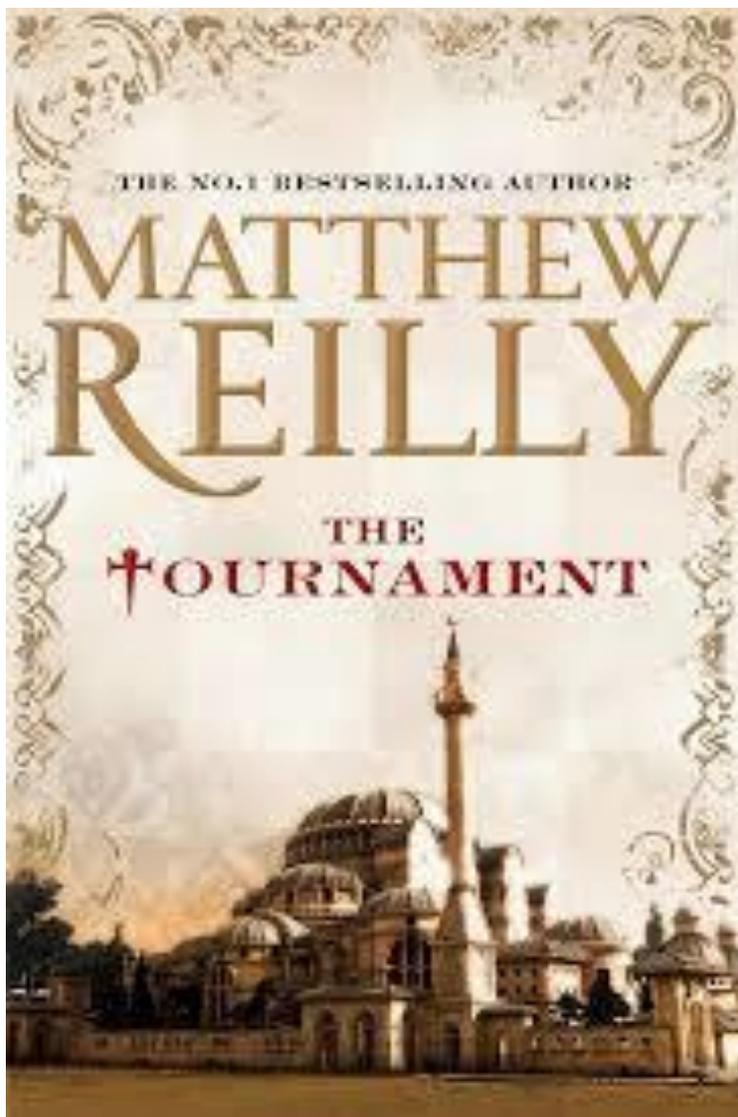


The Tournament

A novel by Mathew Reilly



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

The Tournament. A novel by Mathew Reilly. Pan/MacMillan, 2013. Hardback. 410 pages. Illustrated, maps. ***** 68%

Illustrations from the public domain

Best-selling Australian writer Mathew Reilly goes in a different direction to his previous works in this novel. *The Tournament* is detective fiction written from a historical angle. In an appendice to this work he explains much about why he wrote the book and credits his influences. *The Name of the Rose* is amongst them, but influence is one thing, imitation is another: Reilly does not imitate. His setting, plot and theme are all original. Here he writes vividly, capturing a strong sense of society and its rivalries in Ottoman Constantinople in 1546. Reilly writes very effectively in depicting the massive city's mixture of exotic splendour, wealth and sordidness. Equally effective are the chilling depictions of the way Constantinople is ruled over through absolutist power using ruthless brutality. Reilly does this through his main narrator, a thirteen year old aristocratic English girl. The narrator immediately emerges as part of the problem with this novel. Her narrations are not implausible, maudlin or badly written, exactly the opposite. The problem is that she is Elizabeth Tudor, future queen of England.

As the journey begins, credibility unravels. We are asked to believe that as plague rages in England Elizabeth finds herself encouraged to secretly represent English royalty at a fictitious chess tournament in Constantinople hosted by Suleiman the Magnificent. Invitations to this tournament go throughout the known world, so it will be a grand event. Henry VIII, in reality one of English history's most paranoid control freaks, obsessed with the succession, supposedly allows the third in line to his throne to journey across Europe's wild lands to go to the court of Christendom's worst enemy, the notoriously ruthless and murderous Suleiman the Magnificent, a major leader of the Moslem world. This is however, a secret trip. How can someone represent England secretly at a spectacular event after being introduced by name and parentage at court and accommodated at the palace, attending banquets and chess tournaments? Her retinue for the journey strains credibility further. This group consists of her tutor Roger of Ascham,

Giles, a chess champion, six soldiers, a middle aged couple who ineffectually chaperone and a nymphomaniac lady in waiting. Any bandit gang could have killed off the others and picked up a very lucrative hostage easily. In Constantinople Roger of Ascham meets Suleiman, who impressed with his deductive observations, gives him the task of investigating the recent mysterious murder of a Catholic cardinal.

This causes another credibility problem, the Protestants and Catholics were at each other's throats at this time and it would be unlikely for Catholics to fully cooperate in an investigation led by a Protestant, especially as it would be likely to uncover child murders, priests involved in orgies, perversions and paedophilia. This would be handing a massive propaganda victory to their arch enemies, yet some among the Catholics do help Ascham.

As in the best mysteries, very little ultimately appears to be as it superficially seems. The chess tournament itself has been organised as a cover for hidden agendas. In attempting to involve what soon becomes a series of puzzling murders Reilly skilfully develops a sense of mystery, underpinning it with a quiet sense of menace. That mood increases as Ascham and Elizabeth draw closer to a solution, and not one that readers would expect. Good! What is more pointless than reading a predictable suspense novel?

When his investigations lead him into a brothel involving children, he takes Elizabeth because he must keep her with him as he has no one else he can trust. Afterwards he tells her that while the sights were repulsive, he feels that it is best that she sees the more sordid sight of life as this will help her understand society when she rules. In reality anyone so foolish as to take a royal teenage girl into a brothel would have been executed by even the most liberal monarch, let alone Henry VIII. Reilly presents Ascham throughout as an astute man, but this is not astute.

Before the story begins Reilly warns the reader that some scenes are sexually graphic. They are also often sordid, tacky and distasteful,

but are essential to the plot. Reilly stated that he wanted to show why Elizabeth never married and as sexual turnoffs these scenes do work. They show nothing of sensuality, love or even liking and when these scenes do appear, brutal exploitation is never far away.

Another problem is the number of famous names turning up for the tournament. Does the maker of the magnificent chess sets have to be Michelangelo? Does the helpful Catholic priest have to be Ignatius Loyola? The meetings between adolescents, the future Ivan the Terrible and Elizabeth, does work, considering their future correspondence and his expressed desire to marry her, but they sometimes have a didactic feel. The portrayals of Suleiman and his chief wife are succinct, vivid and believable, but they would stand out more effectively in a cast with fewer famous faces.

The novel's virtues would also stand out more without the main characters being who they are. Why not make Elizabeth just an aristocratic girl and Ascham another fictional character?



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