

John Fraser has lived in Rome since 1980. Previously, he worked in England and Canada.

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The Red Tank displays the true seriousness and sheer brilliance of John Fraser's conceptual aims and the dazzling invention of his linguistic fantasy.

In three fables, Fraser presents founding myths and 21st-century epics – viewed with a kind of Martian 'taken abackness'. In our new globalised world, what happens to the little beings, our species, and their allies among the beasts – do they grow, becoming giant, innocent philosophers, or do they go off to rut and runt in the forest?

The human project is once more immense: taming nature, securing peace, creating order. The protagonists are fabulous, easily the equals of ancient gods and heroes. In the first fable, *Chinese Whispers*, we try to subdue and measure nature – though led astray through sex and murder. In *Funny Little Fellows*, we are spies and cleansers, the figures in an epic with a suspect leader. Our histories repeat themselves, and the shapeshifted waft the epic into myth. We are explorers, finding new frontiers, but never settlement.

The Bright Stars are the gang that founds a state and provide a founding myth. We are their accomplices, artists and managers in their theatrical world. Actors and actresses mingle with inventors, warriors and demigods. They are epic and creative, giving sense and order to this new world, its search for rules, purposes, security and punishment.

The Red Tank is the founding blood myth, a solution true to our nature, resolving uncertainties remaining from the previous fables. We recognise the red tank as it circles us and fires. Our aspirations, fears and ambitions remain, their mysteries familiar and comforting.

'A serious novelist from the beginning. I have always been impressed by the conceptual depth and the fey fantasy of all that he does – not to mention the politics.'

John Fuller, English poet and author
Whitbread Prize winner, Booker Prize nominee and Fellow Emeritus at Magdalen College, Oxford

Back cover illustration from *The Illustrated Ramayana* commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar in Rajasthan, 1649–1653 courtesy of British Library Publishing

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JOHN FRASER

THE RED TANK

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'What choice can an audience in a theatre have? One public watching the drama of another. Like it's seen itself? Who are they, what are they, these battered brainy elves and demons? It seems to me like the White Knight – the childish play: the song, the title of the song, the plagiarism, the something else that is the song but not the song you hear. Hear? Are you supposed to hear it? That Russian musical, where everyone was gassed, the paying audience, the – maybe – paid guerrillas, terrorists, the religious, killers, trussed-up bundles of black, armed and inert. It seems to me like home, home in a fable, fairy tale, it can only be so horrible and entertaining, brainy, if you shut it in a theatre.'

'Or is the idea of choice absurd, misleading and deceptive? Who has choices here? Buy the ticket, take your chance, then maybe have a vote or two, will of the majority, all that. And put it in a theatre, give it a frame, as if something is resolved, decided here – a place where gods and madmen rampaged, our blood myths acted out, or culture burned like acid etching, under that midday sun, on marble seats. All the human condition, your state, my state, incest, suicide and murder – the hope, the choice that's all around us – though not when it is useful. And when it's useful – whose is the use?'

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