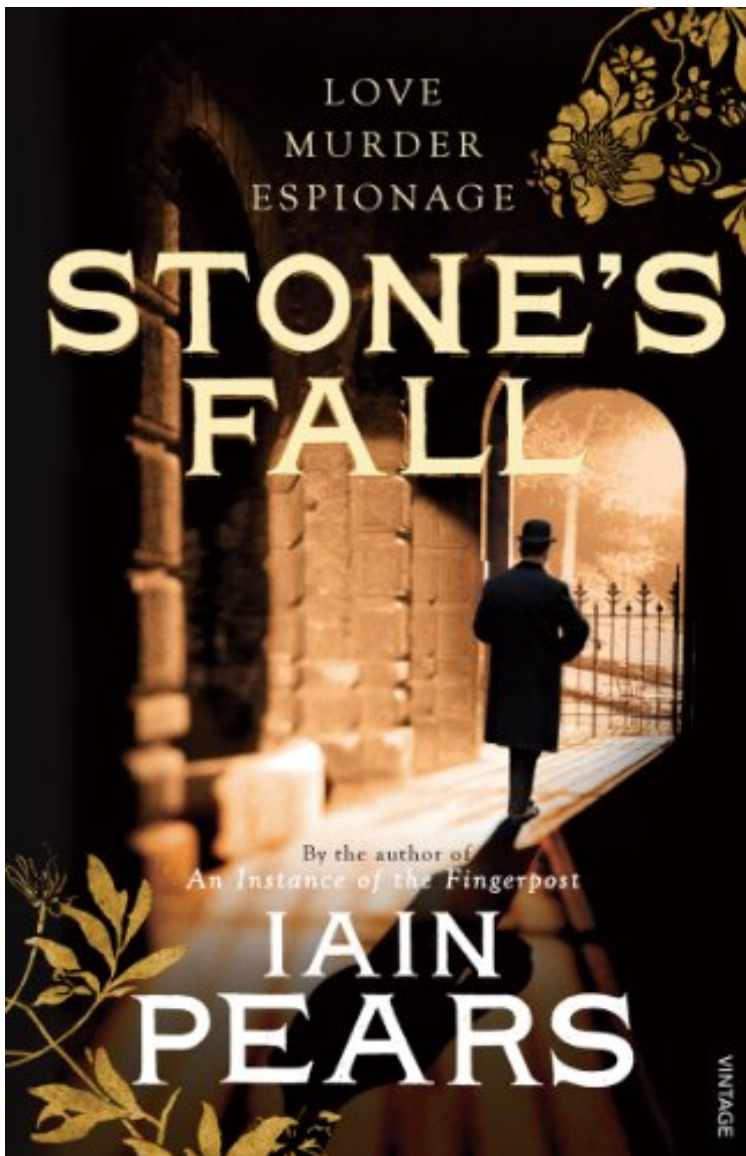


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# Stone's Fall



*Par Iain Pears*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJohn Stone, a man so wealthy that in the years before World War One he was able to manipulate markets, industries and indeed whole countries and continents, has been found dead in mysterious circumstances. His beautiful young widow commissions a journalist to carry out an unusual bequest in his will but as he begins his research he soon discovers a story far more complex than he could have ever imagined... As the story moves backwards through time, from London in 1909 to Paris in 1809, before concluding in Venice in 1867, the mystery of John Stone's life and loves begins to unravel. The result is a spellbinding novel that is both a quest for the truth, a love story that spans decades and a compelling murder mystery.ExtraitPART ONEParis, March 1953The Church of St.-Germain des Prs, at the start of what

was supposed to be spring, was a miserable place, made worse by the drabness of a city still in a state of shock, worse still by the little coffin in front of the altar which was my reason for being there, worse again by the aches and pains of my body as I kneeled. She died a week before I arrived. I hadn't even realised she was still alive; she must have been well into her eighties, and the hardships of the past few years had weakened many a younger person. She would not have been impressed, but something approaching a real prayer for her did come into my mind just before I struggled back onto the pew. Age has few compensations; the indignity of discomfort, the effort to conceal constant nagging pain, is most certainly not one of them. Until I read the Figaro that morning and saw the announcement, I had been enjoying myself. I was on a farewell tour; the powers that be had scraped together enough foreign currency to allow me to travel. My last visit to the foreign bureaux before I retired. Not many people could do that sort of thing these days and would not until foreign exchange restrictions were lifted. It was a little mark of respect, and one that I appreciated. It was a fine enough service, I thought, although I was not an expert. The priests took their time, the choir sang prettily, the prayers were said, and it was all over. A short eulogy paid tribute to her tireless, selfless work for the unfortunate but said nothing of her character. The congregation was mainly freshly scrubbed and intense-looking children, who were clipped around the ear by teachers if they made any untoward noise. I looked around, to see who would take charge of the next round, but no one seemed to know what to do. Eventually the undertaker took over. The body, he said, would be interred in Pre Lachaise that afternoon, at two o'clock, at 15 Chemin du Dragon. All who wished to attend were welcome. Then the pallbearers picked up the coffin and marched out, leaving the mourners feeling lost and cold. Excuse me, but is your name Braddock? Matthew Braddock? A quiet voice of a young man, neatly dressed, with a black band around his arm. I nodded, and he held out his hand. My name is Whitely, he said. Harold Whitely, of Henderson, Lansbury, Fenton. I recognised you from newsreels. Oh? Solicitors, you know. We dealt with Madame Robillard's residual legal business in England. Not that there was much of it. I am so glad to meet you; I was planning to write in any case, once I got back. Really? She didn't leave me any money, did she? He smiled. I'm afraid not. By the time she died she was really quite poor. Goodness gracious me, I said, with a smile. Why the surprise? She was very wealthy when I knew her. I'd heard that. I knew her only as a sweet old lady with a weakness for worthy causes. But I found her charming on the few occasions we met. Quite captivating, in fact. Yes, that's her, I replied. Why did you come to the funeral? A tradition of the firm, he said with a grimace. We bury all our clients. A last service. But, you know it's a trip to Paris, and there's not much opportunity for that these days. Unfortunately, I could get hold of so little currency I have to go straight back this evening. I have a little more than that, so would you care for a drink? He nodded, and we walked down the Boulevard St.-Germain to a caf, past grim buildings blackened with the filth of a century or more of smoke and fumes. Whitely formerly Captain Whitely, so he told me had an annoying tendency to grip my elbow at the difficult bits to make sure I did not trip and fall. It was thoughtful, although the assumption of decrepitude was irritating. A good brandy: she deserved no less, and we drank her health by the plate-glass window as we sat on our rickety wooden chairs. Madame Robillard, we intoned several times over, becoming more garrulous as we drank. He told me of life in Intelligence during the war the time of his life, he said wistfully, now gone for good and replaced with daily toil as a London solicitor. I told him stories of reporting for the BBC; of D-Day, of telling the world about the Blitz. All yesterday, and another age. Who was her husband? I asked. I assume he is long dead. Robillard died about a decade ago. He ran the orphanages and schools with her. Is that why all those children were in the church? I imagine so. She started her first home after the war the first war. There were so many orphans and abandoned children, and she somehow got involved with them. By the end there were about ten or twelve schools and orphanages, I gather, all run on the very latest humanitarian principles. They consumed her entire fortune, in fact, so much so that I imagine they will all be taken over by the State now. A good enough use for it. When I knew her she was married to Lord Ravenscliff. That was more than forty years ago, though. I paused. Whitely looked blank. Have you heard of Ravenscliff? I enquired. No, he said. Should I have? I thought, then shook my head. Maybe not. He was an industrialist, but most of his companies disappeared in the Depression. Some closed, others were bought up. Vickers took over a few, I remember. The lone and level sands stretch far away, you know. Pardon? Nothing. I breathed in the thick air of cigarette smoke and damp, then attracted the waiter's eye and called for more drinks. It seemed a good idea. Whitely was not cheering me up at all. It was quiet; not many people around, and the waiters were prepared to work hard for the few customers they had. One of them almost smiled, but managed to restrain himself. Tell me about her, I said when our glasses were refilled once more. I hadn't seen her for many years. I only discovered she was dead by chance. Not much to

say. She lived in an apartment just up the road here, went to church, did good works, and outlived her friends. She read a great deal, and loved going to the cinema. I understand she had a weakness for Humphrey Bogart films. Her English was excellent, for a Frenchwoman. She lived in England when I knew her. Hungarian by birth, though. Apart from that there's nothing to say, is there? I suppose not. A quiet and blameless life. What were you going to write to me about? Hmm? Oh, that. Well, Mr. Henderson, you know, our senior partner. He died a year ago and we've been clearing out his papers. There was a package for you. For me? What is it? Gold? Jewels? Dollar bills? Swiss watches? I could use some of those. We prospective old-age pensioners . . . I couldn't say what's in it. It's sealed. It was part of the estate of Mr. Henry Cort . . . Good heavens. You knew him, I assume? We met many years ago. As I say, part of the Cort estate. Curious thing is that it carried instructions that you were to be given it only on Madame Robillard's death. Which was very exciting for us. There isn't much excitement in a solicitor's office, let me tell you. Hence my intention to write to you. Do you know what is in it? I have absolutely no idea. I scarcely knew Cort at all, and certainly haven't even cast eyes on him for more than thirty years. I came across him when I was writing a biography of Madame Robillard's first husband. That's how I knew her as well. I hope it was a great success. Unfortunately not. I never even finished it. The reaction of most publishers was about as enthusiastic as your own was when I mentioned his name. My apologies. It was a long time ago. I went back to being a journalist, then joined the BBC when it started up. When did Cort die? Curious how, the older you get, the more important other people's deaths become. Nineteen forty-four. When I get back, send me your package. If it's valuable, I'll be glad to get it. But I doubt it will be. As far as I remember, Cort didn't like me very much. I certainly didn't like him. And then we ran out of things to say to each other, as strangers of different generations do. I paid and began my old man's routine of wrapping myself up, coat, hat, scarf, gloves, pulling everything tight to keep out the bitterness of the weather. Whittily pulled on a thin, threadbare coat. Army demob, by the look of it. But he didn't seem half as cold as I was at the thought of going outside. Are you going to the cemetery? That would be the death of me. She would not have expected it and probably would have thought me sentimental. And I have a train at four. When I get back I will dig out my old notes to see how much I actually remember, and how much I merely think I remember. I took my train from the Gare de Lyon that afternoon, and the cold of Paris faded, along with thoughts of Madame Robillard, formerly Elizabeth, Lady Ravenscliff, as I went south to the greater warmth of a Mediterranean spring. She remained in the back of my mind wherever I went, whatever I saw. . . .

Revue de presse British author Pears matches the brilliance of his bestselling *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1998) with this intricate historical novel. The pages will fly by for most readers, who will lose themselves in the clear prose and compelling plot. Publishers Weekly, starred and boxed A learned, witty and splendidly entertaining descent into the demimondes of international espionage, arms dealing, financial hanky-panky and other favorite pastimes of those without conscience. Suffice it to say that the long but fast-paced story involves, among many other things, plenty of spy-versus-spy stuff, a whiff of romance and a plan to fill the world with enough all-destroying weapons that no one would ever dare go to war an epic James Bond tale, in other words, by way of G.K. Chesterton and perhaps Arturo Prez-Reverte. Classy crime fiction, delightfully written, with few straight lines in sight. Kirkus s, starred When I read Iain Pears *Instance of the Fingerpost* years ago, I thought it was so brilliantly plotted, so compulsively entertaining, so utterly engrossing that I gave it to my father and said, This is the new Dickens. *Stones Fall* is better. Malcolm Gladwell "A steadily simmering, action-filled story." *The Globe and Mail* "A magnificent piece of writing...beyond question." *The Gazette* "Engrossing and intelligent, it's the best sort of page-turner." *Daily Mail* "Pears has a knack of creating drama about high finance, a world that has been notably missing from the modern novel. . . . This is a splendid return to the grand 19th-century novel in its inclusive vision of society." *The Independent*