

# Ken Follett: The Magic of Stonehenge [B2]

Tra divulgazione archeologica e finzione storica, l'autore gallese costruisce una narrazione, ambientata in un passato remoto segnato da simboli e rituali, attorno al celebre monumento neolitico, il cui scopo rimane un affascinante mistero.

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Stonehenge is one of the most iconic and mysterious monuments of the Neolithic era. The complex of huge **standing stones** was erected in about 2500 **BCE** on the Salisbury Plain in South West England. The largest of the stones, called 'sarsens', are a massive seven metres tall, two metres wide, and weigh over 25 tons. They were brought to the site from an area over 25km away. This would have required great engineering expertise and social cooperation from the community that built Stonehenge. The monument is aligned with the movements of the Sun but experts are not sure exactly what role Stonehenge played in the life of the community. The ancient site holds a spiritual fascination for the thousands of people who still come to celebrate the solstices here.

## CIRCLE OF DAYS

Best-selling Welsh writer Ken Follett takes us back to Salisbury Plain in 2500 **BCE** for his latest novel Circle of Days. Combining historical research with a lot of imagination, Follett tells a dramatic version of how and why the great stone monument we now call Stonehenge was built. We meet characters from the Neolithic communities living on "the Great Plain" 4,500 years ago. There is Seft, an ingenious **flint** miner and **craftsperson**, whose engineering skills are ahead of his time; Joia, whose sexuality and mind for maths lead her to join the community of **priestesses**; Ani, an **elder** who tries to keep the peace as resources become **scarce**; and many, many more.

## AN AGE-OLD MYSTERY

The novel moves fast, combining historical details about life in the Neolithic period with the kind of dramas that happen in any period of history: family **feuds**, teenage romance, and dreams of a better future. Follett is fascinating on the different ways that the Neolithic communities survived on the Great Plain. He creates characters who are **herders**, farmers, miners and hunter-gatherers and explains why the different communities sometimes **clashed**. But the most intriguing questions at the heart of the novel are about the construction of Stonehenge itself. How did people with only stone-age technology **manage** to construct the circle of huge **standing stones**? And what was its **purpose**?

## ORIGIN STORIES

Ken Follett has written thirty-eight books, selling a total of 198 million copies, but is perhaps best known for his historical novel *The Pillars of the Earth* about the building of a Gothic cathedral in England in the 12th century. In a meeting with the press he explained why he chose the building of an ancient religious site as his focus in *Circle of Days*. **Ken Follett (English accent):** There's a place in England called Stonehenge where there are these huge stones, enormous, very, very heavy, and they stand in the ground in the middle of a plain called Salisbury Plain. And you can **drive past** them and you think, 'What the heck is that? Who put that there and why?' And that's the thing about Stonehenge. Everybody's seen pictures of it. Millions of people have been to visit it, but it's still a mystery. And that's intriguing. And it's intriguing for me as a writer, because I can explore that mystery. So, two questions, two difficult questions about Stonehenge: How did they build it? And why did they build it? And so I thought "That's a Ken Follett novel!", explaining the existence of this monument and showing you the lives of the people who built it and showing you how they built it and why they built it, what **drove** them to this. Almost everybody who has seen it or has seen a picture of it thinks, "Well, what is that and what's it for? Who built it and why was it built?" If that intrigue is already in people's minds, then I think they'll be interested in the story of the people who made that happen.

## **FACTS...**

As the sales figures show, Follett certainly knows how to write a page-turner but while he's working on a historical novel like Circle of Days he puts in plenty of research too. **Ken Follett:** I explored the entire region around Stonehenge in my car. So Stonehenge is on a plain called Salisbury Plain, it's 300 square miles [777 sq km]. So the people in the story often cross the plain. You can just about walk across it in a day. The stones were brought to Stonehenge from a wood which is seventeen miles [27km] away. So I drove all along what I thought might be the route of these stones so that I could describe, as the people are moving the stones, the landscape they're going through. And that was quite an important trip because I saw where their job would be very difficult and where it would be a little easier.

## **FACT-CHECKING...**

After completing his research, Follett contacts expert historians to check his draft. He explains the process. **Ken Follett:** So I do a lot of research, but when I've written the first draft, I look at the shelf of books that I've got about this particular period of history, and I think about who were the four or five historians who wrote the most clear... you know, clear-thinking people write clear books. So I pick out the ones I like best, and I write to them. And I ask them to do this job, to read my draft and look for mistakes, things that couldn't have happened in the period of the novel, or even things that just seem a bit off for the period, [that] aren't really mistakes or errors. And they send me a report. I pay them, of course. It's an interesting exercise because these are people who normally deal with students and they're slightly inclined to treat me as a student, underline something and say, "Have you checked this?" And I say, "No, you have to check it, that's why I'm paying you!"

## **AND FICTION**

Historians and archaeologists have discovered a lot about the origins of Stonehenge and new theories continue to emerge. Recently researchers

have found evidence to suggest that Neolithic communities would come to visit Stonehenge from all over the island of Great Britain including as far as the northernmost regions of what is now Scotland, not just from the local area. But there are still huge gaps in what we know about the origins of Stonehenge. Despite many credible theories, the experts still don't know exactly how the monument was built or why. And without written records they can't tell us the names of the builders. These gaps in our knowledge open up all sorts of imaginative possibilities for a writer like Follett. He talks about how, through fiction, we can make an emotional connection with the past. **Ken Follett:** I have to be really fascinated by something to write about it in a fascinating way. And different things catch my imagination. And I think it's probably wise to follow that... I mean, you can probably guess I'm very enthusiastic about Stonehenge. I think it's a marvellous, marvellous monument, and I think the story of how it was built is great. And I have to feel like that, because I really want you to care about it. I hope that when you get into this book, you'll start to feel like that way. You'll start to hope that the people who are building it manage to overcome the problems that are in their way. After all, the joy of novels, the joy of literature really, is that we read this story and we start to care about the problems that the fictional characters have. And it doesn't make any difference that you know that Follett made it up, sitting at his keyboard! You start to feel the emotions of the people that you're reading about, even though you know they're not real people. It's the miracle of literature. But I have to feel something. I don't think you can write about people's emotions if you don't, to some extent, share them.

## THE SPIRIT OF STONEHENGE

The Stonehenge monument is aligned so that the Sun rises directly over the Heel Stone (a large stone just outside the main stone circle) on the Midsummer Solstice and sets over it on the Midwinter Solstice. In Circle of Days, Follett imagines the community who built the monument as being worshippers of a Solar Deity who used the monument both as a focus for their Sun worship and as a kind of calendar to keep track of the seasons. Although we can't be sure this is how Stonehenge was used, it does seem

**likely**. Every year thousands of people still **gather** at Stonehenge to watch the Sun rise over the **Heel Stone** on 22 June, the Summer Solstice. Among them are Pagans, Druids and others who see Stonehenge as a spiritual focus. Follett's own experience of Stonehenge is a little different. He describes his feelings on visiting Stonehenge while making his road trip to research Circle of Days. **Ken Follett:** I was brought up in a very strict Protestant family and, as a teenager, I rebelled against that. I went to study Philosophy at university, and during that period of studying Philosophy I became an atheist. And I still am. Although something else happened. In later life, I began to get interested in cathedrals, and the medieval people who built the cathedrals, and I became very **fond of** cathedrals. I quite like going to church, I'm an atheist who goes to church. I know that's **weird**. I sometimes describe myself as 'a **lapsed atheist**'. I became an atheist, but I do go to church. And it's because of the spiritual feeling of being in a church, especially a great cathedral... the architecture and the music and the words of the King James Bible, all of that gives me a tremendous feeling of peace. With Stonehenge, when you stand in the middle, inside this great ring of stones, it is a bit **spooky**. It's not like going to church because going to church is a complicated thing where all sorts of things that have been going [on] for hundreds of years are all happening at the same time... and that's a very intense experience. Stonehenge is just kind of a bit **spooky**. It would be a great place for a ghost story. If you want to know more about this topic, read the article Ken Follett: Solstice at Stonehenge.

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# Glossary

- **flint** = selce
- **feuds** = conflitti, faide
- **sales figures** = cifre di vendita
- **draft** = bozza
- **pick out** = scegliere, selezionare
- **underline** = sottolineare
- **keyboard** = tastiera
- **Midsummer Solstice** = solstizio d'estate
- **clashed** = scontrarsi
- **drive past** = passare accanto (guidando)
- **deal** = trattare
- **slightly** = leggermente
- **joy** = gioia, piacere
- **made it up** = inventare
- **the Sun rises** = il sole sorge
- **gather** = riunirsi, radunarsi
- **standing stones** = pietre erette
- **priestesses** = sacerdotesse
- **sets** = il sole tramonta
- **spooky** = inquietante, spaventoso
- **craftsperson** = artigiano
- **purpose** = scopo
- **Heel Stone** = Pietra del tallone
- **likely** = probabile
- **lapsed atheist** = ateo non praticante
- **northernmost** = più a nord
- **elder** = anziano
- **herders** = allevatori, pastori
- **catch my imagination** = affascinare, catturare l'immaginazione di qualcuno
- **keep track** = tenere traccia
- **hunter-gatherers** = cacciatori-raccoglitori
- **plenty** = un sacco di

- **gaps** = lacune
- **worshippers** = adoratori
- **page-turner** = libro avvincente, che si legge tutto d'un fiato
- **check** = verificare
- **a bit off** = un po' strane, fuori luogo
- **wise** = saggio
- **overcome** = superare
- **fond of** = essere appassionato di
- **weird** = strano
- **BCE** = avanti Cristo (before Common Era)
- **scarce** = scarse
- **manage** = riuscire
- **drove** = spingere, motivare
- **shelf** = scaffale
- **to some extent** = in qualche modo