

THE BOOK OF ASH

by James Flint

Winner of a 2003 Arts Council Writers Prize

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'Flint's talent and invention are unmistakable; his writing vigorous and beautiful.'
The Times

Cooper James is happy to consider himself a run-of-the-mill computer nerd. He has rejected his unconventional upbringing in a hippy commune in favour of seriously politically incorrect employment in a high-security US military base on the Yorkshire moors, where only the anti-nuclear protesters he passes on his way into work every morning serve to remind him of his counter-cultural past. Until the day an unidentified package with his name on it turns up on the base and triggers a security alert.

Even though he is quickly able to establish that the coffee tin sent to him contains not anthrax but the ashes of his late father, artist and activist, Jack Reeve, Cooper finds himself under immediate suspicion from his superiors. It makes no difference that he hasn't seen Jack since the day, twenty years before, that his father left the commune, Cooper and Cooper's mother Stasia to pursue a teenage lover back to the United States (or so it was presumed); his security clearance is still suspended and his job is put on hold. Seething with resentment at his father's ability to ruin his life even after all this time and with old wounds from his abandonment reopening fast, Cooper nonetheless feels intrigued by the mystery posed by the ashes. Who has sent them? Why? And what is the meaning of the mysterious symbol etched on the lid of the coffee tin?

His curiosity piqued, Cooper sets off for the US on a mission to discover the truth behind Jack Reeve's disappearance and death. As he retraces Jack's progress through the quarry town of Graniteburg in Vermont and the artistic community of Seattle, via the notorious Area 51 in the Nevada desert and finally to Atomville, site of the first nuclear reactor, Cooper soon realizes how little he knew his father. The hippy protester he remembered from his childhood seems to have undergone a remarkable transformation, his political allegiances abandoned in the wake of a growing fascination with nuclear science.

Thanks to clues gathered along the way – the conflicting reports of Jack's old friends, enemies and colleagues; his father's copy of an arcane fifteenth century treatise on

metallurgy, *The Pirotechnia*; a catalogue of a bizarre exhibition by Jack of sculptures incorporating nuclear waste – the journey becomes a hunt for a giant granite slab which Jack was apparently intending to carve into his masterpiece. Increasingly convinced that this mysterious object holds the key, not just to his father's changed personality, but to the disaster of his own childhood, Cooper eventually finds the truth waiting for him on a hilltop overlooking the world's largest plutonium processing plant – inside a full-sized concrete replica of Stonehenge. Although like everything else in *The Book of Ash*, the truth isn't quite what it at first might seem.

James Flint's new novel challenges the dichotomy between science and art that lies at the heart of modern culture and suggests that the two disciplines are in fact intimately interdependent. He deftly incorporates a brief history of nuclear science and the American development of this most elemental of technologies into a gripping story of art, atoms, alchemy, politics and paranoia. And above all he asks the question: What does it mean for something – an element, a society, an individual – to really change? Inspired by the American artist James L. Acord, who in Flint's words 'loaned me his life and work to use as a frame across which to drape my own fiction', *The Book of Ash* is both a compelling and funny read and a deeply serious novel of ideas.

James Flint is the author of two novels: *Habitus* and *52 Ways to Magic America*. He has written features and reviews for many national newspapers and magazines and his short fiction has appeared in collections published by Penguin, the New English Library and the ICA. In 2002 one of his stories (*The Nuclear Train*) was made into a short film for Channel 4, directed by Daniel Saul. *The Book of Ash* was a winner of a 2003 Arts Council Writers' Award. James Flint lives in London.

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