyrs has dried, all that is left is a Bonapartist bang. *Guardian News & Media*

HISTORICAL FANTASY



Twelve
by Jasper Kent
Bantam Press
HK\$169
★★★★☆
Nick Ryan

Reading the author's notes on *Twelve*, a *Doctor Zhivago*-meets-*Dracula* in Napoleonic Russia epic, it seems that Jasper Kent is a man who lives by the sea with a dozen rats and writes musical theatre.

An eccentric Englishman? Possibly. But a promising novelist too, if all his works build on the strengths in *Twelve*.

It's a sprawling, ambitious chase, set over endless swathes of beleaguered territory in tsarist Russia. It's an unusual setting for something vampiric – a mature, cross-genre tale that excels in tension and historical depth.

The hero is Captain Aleksei Ivanovich Danilov, part of an espionage and sabotage unit of four men trying to hamper Napoleon's Grand Armée as it storms through Russia. The men are a close unit: individualists toughened by capture and torture, assassinations and long days out in the field. Danilov knows the family of his senior officer, Vadim, and has named his son after another, Dmitry, while Maks is the idealist intellectual, an admirer of France's revolutionary ways.

Starting in the heat of summer, when Napoleon looks unstoppable, then moving into one of the worst winters ever, much of the action takes place during days off carousing in the soon-to-be-invaded Moscow or out in the field, where they prepare their traps for the advancing French.

Early on, Dmitry reveals he has summoned help from mercenaries somewhere to the west (Romania). These men, he says, are the *oprichniki*, a ragged bunch who use unconventional means to fight their enemies. Danilov and his comrades are unimpressed when they first meet them, regarding them as criminals. But soon tales of their exploits and unconfirmed reports of plagues, attacks by rabid animals and other terrors travel on the wind, sowing unease among the French.

Up to this point, we're still in historical novel territory (all the actual battles of the campaign are there) but the sacrifice of Maks – who it turns out is a French spy – tears at Danilov's heart and reveals something disquieting about the nature of the *oprichniki*. Kent superbly draws out the tension, heartache and sense of betrayal.

There is the crack of authenticity about the book: real-life battles, timelines and places are described in great detail. But Kent also uses vampires to examine the madness and cruelty of war, of one human to another, drawing the creatures as savage and feral but almost entirely instinct driven. It is only "the master" and the cruel, intelligent Iuda (Judah) who seem possessed of intelligence and it is mankind who is responsible for the ultimate evil: the razing of towns, starvation and random acts of brutality.

Twelve is a monumental first novel in which fantasy, folklore, history and war collide in a rich, mesmerising tableau.