

SUTRA KARMA

A Buddhist scroll's history inspires, writes ROSEMARIE MILSOM.

While being shown around the J. Paul Getty Museum's conservation department during a three-week fellowship at the magnificent Los Angeles institution in 2005, arts journalist Joyce Morgan spotted an image on a computer screen.

"There were van Goughs out of their frames and artwork everywhere," she remembers. "We walked past this computer and the guide said to me, 'That's some conservation work we're doing at these Buddhist caves in the Gobi Desert'. That pushed all my buttons."



The intrepid traveller, who enjoys the solitude of deserts and had previously visited exotic and isolated Central Asia, had never heard of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, a holy site of more than 400 caves hewn out of the granite cliff near Dunhuang in north-west China. Morgan felt compelled to learn more about their discovery, and in 2007 set off to the edge of the Gobi desert to write a feature about their conservation for *Good Weekend* magazine.

"While I was there I started hearing about this hidden cave in which the world's oldest printed book had been found," Morgan, a former *Newcastle Herald* journalist now at *The Sydney Morning Herald*, says. "It sounded like an amazing story and I started doing more research and took it from there."

That amazing but little-known story is the hook on which Morgan and her journalist husband Conrad Walters hang their gripping historical narrative *Journeys on the Silk Road*, which centres on the discovery of the *Diamond Sutra*, one of Buddhism's most revered texts.

For 1000 years the woodblock-printed scroll had been concealed in a tiny room behind a wall in one of the painted caves until 1900 when the Taoist monk, Wang Yuanlu, with the help of a team of labourers, forced open a crack. (Wang had found the abandoned caves and had declared himself their unofficial caretaker, setting about clearing them of centuries of sand.)

He uncovered a library of 50,000 scrolls, but until Hungarian scholar-explorer Aurel Stein arrived in Dunhuang in 1907 after a year-long trek from northern India, the West was ignorant of the priceless paper treasure.

DOUBLE ACT: Conrad Walters and Joyce Morgan, whose *Journeys on the Silk Road* is published by Picador, \$34.99.

"The *Diamond Sutra* is important for a couple of reasons," Morgan explains. "Firstly, because it can be recited in about 45 minutes it's nice and compact compared to other sutras, which can take days."

"It is a key teaching of Buddha and its content is very important to zen buddhists; it's a conversation between the Buddha and one of his favourite disciples, Subhuti. It is about impermanence, about how everything that we think is fixed is actually ever-changing."

The Dalai Lama explained to Morgan during a meeting in 2009 that the importance of the *Diamond Sutra* lies in what it says about the nature of reality. "In particular, its insistence that nothing – and no one – has unchanging, independent existence."

Pivotal to the intriguing story of the sutra is Aurel Stein, an eccentric loner who was more at home living in a tent in Kashmir with his fox terrier Dash than in Europe. A prodigious letter writer, Stein meticulously recorded details of his gruelling expedition to Dunhuang, which led him to travel on horse, yak and camel through some of the world's most hostile terrain. Morgan and Walters spent two months in the British Museum poring over his dispatches, which were stored on 70 reels of microfilm. "Thankfully, his handwriting is legible," she laughs.

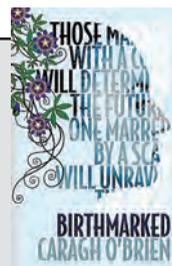
The appeal of *Journeys* is its carefully crafted narrative, and Joyce's skill as a journalist – she was the main author while Walters edited – means that historical figures and places leap off the page, full of life and colour. Quirky characters form a strong supportive cast to Stein's starring role, which has long been overlooked. Until now.

"What gets forgotten over time are these early discoveries and the potty explorers who risked everything," Joyce says. "Part of the challenge is to remember these stories at a time when areas such as these are going through tremendous change. This book brought a lot of threads together for me."

ON THE SHELF

BIRTHMARKED
Caragh O'Brien
Simon and Schuster,
\$16.99

A young adult sci-fi that some adults would enjoy. The "dystopian" tag fits well. It is set about 300 years into the future where the world has been baked dry by the sun. What results is two classes – those who live the good life inside an enclave and those who battle outside. But inside there is trouble in the gene pool and they need babies made on the outside.



John Brown

THE PUP'S TALE
Darrel and Sally Odgers
Scholastic, \$10.99

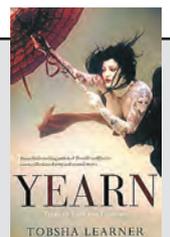
This story is told by Trump, a Jack Russell who lives with his vet owner, Dr Jeanie. Trump likes to travel in her van and help with the sick animals. In this book, the sixth in the Pet Vet series, Trump meets Goldie, a labrador who is having trouble looking after her 15 puppies. This book is fun to read and has tips on caring for pets.



Shona Powell, 8

YEARN: Tales of lust and longing
Tobsha Learner
HarperCollins, \$32.99

This is a collection of nine sensual, witty and mystical short stories. Following on from two previous volumes of short tales, it explores obsession, romantic encounters and secret regrets. Characters hail from around the globe, and all have a sultry tale to tell. This book is a luscious indulgence, in the same category as bubble baths and champagne.



Judith Whitfield

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