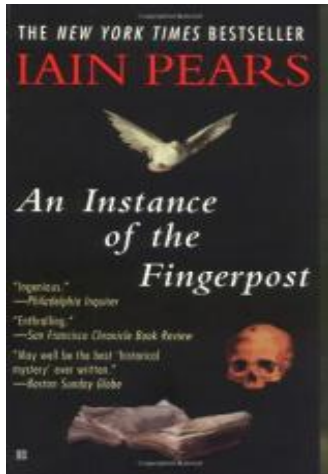


# An Instance of the Fingerpost

by Iain Pears

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## About the Book

It's England in the 1660s, Charles II has been restored to the throne following years of civil war and Oliver Cromwell's short-lived republic. Oxford is the intellectual seat of the country, a place of great scientific, religious, and political ferment. A fellow of New College is found dead in suspicious circumstances. A young woman is accused of his murder.

We hear the story of the death from four witnesses?each tells his own version of what happened. Only one reveals the extraordinary truth.

**An Instance of the Fingerpost** is an utterly compelling historical mystery with a plot that twists and turns and keeps the reader guessing until the very last page.

## Discussion Guide

1. The four narrators of **An Instance of the Fingerpost** illustrate that there is never just one side to a story, that an event can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. As readers, however, we're conditioned to trust our narrator. Did you find one narrator inherently more trustworthy than another? What qualities suggest a credible narrator, and how does Iain Pears play off of our assumptions in his characterizations of Marco da Cola, Jack Prestcott, John Wallis, and Anthony Wood? Can you think of other books in which this multi-perspective technique was used to similar ends, or other books that feature unreliable narrators?

2. **An Instance of the Fingerpost** is set in the early years of the Restoration, a time in English history marked by political intrigue and social unrest. The Civil War has just ended. Oliver Cromwell, rebel and "lord protector" of England, is dead, and the monarchy of Charles II has been restored to power. Although the eleven years of Cromwell's Commonwealth are not described in great detail, they are evoked?in very different ways - by a number of characters (Wallis, Prestcott, Sarah Blundy and John Thurloe among them). What might we infer about Cromwellian England from

the character?and memories?of his supporters and detractors? Is it safe to assume it was any easier for those citizens (like Sarah Blundy) who, during the Restoration, have been forced to the fringes of society?

3. The Oxford University of the novel is steeped in its own plots, schemes, and rivalries (think of the competition between Marco da Cola and Richard Lower, and Lower's alliances with Robert Boyle, as well as the university fellows' various reactions to the murder of Robert Grove). How does Pears use Oxford as a microcosmic reflection of the larger, more tumultuous society?

4. The period in which the novel takes place is one wherein religion permeated every facet of society, from academia to the sciences, from art to philosophy. Richard Lower's medical experiments seem primitive now, but in the context of this novel, they offer us both a fascinating glimpse of the development of medical procedures, as well as a portrait of how religion, and one's religious beliefs, informed and affected scientific research and experimentation. Cite examples from the text of how religion shaped?for better or worse?commonly held medical, scientific, and philosophical "truths."

5. Restoration England was a sharply demarcated world?there were those who clearly belonged (Royalists and Protestants) and those who clearly did not (Roundheads, Freemasons, Quakers, and Papists.) Even Oxford University, during a veritable golden age of scientific discovery and academic advancement, is depicted in the novel as a dangerous place for free-thinkers and outsiders. What social or political conditions made such rigid definitions of "the outsider" necessary? Similarly, what constituted "radical beliefs"?

6. Nowadays, we often tend to conceive of prejudice in ethnic or racial terms, but in the world of **An Instance of the Fingerpost**, one's trustworthiness and social worth is decided by family history. Sarah Blundy, for example, is far more a social pariah than, say, John Wallis, whom Pears has portrayed as a homosexual, or, for that matter, Marco da Cola, who's not only not English, but Catholic as well. Consider the family histories of some of the characters in this novel, and how the actions of their fathers has determined their station in Restoration society. How do the characters in this novel decide if their peers are trustworthy or not? By what criteria do people judge one another?

7. The events of **An Instance of the Fingerpost** are set in motion by the death of an Oxford don and the subsequent trial of Sarah Blundy, the woman accused of his murder. Anthony Wood, a witness to these events, is reconciled to the verdict calling for her execution in the belief that the divine plan will be fulfilled. Considering the fate of Sarah Blundy, what do you think Pears is saying about the construct of social justice versus divine justice? Compare our contemporary assumptions about guilt and innocence against those of the 17th century. Consider other criminal trials of that era, either historical or fictional accounts. For example, during that same period, the Salem witch trials were underway in America. What do these events suggest about how a society defines and administers justice?

8. A historical novel starts from fact, but its creator must mesh fiction with facts to create a compelling narrative. If you consult the *Dramatis Personae* at the end of the book, you'll discover that many of **An Instance of the Fingerpost's** characters (such as John Wallis, Anthony Wood, Robert Boyle, and Richard Lower) are actual historical figures, while others (such as Marco da Cola, Jack Prestcott, and Sarah Blundy) are fictionalized. Were you able to determine which characters were fictional creations? What kind of responsibility, if any, do historical novelists have in their portrayal of actual historical events? Compare Pears's technique to those of other contemporary historical novelists (e.g. Umberto Eco, E.L. Doctorow, Caleb Carr).

9. There is a wonderful scene in the novel's first section where Marco da Cola attends (and loathes) a production of King

Lear by William Shakespeare. King Lear tells the story of a once-powerful monarch humiliated and unraveled by his own weakness and the treachery of his children. Why, then, might Pears have chosen to include Lear in his novel in particular? Do you see any parallels between the world invoked in King Lear (which was written in 1606) and the world of **An Instance of the Fingerpost**? How might this play have particular significance in Restoration England, particularly in Oxford, which was a Royalist stronghold? (Remember that not everyone shares da Cola's reaction; indeed, Richard Lower reacts to the play very differently.) What, then, does each character's reaction to the play say about their politics?

**10.** Francis Bacon's opus *Novum Organum Scientiarum* is a defining philosophical work that takes as one of its themes the fallacies that often beset logical thinking. Pears uses this as the intellectual framework for his novel, and has adopted three of Bacon's tenets as epigraphs for his narrators' stories: The Idols of the Market (which refers to a misuse of language); The Idols of the Cavern (which refers to personal obsessions); and The Idols of the Theater (which refers to the danger of false reasoning). (Bacon's fourth tenet, The Idols of the Tribe, refers to fallacies common to humankind.) Consider which epigraph Pears uses for each of his narrator's stories; how are they meant to be "signposts" for the reader? What relation do the part titles ("A Question of Precedence," "The Great Trust," "The Character of Compliance") have to their respective narratives? The testimony related in the final section shares its title with that of the novel. "An Instance of the Fingerpost" is the moment that marks the discovery of an inviolable truth in the cause of an investigation. Do you think that the final witness's testimony is wholly reliable or does he also succumb to instances of impaired logic, as defined by Bacon's idols, en route to the truth?

## Author Bio

Iain Pears is the author of the bestsellers *AN INSTANCE OF THE FINGERPOST*, *THE DREAM OF SCIPIO* and *STONE'S FALL*, and a novella, *THE PORTRAIT*, as well as a series of acclaimed detective novels, a book of art history, and countless articles on artistic, financial and historical subjects. He lives in Oxford, England.

## Critical Praise

"Enthralling. "

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