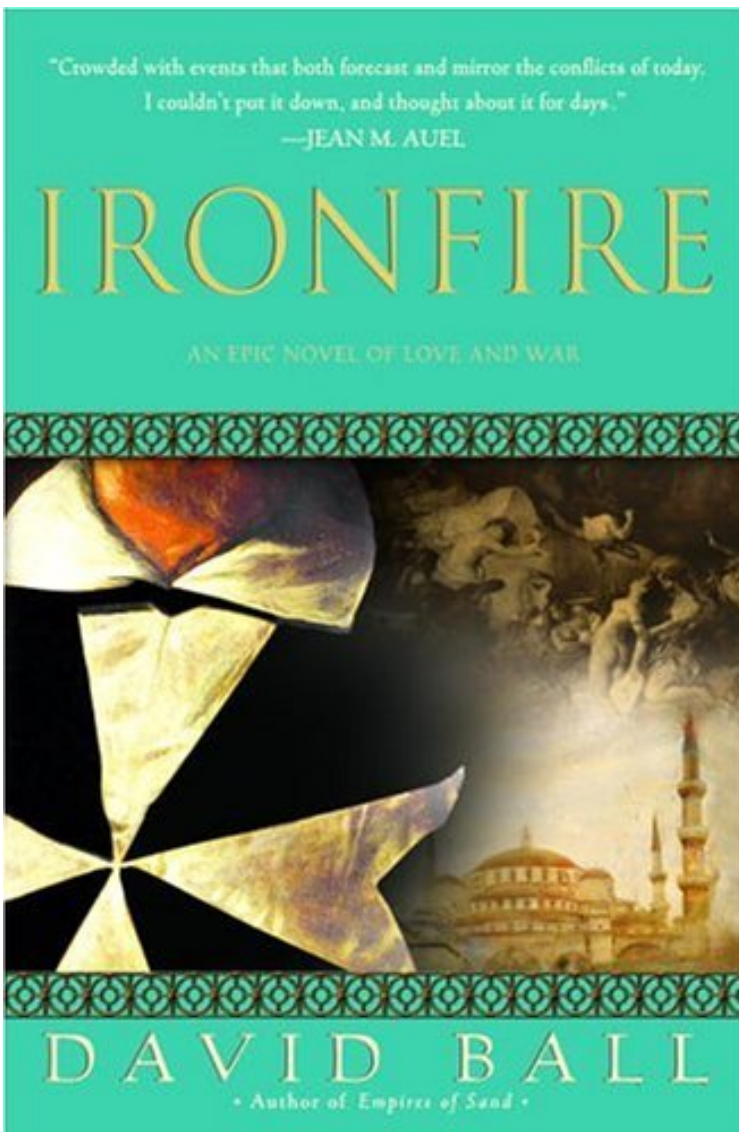


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Ironfire: An Epic Novel of Love and War



Par David Ball
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the acclaimed author of Empires of Sand comes a mesmerizing new adventure that Jean Auel cites as crowded with events that both forecast and mirror the conflicts of today. Sweeping from the drawing rooms of Paris to the palace of Suleiman the Magnificent to the dark hold of a slave ship racing across the sea, here is a dazzling story of love and valor, innocence and identity, an epic novel of the clash of civilizations on a barren island where the future was forged.The Mediterranean, the sixteenth century: Lying squarely in the midst of the vital sea lanes between the Christian West and the Ottoman Empire in the East, and ruled by the ancient Order of the Knights of St. John, Malta will become the stage upon which the fate of the world turns. For one of its sons, the hand of violence strikes swiftly, when young Nicolo Borg is seized by Barbary slavers and launched on a remarkable journey to the court of the supreme

ruler of the Muslim world. Renamed Asha, plotting his escape even as he swears allegiance to the god of his masters and is schooled in the arts of culture and war, the innocent boy will be transformed into one of the Sultans deadliest commanders. For Nicos beloved sister, Maria, his loss fires her hatred for the knights who did nothing to save him and her dreams of escape from her stifling home. As the headstrong girl grows into a fierce beauty, she will capture the attention of one man in particular, Christien de Vries, a surgeon-knight torn between duty and desire, caught up in Malta's frantic preparations against the coming Ottoman storm. Around Nico and Maria are men and women who will share their destinies: Dragut Ras, a brilliant corsair, arch-rival of the knights; Giulio Salvago, a priest in full flight from his carnal nature; Alisa, a young beauty hidden away in a harem; Jean de La Valette, the master knight who is Malta's only hope for survival. As the mighty Ottoman fleet bears down on the tiny island, as Nico Borg makes his way back to his homeland at the helm of a warship, Ironfire moves inexorably to a shattering climax where all will face ultimate justice in the murderous cauldron of siege warfare. Brilliantly capturing the crosscurrents of a storied age, Ironfire is historical fiction in the grand tradition, a stirring realization of a pivotal moment in time that irrevocably shaped the world we inhabit today.

From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait

Chapter 1 MALTA 1552

On the morning the slavers came, the children were looking for treasure. Swept up in their purpose, they didn't see the mast of the corsair galley, all but obscured by the high rocks surrounding the cove where the ship had anchored in the night. They didn't see the dead sentry hanging upside down on the watchtower. It was Bartholomeo, an older boy who lived on their own street, his throat cut deep as he slept, cut from ear to ear. His blood had already baked dry on the platform from which he was to have sounded the alarm, a platform from which his killers had stolen several planks of wood. The children didn't see Bartholomeo because they were hiding from him, keeping to the deep gullies or crouching behind the low stone walls that separated fields so dry and barren that even the crows didn't bother to scavenge there anymore. As long as they stayed behind those walls they knew Bartholomeo couldn't glimpse them and spoil their plans. He would do that, and just for spite: Bartholomeo was plain mean. They couldn't see or hear the stream of galley slaves snaking along the ravine a hundred paces to the east, men laboring in silence as they hauled water beneath the watchful eyes of their guards. And they couldn't smell the galley, because the wind was at their backs, a majjistral blowing from the northwest. With the right winds the smell of a galley preceded the sight, the stench an unmistakable herald of danger. Had they smelled it, they would have known the scent of doom.

There would have been time to fear, time to flee. Today, however, they smelled nothing but Maria's dreams. "Father's going to whip us," Nico said solemnly. He was breathing heavily, struggling to keep up with his sister as she led him toward the southern coast of Malta. The limestone over which they ran baked under a sun that was already scorching despite the early hour. "We're supposed to be cleaning out the dung pit." "He'll never know," Maria said. On bare feet she moved like quicksilver over the rocks, threading her way barefooted between stands of prickly pear. She was thirteen but small for her age, athletic and lean, her figure as yet betraying no sign that she was a girl. Her clothes were worn through in spots, and she carried a knife in her belt. Her hair was cut short and ragged, like a boy's. Her face was smeared with grime, her skin deeply browned by the sun, her green eyes lit with determination and adventure. "He's busy today, seeing the capumastru for a job building one of the knights' new forts. Besides, I'm not giving up until we've found it. If you'd rather slop shit than dig treasure, suit yourself. I don't care." They'd been two long days at the dung pit beneath their house, hauling out pail after pail of human and animal excrement to be spread over a rocky field outside the village where their family tried to grow vegetables. They emptied the pit twice a year, when the flies in the kitchen got too thick. Except for the flies, Maria saw no point to it. Nothing had grown in that field for two years. It was the same all over Malta. The rains hadn't come, and there had been no grain from Sicily. Her own baby sister and brother, twins, had starved to death, like half the babies in the village of Birgu that year. "Nothing grows in Malta but rocks and misery," her mother often said. "Nothing but dung, that is. If only there were a market for it, we would be rich beyond dreams." It was perhaps the only matter in which Maria agreed with her mother. Spreading the dung was pointless, just another of Father's nasty chores. It was better to be here, doing something that mattered. "We've been looking forever and we haven't found it," Nico grumped. "We'll find it today. But you can go back if you want." He would never go back, of course. He idolized his sister, who was the sunrise in his life. She protected him from the anger of their father and the despair of their mother and all the troubles of a hostile world. She wasn't like the other girls her age, not at all. Most of them covered their faces with barnuzi and stayed indoors. "A woman should be seen but twice in public," Maria's mother said. "The day she is married and the day she is buried." Maria never listened. She was a tomboy with a hot temper, and she vowed never to hide behind a barnuza. The

other girls shunned her. She shunned them back. That suited Nico because it left him someone to run with, someone who knew things and told stories and climbed rocks and hunted treasure. If she asked, he would follow her over the edge of the cliffs, even though such devotion often meant trouble for him with their father. "I just don't want to get whipped." "There are worse things." "Like what?" Nico could feel the leather of his father's belt on his backside. There wasn't much worse than that. "Like spending your life hauling shit. Like letting someone else find the treasure. Here we are," she said. They'd arrived at their private place, a series of ruins situated on a plateau overlooking the sea. They'd never seen another soul there. Dust carried on the winds of eons had buried most of it, but there remained great megaliths of stone, marking a temple built by some ancient and forgotten race. A few stone columns still rose to the sky, while others had toppled into a confused jumble. There remained subterranean chambers and innumerable places to hide. They'd explored much of it, crawling through openings and burrowing beneath slabs, sometimes discovering new passageways and rooms merely by moving rubble and digging a little. Somewhere in that labyrinth, carefully concealed in a box or a pot or behind a stone panel, Maria was certain there was treasure. Half a century earlier the Jews had been expelled from Spain and her domains, including Malta. During their flight from persecution, they were believed by many to have buried their uncountable riches, intending to return for them later. So far all Maria had found were seashells and some old bones, but even without the hope of treasure she'd have come anyway. She loved the ruins. There was a purity to them, from their smell to their glorious view of the sea to their telltale hints of glories past. She felt the presence and spirit of the people who built them, people who had money and enough food and wore clothes even more magnificent than the Knights of St. John, who strutted like peacocks through the streets of Birgu. These people had lived well, dancing and laughing and holding great feasts. She told Nico all about them as they dug at the bases of the columns and turned over stones. "If they were so great," Nico said, pawing through the rubble, "why is this all they left?" "They went to Franza. It's greener there. Everyone is rich." "Who says they left treasure here, anyway?" "I say they did. Dr. Callus told me. He spends all his time looking for it, too. Some Jews left it about a thousand years ago, after the king made them leave." "Jews wouldn't leave money. Mother says Jews would leave their children before they'd leave their money." "Well, these did," Maria huffed. "It was gold and silver. They couldn't carry it all. And I'm going to find it. I'll hide it until I'm old enough, and then I'm going to buy a castle in Franza." At the wharf she'd heard talk about France, about its mountains and rich fields of lupine. That sounded grand: she'd buy a castle and put slaves in her fields, growing lupine. "What's lupine?" Nico asked. "I don't know exactly, but I'll have lots of it. And servants, and all my clothes will be spun from silk, and my spoons will be made of silver. You can live with me if you like." "Girls can't have castles." She snorted at that. "Queens can. I will. You'll see." They dug for a while without uncovering anything but more dirt and rock. She was almost ready to suggest they go look in the caves that dotted the cliffs overlooking the sea. Some were occupied, but not all. She knew the Jews would have had many clever hiding places, and caves would make good ones. She was digging with the tip of her knife when she heard a clink. She cleared away the earth with her fingers and found a small object. It was oval in shape, crusted with age. "Look!" She held it up. "What is it?" "Munita! A coin!" "It looks like a rock to me." "Your head is a rock! It's old, stupid, but it's still treasure." She scraped it with her knife. In the sunlight she could see the dull glint of corroded metal. "There, look, don't you see? A man's head. He's wearing a helmet!" Nico didn't see, but his eyes went wide anyway. "You can keep it," she said magnanimously, passing it to him. "There's more here. What did I tell you? Now put it in your pocket. Whatever you do, don't show it to a grown-up. They'll just take it away." "Grazzi," Nico breathed, scarcely believing his good fortune. He slipped the coin into his pocket and labored feverishly beside her, his enthusiasm renewed. They dug for more than an hour, sweat mingling with thick dust on their brows as they grunted and heaved and dug for her dreams. She unearthed a bowl, well preserved but broken in two. Buried beneath that they found a perfect white femur. "You see? It's a Jew bone," Maria said confidently. "A marker. They always leave them near treasure. We're getting close." Nico gave a low whistle. They dug ever more furiously. Maria stopped abruptly. She tugged his sleeve for quiet. "What was that?" she whispered. "What?" She cocked her head, listening intently. A blue thrush hopped among the rocks, looking for insects. A tiny lizard clung to th...
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religious war."--Publishers Weekly"Entertaining, swashbuckling, at times sexy, packed with raw emotion,
and just plain fun."--Boulder Daily CameraFrom the Hardcover edition.