

# No Two Ways About it: Dayr al-Barsha Finds Favour in Fiction

Marleen De Meyer

## Abstract

*The Book of Two Ways* by Jodi Picoult centres on a woman who sees her life flash before her eyes during a plane crash—except it is not her real life, but the life she missed out on when she decided not to pursue an Egyptological career, "the road not taken". The idea of diverging life paths becomes intertwined with *The Book of Two Ways*, an actual ancient Egyptian composition that occurs on Middle Kingdom coffins from Dayr al-Barsha. This leads the protagonist to the site of Dayr al-Barsha and the ongoing fieldwork there. Contrary to how Egyptology is generally pitched in literature—at highprofile sites during the "age of the great discoveries"—this novel focuses on a modern-day excavation at a site not well known to the public. Coached by Yale Egyptologists who contribute both Egyptological facts and fabricated fiction (e.g. fictional hieratic inscriptions), Picoult paints a picture of Egyptology that feels genuine to the layperson, but that to the specialist is riddled with fantasy. This essay, written by someone who has excavated at Dayr al-Barsha for many years, evaluates how this work of fiction centred on a real-world scientific project gives new meaning to the term 'science-fiction'.

## Keywords

science-fiction; alternate timeline; alternate universe; Egyptology; Dayr al-Barsha; Jodi Picoult; *The Book of Two Ways*.

On 11 October 2020, a new novel entitled *The Book of Two Ways* by American writer Jodi Picoult entered the *New York Times* fiction bestseller list at the #1 spot, remaining on the list for six weeks.<sup>1</sup> The book has appeared with several different covers, most of them vaguely referencing pathways and some imagery suggestive of ancient Egypt, from pyramid shapes to block borders and suns (Fig. 1). However, none of these covers explicitly indicate a story set in Egypt, interwoven with ancient Egyptian elements and Egyptological knowledge. This, despite the abstract subtleties of the novel's external packaging, is exactly what Picoult provides in *The Book of Two Ways*. Picoult engaged in extensive Egyptological research for this novel, and the interweaving of fact and fiction is dense. She also focuses the story around a real archaeological site that is not well

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1 Picoult, Jodi. *The Book of Two Ways*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2020. "The Book of Two Ways", Jodi Picoult. The author's nine previous books all debuted as #1 as well.



Fig. 1: Different covers of Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 2020.

known to the general public: Dayr al-Barsha in Middle Egypt (Fig. 2). As it proves challenging at times to dissect fact from fiction in Picoult's novel even to the seasoned Egyptologist, this is bound to be even harder for the general reader. This article illuminates the line between fact and fiction in *The Book of Two Ways* from this specialist perspective, untangling the Egyptological elements woven throughout it with particular reference to the scientific research carried out at Dayr al-Barsha. Ultimately, it highlights the novel's special blend of "science-fiction" that questions and challenges common conceptions of this genre, both in its identification of Picoult's creative use of "scientific" Egyptological information and in the narrative's presentation of alternate timelines, themselves inspired by the ancient Egyptian "Book of Two Ways" which gives the novel its name.

*The Book of Two Ways'* narrative centres around Dawn Edelstein (*née* McDowell), a woman who sees her life flash before her eyes during a plane crash. The vision is not of her real life, however, but the life she missed out on when she decided not to pursue a career in Egyptology at a younger age—"the road not taken". Dawn is a death doula, someone who helps dying people transition from life to death, a career path she pursued after she watched her own mother die. She is married to Brian Edelstein, a professor in quantum physics, and they are the parents of a teenage daughter named Meret (an ancient Egyptian name, meaning "beloved"). All of them live in Boston, USA. Dawn studied Egyptology fifteen years earlier, first at Chicago, then at Yale under a fictitious academic, Prof. Dumphries. As a graduate student she started (but never finished) a PhD on the "Book of Two Ways", a composition of funerary-religious spells sometimes found on coffins of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055–1650 BC). She also worked a season at Dayr al-Barsha, the site where coffins with this composition are attested, and was, at that time, passionately in love with fellow graduate student Wyatt Armstrong.

Dawn survives the plane crash and, instead of returning to her family in Boston, decides to go to Egypt, specifically Dayr al-Barsha, and visit Wyatt, whom she has not seen in fifteen years. The storyline alternates between chapters in Egypt with Wyatt (headed "Land/Egypt"), and chapters back home in Boston with



Fig. 2: The site of Dayr al-Barsha as seen from the north hill  
(© Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven; photo M. De Meyer).

her family (headed “Water/Boston”). This idea of diverging life paths becomes intertwined with the ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways.

### The Book of Two Ways and Dayr al-Barsha

The term “Book of Two Ways” was first coined over a hundred years ago by Hans Schack-Schackenburg (“Zweiwegebuch”),<sup>2</sup> and several monographs dedicated to this Coffin Text composition have appeared since.<sup>3</sup> It is a composition that in its complete form only occurs on Middle Kingdom coffins from Dayr al-Barsha. The name is taken from one specific part of this larger composition, specifically a section that looks like a map of the netherworld with two winding ways, one black and one blue in colour (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Along the path are several demons and other obstacles that the deceased has to navigate on their journey through the netherworld. The colour coding of the ways is not explained, but the blue could be imagined as representing water and the black as representing land, which evidently inspired Picoult to alternate chapter headings between the two. Picoult’s son, Kyle Ferreira van Leer, majored in Egyptology at Yale in 2010, and worked on a translation of the “Book of Two Ways”, which was the creative point of origin for Picoult’s novel. She was inspired by what she found after “d[oing] some digging” herself: in her own words, “The deceased could take either a land route

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2 Schack-Schackenburg, *Das Buch von den zwei Wegen*.

3 Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*; Hermesen, *Die zwei Wege des Jenseits*; Backes, *Das altägyptische “Zweiwegebuch”*; Sherbiny, *Through Hermopolitan Lenses*; Carrier, *Le Livre des deux chemins*.

4 The text accompanying these depictions speaks of “ways” in the plural, never specifically “two ways”, complicating the fittingness of the name by which this composition has come to be known.

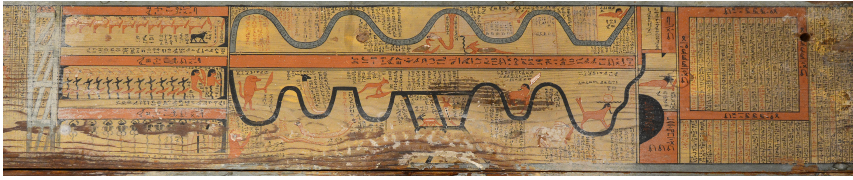


Fig. 3: The Book of Two Ways on the Middle Kingdom box coffin of Sepi III (JE 32686a) from Dayr al-Barsha (© Egyptian Museum in Cairo; photo M. De Meyer).

or a water route to get to the field of offerings [...]. No matter which path you took, you wound up where you were supposed to be.”<sup>5</sup>

Dayr al-Barsha, the central Egyptian setting in Picoult’s novel, was one of the main necropoleis of the ancient city of Khemenu, or Hermopolis Magna in Greek, modern al-Ashmunayn, about 300 km south of Cairo. Khemenu was the capital of the 15<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome (province), also called the Hare Nome. During the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom the governors of the Hare Nome were buried at Dayr al-Barsha, sometimes in lavishly decorated tombs. The site was excavated in the past by Georges Daressy (in 1897), Ahmad Bey Kamal (from 1900 to 1902), and George A. Reisner (in 1915), and since 2002 it is being investigated by a team led by KU Leuven and the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC).<sup>6</sup> It is mainly from these over twenty years of research by the Belgian mission that the Egyptological discussion at the heart of this article derives.

## Placing and Displacing Dayr al-Barsha

When Dawn arrives at Dayr al-Barsha, fiction starts to intertwine with fact. She describes the necropolis as “dozens of tiny metal doors lined up in a striated row of limestone like a hotel carved into the walls of the wadi”.<sup>7</sup> This description of the necropolis is in fact not accurate for Dayr al-Barsha, but applies instead to Beni Hasan, the Middle Kingdom nomarchal necropolis in the 16<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome about 30 km north of Dayr al-Barsha. The reason for this inaccurate description is that Picoult visited Beni Hasan, as stated on her website, where her photo of the tombs at Beni Hasan is wrongly labelled as “rock cut tombs in Bersha”,

<sup>5</sup> Egan, “Jodi Picoult Waited to Write”.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the site and its research history, see Willems, *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture*, 59–123.

<sup>7</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 15.



demonstrating a confusion of these sites.<sup>8</sup> Picoult mentions in the “Author’s Note” to *The Book of Two Ways* that she went on a journey of several weeks through Egypt with Colleen Darnell, who was the lead consultant on the Egyptological background for this book, taking in various sites across this stretch of time.<sup>9</sup>

This minor error will go unnoticed for the vast majority of the book’s readership, but it illustrates how this work of fiction informed by facts about ancient Egypt and the field of Egyptology integrates unintentional oversights that themselves contribute to its “science fictionality”, both drawing upon the scientific reality of Egyptian archaeology but undercutting some of the text’s potential for documentary record as errors creep in. Elsewhere, Picoult’s text also demonstrates a deliberate creative freedom in intentionally transposing historical facts to places and scenarios beyond their original historical context in a way that can suggest a kind of factual anchoring for the lay reader but which, to the Egyptological expert, suggests a fantastical revision of our own world.

Such is the case in Picoult’s description of the Dayr al-Barsha excavation house.

The house has changed, too. It was built of mud brick in 1908 by a British architect, Gerald Hay-Smythe, to match medieval Coptic monasteries. The porch had collapsed before I arrived as a grad student, and no one ever got around to fixing it. But now, I see, the porch has been rebuilt.<sup>10</sup>

As Picoult was coached by Yale Egyptologists John and Colleen Darnell,<sup>11</sup> there are several elements derived not from Dayr al-Barsha, but rather from another site with which these scholars are intimately familiar and that has a long-standing tradition of Belgian missions: Elkab.<sup>12</sup> This description is in fact one of the Belgian excavation house at Elkab, which John and Colleen Darnell also use during their work in the desert area of this region.<sup>13</sup> The details mentioned roughly match the

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<sup>8</sup> “The Book of Two Ways”, Jodi Picoult.

<sup>9</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 410–411.

<sup>10</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 409.

<sup>12</sup> Belgian work at Elkab began in 1937 under the direction of Jean Capart of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, and is still ongoing today. For a history of the work on site, see Limme, “Elkab, 1937–2007”.

<sup>13</sup> Capart, *Fouilles en Égypte*, 23–30 (chapter 2, with various images) offers a description of the house and its surroundings. A recent study of the house is Warner, “An Architect Abroad”.

Elkab house: built in mud brick in the first decade of the twentieth century by a British architect, with a once-collapsed porch. The actual house at Elkab was built in 1906 by British architect Somers Clarke, and its porch did collapse, but is now repaired (Fig. 4). The slight disparity in dates and Picoult's invention of the architect Gerald Hay-Smythe rather than using the name of a real historical personage suggests a playful interpretation of the historical details available to her, in which her world is recognisably our own but slightly altered, just as Dawn is presented with two versions of her life: her own lived experience and her vision of an alternative timeline.

The description of the interior of the house on the following pages also replicates the Elkab excavation house faithfully, including the house staff member Harbi who is, unlike the invented architect, a real person identified by name. Even a minute detail like the sign taped to the bathroom door is mentioned, although here too some artistic freedom is wielded, because the real sign does not read "Things you shouldn't flush: anything yellow, toilet paper, your hopes and dreams" as is stated in the book,<sup>14</sup> but rather "If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down".<sup>15</sup> The real excavation house at Dayr al-Barsha was built by the KU Leuven/NVIC mission on the edge of the antiquities land and its construction was begun in 2002 (Fig. 5). Neither Picoult nor the Darnells ever visited this house, which suggests why the house at Elkab was used as a template for the excavation house in the novel.

In line with the transposition of the Elkab excavation house to the site of Dayr al-Barsha, the novel's archaeological mission at Dayr al-Barsha is presented as a Yale University excavation under the direction of the fictitious professor Ian Dumphries,<sup>16</sup> not of KU Leuven under the direction of Harco Willems as is the case in reality. Yale has never had a concession to this site.<sup>17</sup> Yet research of the Belgian mission, as well as other Egyptological literature, is frequently used to support the novel's Egyptological content, and in doing so it may be the only novel ever to reach the top of the *New York Times* fiction bestseller list with an Egyptological bibliography at the back.<sup>18</sup>

There is also plenty of historically accurate information in the story, such as the reference to the Egypt Exploration Fund mission of 1891–92 under the

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<sup>14</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> I thank Wouter Claes for this information, and for confirming all other details about the Somers Clarke house at Elkab.

<sup>16</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> This is acknowledged in the Author's Note; Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 410.

<sup>18</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 415–417.



Fig. 4: The Somers Clarke house near Elkab overlooking the Nile  
(© Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels).

direction of Percy Newberry with Howard Carter as a draftsman,<sup>19</sup> and the fact that Johann Michael Wansleben (Vansleb) was the first European to visit Dayr al-Barsha in the seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> In addition, when Dawn describes a field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston during her student years, she brings up George Reisner's 1915 excavations at Dayr al-Barsha, and his discovery of Tomb 10A.<sup>21</sup> This tomb of Middle Kingdom governor Djehutinakht IV or V (Fig. 6) was found nearly intact by Reisner's team, and its objects now fill most of the Middle Kingdom gallery at the MFA. It is during this field trip that Dawn and the other students see the "Book of Two Ways" for the first time, depicted on the

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19 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 22. See Newberry and Fraser, *El Bersheh I*; Griffith and Newberry, *El Bersheh II*; Cortebeeck and Willems, "Newberry en zijn team".

20 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 35. See Wansleben, *The Present State of Egypt*, 237–240; Sykora, "Wansleben en de herontdekking van Dayr al-Barsha".

21 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 25. See Freed, Berman, Doxey, and Picardo, *The Secrets of Tomb 10A*. For the re-excavation of Tomb 10A in 2009, see De Meyer and Dils, "Fowl for the Governor 1"; De Meyer, Linseele, Vereecken and Williams, "Fowl for the Governor 2".



Fig 5: The excavation house of the Belgian mission at Dayr al-Barsha  
(© Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven; photo M. De Meyer).

western side panel of the inner coffin of governor Djehutinakht (coffin B2Bo, MFA 21.962a). An image of this coffin panel is even included as illustration.<sup>22</sup>

While these elements concern the physical setting and research history of the site of Dayr al-Barsha, whose fictional and non-fictional aspects can be untangled relatively easily, things become more complicated when getting into the minutiae of its pharaonic history.

## A Fabricated Hieratic Graffito and its Implications

While Dawn left academia and chose a different path in life, Wyatt has a successful career in Egyptology that began in 2003 when he and Dawn were on excavation at Dayr al-Barsha and made an important discovery: a painted hieratic graffito (Fig. 7) on the rock surface in the wadi that relates the visit of a nomarch named Djehutihotep to Dayr al-Barsha to see the heliacal rising of the star Sirius,

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<sup>22</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 26. See also Freed, Berman, Doxey, and Picardo, *The Secrets of Tomb 10A*, 126–127, figs. 79–80.

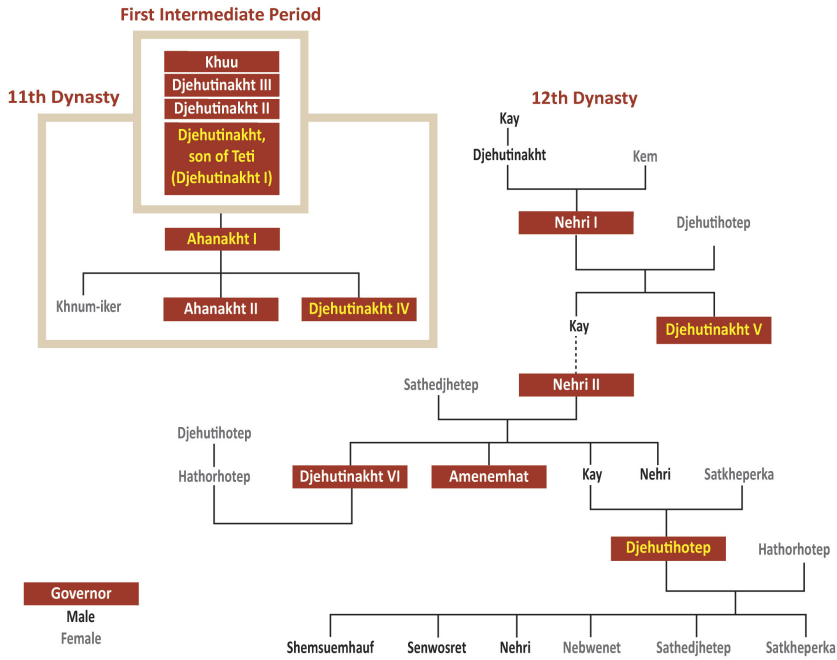


Fig. 6: Family tree of the governors of the Hare Nome and their close relatives during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom. The names of persons mentioned in the article are indicated in yellow (based on Harco Willems, “The Nomarchs of the Hare Nome and Early Middle Kingdom History”, *JEOl* 28 (1983–84), 80–102, with additions by the author).

the Greek Sothis.<sup>23</sup> The text describes that in order to witness this celestial phenomenon Djehutihotep stayed overnight in the forecourt of the tomb of a man named Djehutinakht, son of Teti. The latter’s tomb had never been found, making it extremely unfortunate that the inscription breaks off at the point where the location of the tomb is indicated: “which is [...] cubits from [...]”. An illustration of this hieratic graffito is provided in the book, complete with hieroglyphic transcription, transliteration, and translation (Fig. 7).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the inspiration for the observation of a celestial phenomenon at Dayr al-Barsha comes from the tomb of (another) Djehutinakht (tomb 17K74/1), whose duties included being a star watcher; see Willems, “An Astronomer at Deir al-Barsha”; Willems, *Op de Beeck, Sagrillo, Van Walsem and Vereecken, Dayr al-Barshā Volume 1*, 51–54.

<sup>24</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 33–34. One could call this a process of “artefaction”, comparable to for instance the creation of a fake potsherd in H. Rider Haggard’s *She*; see Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 64.





text composed by John Darnell for *The Book of Two Ways* is a playful allusion to this actual ancient Egyptian letter from the Middle Kingdom, evident in his text's echoing of the aforementioned source material, for instance in the following phrase: "After having received the letter from the Residence foretelling the rising on fourth month of Peret, day 15." Moreover, the hieratic handwriting in the fake graffito closely resembles that of P. Berol 10012A, with, for instance, the words *pr.t spd.t* "the rising of Sothis"—which occur in both the authentic and the fabricated text—written identically.<sup>28</sup> As all of the formalities of a scholarly publication have been observed in Darnell's presentation of his text, to the layperson this is likely to come across as an actual ancient Egyptian inscription; to the specialist, it may be clear that the inscription is fiction infused with scientific fact, though one can identify and appreciate the aspects of the text that fasten it concretely to the Egyptology of our own world while simultaneously enjoying the deviations of this (subtly) alternative history.

Wyatt's career climaxed in 2013 when he finally found the tomb of Djehutinakht, son of Teti. Picoult describes Djehutinakht as having

lived during the Eleventh Dynasty just before Mentuhotep II reunified Egypt. This Djehutynakht—as common a name during the Middle Kingdom as John—was known to scholars from some hieratic ink graffiti he left in the tombs of his ancestors, touting the work he had done restoring the damage there. And yet, the location of Djehutynakht's own final resting place had never been located.<sup>29</sup>

The tomb that Wyatt found was, of course, intact, complete with tomb models and double nested coffins with Coffin Texts, including a version of the "Book of Two Ways". "Egyptology's newest discovery", Dawn relates, using the present tense to emphasize immediacy as the discovery is made, "is the world's oldest version of the Book of Two Ways."<sup>30</sup>

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25 Throne name of Senwosret III, fifth king of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Middle Kingdom.

26 This is acknowledged by Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 412: "It's not every author who can have Dr. John Darnell create a fake dipinto for her, in addition to providing all the translations and concepts that have come from his published work."

27 Luft, *Die chronologische Fixierung des ägyptischen Mittleren Reiches*, 54–57, with further literature. I thank Harco Willems for this reference.

28 See Luft, *Die chronologische Fixierung des ägyptischen Mittleren Reiches*, pl. 7a (2.13) for an image of P. Berol 10012A.

29 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 32–33.

30 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 255.

But sometimes reality is stranger than fiction; the oldest known version of the Book of Two Ways was found by the Leuven mission in 2012, on coffin fragments discovered inside burial shaft 17K85/1B in the tomb of governor Ahanakht I and belonging to a woman named Ankh (coffin B4B). The scientific publication of this find appeared in 2018,<sup>31</sup> which received considerable press attention in December 2019,<sup>32</sup> incidentally right around the time when Picoult's book was being printed. The versions of the Book of Two Ways on the coffins of Djehutinakht IV/V and his wife, also named Djehutinakht, which are now kept at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and which date to the very end of the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty or the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, had been the earliest known examples until the discovery of the tomb of Ankh. The version on the coffin fragments of Ankh probably dates to the tenure of governor Ahanakht I and is at least a generation earlier than those of Djehutinakht IV/V and his wife, thus offering the earliest evidence for the Book of Two Ways currently known.

Where did Wyatt find this tomb of Djehutinakht, son of Teti? Right in front of the entrance to the rock-cut tomb of governor Djehutihotep, on the north hill of the site, as he describes to Dawn in this dialogue:

"I'd looked everywhere, except where I was literally standing. So I dug down two feet from the entrance of Djehutyhotep II's<sup>33</sup> tomb and found the top of a lintel. There was enough autobiographical inscription on it for me to see the glyphs for Djehutynakht. A couple of weeks later, I'd uncovered the entry—painted with faux red-and-green granite and a seal of a giant scarab on the door. By then I'd read enough inscriptions to know that this was Djehutynakht, the son of Teti. He's five generations removed from Djehutyhotep II, and one or two generations older than the Djehutynakhts in the Boston MFA. And he's been referenced in nine other restoration inscriptions he left behind at different tombs in Middle Egypt"

My jaw drops. "So he's truly the granddaddy of the necropolis?"

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31 Willems, "A fragment of an early Book of Two Ways".

32 See for instance Lidz, "An Afterlife So Perilous, You Needed a Guidebook"; Wu, "4,000-Year-Old Guide to the Ancient Egyptian Underworld May Be Oldest Illustrated 'Book'".

33 The addition of II to Djehutihotep's name is in fact erroneous, since there only ever was one Middle Kingdom governor at Dayr al-Barsha named Djehutihotep.

“Most likely. He’s probably from the First Intermediate Period, Eleventh Dynasty. He may be the immediate predecessor of Aha-nakht I, the first known nomarch to have a rock-cut tomb at Bersha.”

“Evidence?” I demand.

He laughs. “We don’t have anything substantive, but I’m not the only one who thinks it. Given the dates of their existence as nomarchs, it fits. And we know for a fact that Djehutynakht liked going around Middle Egypt to other necropolises to fix up other people’s tombs, so it’s entirely plausible that he would start *this* necropolis area for his own family.”<sup>34</sup>

This passage is typical of the kinds of Egyptological details dispersed throughout this book, and that even for seasoned Egyptologists may not be common knowledge. But the suggestion that the tomb of Djehutinakht, son of Teti, could be located in the vicinity of the tomb of Djehutihotep, is unlikely, as is demonstrated below.

### **Djehutihotep and Djehutinakht, son of Teti**

Both governor Djehutihotep and governor Djehutinakht, son of Teti, are in fact real historical characters (Fig. 6), but the story that Picoult weaves around them is fictional. Djehutihotep is the well-known 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty governor of the Hare Nome, whose tomb is the best preserved of all of the governors’ tombs at the site (Fig. 8).<sup>35</sup> Djehutinakht, son of Teti, is a far lesser-known figure, who lived at the end of the First Intermediate Period, and is also known in Egyptological literature as Djehutinakht I.<sup>36</sup> He has been identified with several other known Djehutinakhts, but it seems most likely that he may have been the father of

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<sup>34</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 101–102.

<sup>35</sup> Newberry and Fraser, *El Bersheh I*; Sykora, “Djehoetihotep, de laatste nomarch van de Hazengouw”.

<sup>36</sup> De Meyer, *Old Kingdom Rock Tombs at Dayr al-Barshā*, 100–108.



Fig. 8: The area in front of the tomb of Djehutihotep on the north hill  
(© Dayr al-Barsha Project, KU Leuven; photo M. De Meyer).

Ahanakht I, the first Middle Kingdom governor of the Hare Nome.<sup>37</sup> He is indeed known from nine restoration inscriptions that he left in 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty tombs at Dayr al-Barsha and nearby al-Shaykh Said, a unique corpus of private texts attesting to First Intermediate Period restoration of late Old Kingdom tombs (Fig. 9).<sup>38</sup> Picoult thus includes several historically accurate details about this nomarch who is fairly obscure in even the most up-to-date Egyptological literature.

The tomb of Djehutinakht, son of Teti, has up until today not been located. The suggestion by Picoult that it could be located in the vicinity of the tomb of Djehutihotep is implausible. In the area surrounding this tomb only shafts that are contemporary with the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty governor are found (Fig. 8),<sup>39</sup> while the older Middle Kingdom tombs and that of Ahanakht I are located further to the east. This makes it unlikely that the tomb of an early nomarch like Djehutinakht, son of Teti, would be located close to Djehutihotep on the western side of the plateau.

<sup>37</sup> For this Djehutinakht, see Willems, “Die Grabkammer des Djehutinakht (I?) in Dayr al-Barsha”; Willems, “Deir el-Barsha”. In the latter article Djehutinakht I is mistakenly labeled as Djehutinakht III.

<sup>38</sup> De Meyer, “Restoring the Tombs of His Ancestors?”.

<sup>39</sup> For the five shafts in front of the tomb of Djehutihotep (Fig. 8), see Pommerening and Willems, “Unravelling Daressy’s excavations”.

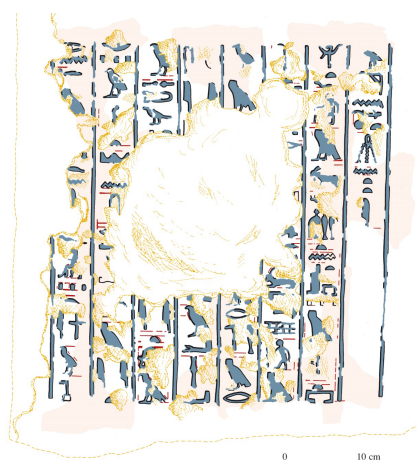


Fig. 9: One of the nine restoration inscriptions of Djehutinakht, son of Teti. This inscription is located in tomb 15J15/1 on the south hill at Dayr al-Barsha (drawing M. De Meyer)

Unless Djehutinakht, son of Teti, was buried in one of the four large burial shafts inside the tomb of Ahanakht I—which each contain at least one and sometimes several burial chambers, the owners of which are now no longer known due to a lack of associated inscribed material—it is doubtful that the tomb of this late First Intermediate Period governor would be located on the north hill at all. A cemetery featuring elite First Intermediate Period tombs exists in what is now the central village square at Dayr al-Barsha, and what was formerly part of the desert plain (Zone 10).<sup>40</sup> Several decorated subterranean burial chambers have been excavated here in the past by the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation under the direction of Osiris Ghobrial and Mahmud Hamza.<sup>41</sup> While a detailed discussion of this area is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that if ever the tomb of Djehutinakht, son of Teti, would surface, this would be the most likely location, and it would not be a rock-cut structure.

The aforementioned examples make it clear that the level of Egyptological detail in the novel is noteworthy, drawing both on research in and around the site of Dayr al-Barsha, as well as the wider Egyptological literature in general. The focus on Dayr al-Barsha rather than any other site in Egypt derives from the fact that the Coffin Text composition known as the “Book of Two Ways” only occurs in its complete form on coffins from that site. However, the novel uses this

<sup>40</sup> For an overview of this area, see Willems, *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture*, 73–76 and pl. 5–6.

<sup>41</sup> Willems, *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture*, 69–71.

composition not in the first place for the function and meaning it had in Middle Kingdom Egypt, but rather as a literary analogy and metaphor for the novel's main themes.

## The Novel's Main Themes

The theme of dealing with death is central to the novel and is woven throughout it in several ways. In the initial plane crash Dawn is confronted with her own mortality, leading her to go to Egypt and find her old love Wyatt working in a necropolis. As ancient Egypt is often conceived in the popular imagination as the culture *par excellence* associated with all things funerary, it is appropriate that this culture is used to explore various ways of dealing with death. The three protagonists all embody a different aspect of this. Dawn as a death doula helps the terminally ill with transitioning from life to death. She is confronted with death on a daily basis in the real world and witnesses its effects on both the dying and those who stay behind. Wyatt excavates ancient Egyptian tombs and works on Coffin Texts, offering a historical perspective on how people in the past coped with the finiteness of life. And, finally, Dawn's husband Brian is a quantum physicist with a fascination for "Schrödinger's cat", multiverses, alternate timelines and parallel universes, bringing in a more theoretical and philosophical perspective on human existence.

This theoretical perspective of parallel universes and alternate timelines supports another central theme in the novel: that of the road not taken, questioning life choices and wondering what life would have looked like had other decisions been made. Dawn is torn between whether she should have followed her heart and dreams (pursue Egyptology and her love for the untamed explorer Wyatt, symbolized by chapters headed "Land/Egypt"), or rather her more rational intuition (build a stable family life with Brian and their daughter Meret, symbolized by chapters headed "Water/Boston"). These are incompatible extremes, and the very structure of the novel attempts to assert a kind of binary relationship between the two, at least at the beginning of the text, but of course life is not as simplistic as that, and the various timelines become increasingly indistinct. The book also raises the question of how much of life is determined by free will, and how much it is the result of circumstances and fate. And as life progresses, the question of what we do with the time that we have left becomes more pressing. The concept of the "Book of Two Ways" is used as a literary analogy to these questions of



different and diverging paths in life, while as a funerary composition it is at the same time intrinsically linked to death as one of the novel's chief concerns.

The book is replete with Egyptological data, inserted in the narrative at regular intervals and sometimes even taking on the form of mini Egyptology lessons, for instance about how to read hieroglyphs,<sup>42</sup> aspects of ancient Egyptian religion, mythology and beliefs, historical data, and so on. The monuments at the site of Dayr al-Barsha are frequently addressed, such as for instance when the tomb of Djehutihotep and its most famous scene of the dragging of the colossal statue are described.<sup>43</sup> The latter is even illustrated in the book when Picoult places her two protagonists in the tomb of Djehutihotep in 2003, doing epigraphy the old-fashioned way, namely copying inscriptions on transparent mylar film.<sup>44</sup> Fifteen years later, when Dawn visits Wyatt after her plane crash, Wyatt has moved on to digital epigraphy, and this process is also explained in detail down to the iPad and the Apple pencil,<sup>45</sup> which is the current methodology of the Leuven team in the tomb of Djehutihotep.<sup>46</sup> The novel's interest in manifestations of the passage of time is connoted not only in its narrative arc symbolised in the linear routes of the Book of Two Ways but also in details such as these that suggest Egyptological progress through technological advancement.

Picoult takes advantage of any possible opportunity to introduce ancient Egypt in the narrative, and to assert the significance of ancient Egyptian culture to modern human experience. The romance between Dawn and Wyatt solicits excursions into ancient Egyptian love poetry, such as Wyatt quoting the opening lines of the first stanza of Papyrus Chester Beatty I when he seduces Dawn,<sup>47</sup> or when he makes his own ostrakon for Dawn with hieratic lines copied from Ostrakon Gardiner 304.<sup>48</sup> When Dawn and Wyatt make love for the first time, they

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42 See for instance the passage on how to read the name of Djehutinakht in hieroglyphs; Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 28–29.

43 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 38–39.

44 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 42–44. On p. 44 Dawn and Wyatt have some nerdy graduate student fun with Djehutihotep, referring to him as DJ Hutytotep, a joke that, incidentally, was also made by members of the Belgian team in real life.

45 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 157–158.

46 See Hernandez, Sykora, De Meyer, Willems, and Vergauwen, "On Combining Epigraphy, TLS, Photogrammetry, and Interactive Media for Heritage Documentation"; Sykora, Hernandez, De Meyer, Vergauwen, and Willems, "Puzzling Tombs".

47 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 180–181; see Landgráfová and Navrátilová, *Sex and the Golden Goddess I*, 92.

48 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 186 ("I shall kiss [her] in the presence of everyone, That they might understand my love. She is the one who has stolen my heart—When she looks at me it is refreshment"); see Landgráfová and Navrátilová, *Sex and the Golden Goddess I*, 100–102.

are interrupted by thoughts about the First Intermediate Period stela of Uha from Girga now at the Oriental Institute in Chicago (OIM E16956), in which part of the biography reads: “I was circumcised (?) along with 120 men.”<sup>49</sup> Later on, Wyatt spices up foreplay by citing *Gliedervergottung* spells throughout.<sup>50</sup> Just as death is the final part of everyone’s journey through life, Picoult homes in on love as a particular milestone for her protagonist, emphasising through the relevance of ancient Egyptian sources to this experience a kind of timelessness that further contributes to the novel’s complex temporal work. This is not time travel in the typical science-fiction sense, though it nonetheless suggests a cultural collapsing of various times and even of the ancient and modern worlds that are usually thought of as entirely distinct.

## The Novel’s Reception

This novel was, of course, not written for an audience of Egyptologists, but for the general public for whom Egyptology is hardly a daily concern. This begs the question whether such an audience digests the dense Egyptological material well, or even appreciates it. While it is not my intention to analyse all aspects of the reception of the novel, the question about the reception of the dense interweaving of scientific facts in particular is relevant for the focus of this article. The wide distribution that the novel enjoyed due to it being written by a well-known author and arriving at the #1 spot on the *New York Times* fiction bestseller list, makes for a large readership across the globe. While sites like Amazon and Goodreads do not allow for a thorough statistical analysis, the multitudes of reviews left by readers give a good indication of how the book was generally received. For *The Book of Two Ways*, Amazon lists 19,236 global ratings (Fig. 10, left),<sup>51</sup> while Goodreads has almost 80,000 ratings and 10,230 reviews (Fig. 10, right).<sup>52</sup>

The overall customer rating of the book is 4.1 out of 5 stars on Amazon, and 3.66 on Goodreads. While on the commercial site Amazon 52% of the reviewers give the book 5 stars, this is far less on the bibliophile community site Goodreads, with only 23% awarding it the highest score. For the latter, the majority of the reviewers give the book 3 or 4 stars, rating categories that are used considerably

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49 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 182; see Dunham, *Naga-ed-Dêr Stelae*, 102–103, pl. XXXII; “Object Photo OIM E16956”.

50 Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 274–275.

51 “The Book of Two Ways: A Novel”, *Amazon*.

52 “The Book of Two Ways”, *Goodreads*.

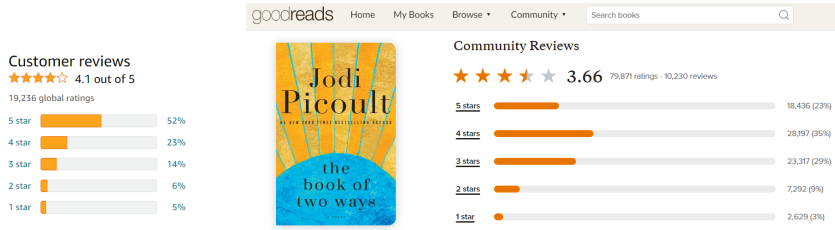


Fig. 10: Ratings for *The Book of Two Ways*; Left: Amazon; Right: Goodreads. Both graphs were generated on 3 March 2023.

less on Amazon. When browsing the reviews and comments left by the readers, it is clear that the level of detail in the Egyptological contents in the book often either makes or breaks the novel depending on the reviewer. The mixed reviews mainly circle around that issue. For many people the strong Egyptological focus formed an obstacle in reading rather than enhancing their readerly experience.<sup>53</sup> From the thousands of comments on Goodreads, the selection below illustrates this:

I don't even know where to start with my review for this book because I absolutely love Jodi Picoult and so this review is very difficult to write because I did not like this book. In fact that is putting it very lightly because this book honestly enraged me slightly.

I found the first 20% of the book difficult to get through because it felt like I was reading a text book on Egyptology. I imagine it's interesting if you're into that but I honestly just felt I was being lectured most of the time and that's not what I want when I set down to read a contemporary book. I appreciate that Picoult has clearly done a lot of research into this topic but it really just wasn't what I wanted going into this book and I found it difficult to get enticed to read it.

(Amy, 1 star, reviewed on 10 November 2020; 966 reviews)

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<sup>53</sup> This is reminiscent of, for instance, Andrew Lang's comment on H. Rider Haggard's *Cleopatra*, who stated that it was "too full of antiquarian detail [...] to carry the general public with it"; Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 114.

Worst Jodi Picoult book ever. I've read every adult book she has ever written some have been outstanding, her last few were perhaps mediocre, this book, for the most part, was unreadable. I read her books for the characters, for the interwoven stories. Sometimes it is nice when she challenges us to think, outside the box. I don't read her books to be bored to death with Egyptology or Quantum Physics. I respect the amount of research that must have gone into this book, but, to me, it was just boring. If I wanted a lecture or to learn about either of these subjects I would purchase a book on them and study it.

(Vicki Mock, 1 star, reviewed on 4 October 2020; 16 reviews)

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I stuck with this book, beyond the mindlessly numbing pages of Egyptian history and physics (love them both in non-fiction format). The endless pages the author used to hit the book length. I'm so disappointed. I was hoping for the Picoult twist that would make it worth it. There wasn't one. I simply could not understand or like Dawn. What a let down.

(Lori, 1 star, reviewed on 2 October 2020; 826 reviews)

Remarkable among the negative reviews is that often they seem to be written by true Picoult fans, who feel that the style in this book drifts away from what they would normally expect from her novels. Among the positive reviews, however, many comment specifically on the fact that they enjoyed the Egyptological education they received along the way. Some comments from Goodreads highlight how the book may be particularly attractive to Egyptophiles:

The minute I read some of the reviews of this book I decided I had to read it too. As many other people, I have a slight fascination for Egyptology—with a copy of the Book of the Dead in my study and 800 pictures taken during an unforgettable holiday to Egypt in 2012. In contrast to the situation nowadays, as the author describes, we took trains without a problem and even visited Minya. [...]

You can call this a life-changing book. Who would have thought that mixing physics with Egyptology would lead to such an out-

standing novel. Yes, sometimes it is necessary to have Wikipedia on hand to clarify certain details, but all in all it is a spectacular mix.

I had to sit and think about this book for a couple of days because it made such an impact. I'm very happy to have read it. If you are interested in Egyptology, you really must read it. If you're not, but want to read an extraordinary story, you really must read it. It's more than a book; it teaches us things—different things for different readers. If it was up to me, I would give this book every prize there is to be won.

(Jannelies, 5 stars, reviewed on February 4, 2021; 955 reviews)

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Went above and beyond my expectations! Though I am a huge Jodi Picoult fan, I find her work can be hit-or-miss. Didn't help I really didn't like her last novel, *A spark of light*—and the synopsis of this one didn't call to me. A story told in dual timelines? With a focus in Egyptology? I expected this book to be a chore: early reviews didn't help, saying Picoult gets lost in the weeds of Egyptology at the expense of the narrative.

I know dick about Middle Egypt, and mummification, and tombs. But Picoult made me care. I didn't find the detail excessive or boring—the author creates her world, giving the reader what they need to fully immerse themselves in it.

(Cody, 5 stars, reviewed on 6 October 2020; 716 reviews)

Throughout the positive comments there are many from people who admit to having a fascination with ancient Egypt, thus making the Egyptological element easier to appreciate and digest. This is not the case for all, however, and for some reviewers this book sparked an interest in Egyptology they did not have before.

Of course, no book is received unanimously positively or negatively, and there is always a spectrum ranging between the two extremes. But Jodi Picoult's books in general receive a higher rating on Goodreads than the 3.66 for *The Book of Two Ways*. Based on 4.597.943 ratings and 284.973 reviews of the 116 distinct works by Picoult that are listed on Goodreads, her work receives an average rating of 4.0. This seems to indicate that at least compared to her other books, *The Book of Two Ways* scores below the average expectation, and the amount of Egyptological detail in it, described by a reviewer for the *Washington Post* as

“heavier than a sarcophagus” may be at least part of the reason for this lower score.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, the novel’s use of quantum physics seems to be another sticking point for readers, who find *The Book of Two Ways*’ references to such theories either dry and textbook-like or thrilling when twinned with Picoult’s research into Egyptological scholarship. Certainly, Picoult’s use of “dual timelines” suggests itself as an unusual device given the kinds of fiction for which she is known and celebrated: from romance novels to courtroom dramas, domestic fiction to thrillers. Such a noteworthy formal device, and one which established Picoult fans might not have been expecting given her earlier work, suggests Picoult’s adoption of a narrative element more redolent of science fiction.

## Science Fiction?

Given the focus of this special issue on the reception of ancient Egypt in science-fiction, the question can be asked whether this book in fact qualifies as such. The term “science fiction” encompasses many meanings, often implying futuristic and technological elements.<sup>55</sup> However, as Sherryl Vint recently stated, “From its very beginnings, sf has included both science-focused extrapolations and politically engaged visions of the future.”<sup>56</sup> *The Book of Two Ways* is an example of the former: the story relies heavily on scientific facts—drawn from the academic disciplines of Egyptology and quantum physics—to support the characters, themes, and plot-lines. Both Wyatt and Brian are presented as academics following research questions that resemble real-world practices; Brian’s research as a quantum physicist speaks to the novel’s unusual presentation of time, which is, of course, simultaneously informed by a creative take on ancient Egyptian source material on Picoult’s part.

While ancient Egypt itself is a popular theme in historical fiction—stories woven around well-known historical figures like Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Ramses, and so on are abundant<sup>57</sup>—Egyptology as a scientific discipline is less so. Portrayals of predominantly fictional Egyptologists and their excavations have been inserted

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54 Tanabe, “In ‘The Book of Two Ways,’ Jodi Picoult delivers another powerful story about heart-wrenching moral choices”.

55 See for instance recently Menadue, Giselsson, and Guez, “An Empirical Revision of the Definition of Science Fiction”.

56 Vint, *Science Fiction*, 8.

57 See recently, for instance, Dobson and Tonks, *Ancient Egypt in the Modern Imagination*.



into twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction mainly in crime/detective narratives,<sup>58</sup> as in Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot stories or Elizabeth Peters' Amelia Peabody series, but generally they tend to focus on excavations of the so-called "Golden Age" of Egyptology (from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century), and at high profile sites (predominantly, Giza, Karnak and the Valley of the Kings).<sup>59</sup> For instance, in Agatha Christie's short story "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb", Belgian detective Hercule Poirot investigates the so-called curse of the pharaoh in the Valley of the Kings. First published in 1923,<sup>60</sup> the story came hard on the heels of Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. It is not difficult to see how Christie's story originated in the slipstream of the media frenzy surrounding this discovery.

Actual scientific scholarship and contemporary ongoing excavations are only rarely injected into fiction, though Christie's story demonstrates how Egyptological excavations—and, in particular, media coverage of digs—can be made to manifest in fictional narratives inspired by true events. Incidentally, another fictional novel has appeared in recent years that, like *The Book of Two Ways*, also centres around a real-life Belgian archaeological mission in Egypt: that of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels at El Kab. The events of Janis Patterson's *A Killing at El Kab* (2016) take place in the same Somers Clarke house described above (Fig. 4 and Fig. 11).<sup>61</sup> Patterson visited the site in 2015 and even wrote former excavation director Dirk Huyge into the story. However, her readership is not nearly as large as Picoult's, with only 6 ratings and 3 reviews on Goodreads, and her novel's focus on murder, treasure and curses aligns it with the earlier twentieth-century tradition and its rather sensationalist take on the Egyptological world.<sup>62</sup>

In stories written and published over the course of the last century Egyptologists are often stereotypically portrayed as explorers of lost worlds, and clichéd depictions of ancient Egypt abound (dominated by pyramids, mummies, and their assorted curses), leading to the fairly caricatural perception that the general public tends to have of Egyptology. The examples covered in this special issue show that such considerations manifest in science fiction and adjacent genres, too, much as these sources might also draw upon Egyptological source material and reinterpret it in diverse and meaningful ways.

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58 See for instance Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*, 124–136.

59 An excellent overview is provided in Thornton, *Archaeologists in Print*, 188–209.

60 Christie, "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb".

61 Patterson, *A Killing at El Kab*.

62 "A Killing at El Kab", *Goodreads*.

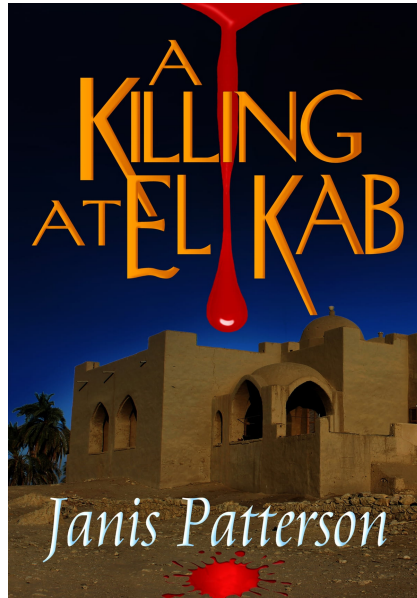


Fig. 11: The cover of Janis Patterson, *A Killing at El Kab* (2016), featuring the Somers Clarke excavation house.

What separates this novel from these other examples, perhaps, is that rather than using ancient Egypt and Egyptology as markers of otherness as is often the case, Picoult's novel provides an exception to the norm that may help in countering the stereotypical perception of the discipline. *The Book of Two Ways*' science-fiction elements may be subtle, but this subtlety means that Picoult can avoid sensationalism while also paying homage to a more realistic take on Egyptology that is so infrequently seen in fiction. Her text rests upon a scientific foundation that represents a plausible—if at times creatively tweaked—version both of our world and that of the ancient Egyptians.

## Conclusion

Contrary to how Egyptology is generally pitched in literature, namely at high-profile sites and during the “age of the great discoveries”, Picoult's *The Book of Two Ways* is a rare case of a novel focusing on a modern day excavation at a site that is not well known to the general public. Coached by Yale Egyptologists who inject the novel both with Egyptological facts, as well as with fabricated fiction (for instance, fictional hieratic inscriptions), Picoult paints a picture of Egyptology

that will feel genuine to the layman, but that to the specialist is interwoven with fantasy. This work of fiction centred on a real-world scientific project gives new meaning to the term “science fiction”, working in tandem with the novel’s unusual take on the alternative history subgenre. Rather than a grand narrative of divergent events on a national or international scale, Picoult offers a much narrower take in which her text—in her own words—focuses on “a middle-aged woman [...] wondering what her life would have looked like if it had taken one tiny detour”.<sup>63</sup>

Picoult’s text presents us with a history which both is and is not her own, blending references to real historical personages with invented characters. She writes in the Author’s Note at the end of the book: “Djehutynakht was an antiquarian committed to making his ancestors’ names live forever, so I’d like to think this novel is belated wish fulfilment, for him.”<sup>64</sup> And for this in itself, the author is to be commended. The audience reached by this novel is exponentially larger than what any scholarly publication could ever attain. Hundreds of thousands of people have now heard of the site of Dayr al-Barsha in Middle Egypt, and even more specifically of the name of governor Djehutinakht, son of Teti, a feat that could never have been accomplished through a scholarly article about his restoration inscriptions.<sup>65</sup> The impact of such a novel is considerable, as it is estimated that Picoult has in total over 40 million books in print in 35 countries.<sup>66</sup> Translations of the book into several different languages appeared in 2021 (Fig. 12), such as German (“Umwege des Lebens”), French (“Le livre des deux chemins”), Italian (“Il Libro delle Due Vie”), Portuguese (“O Livro dos Dois Caminhos”), Russian (“Книга двух путей”), Dutch (“Een tweede pad”), and Lithuanian (“Dviejų kelių knyga”). While the interweaving of fact and fiction is dense and not always easy to discern even for someone who is intimately familiar with the material, the fictional liberties can easily be forgiven for the greater educational good of bringing a large audience into contact with genuine Egyptological research.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Harco Willems, the editors of this volume and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on a draft of this paper. I am grateful to Toon

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<sup>63</sup> “Jodi Picoult”, *Stella*.

<sup>64</sup> Picoult, *The Book of Two Ways*, 410.

<sup>65</sup> De Meyer, “Restoring the Tombs of His Ancestors?”.

<sup>66</sup> “Published books by Jodi Picoult”, *Jodi Picoult*.



Fig. 12: Covers of various translations of *The Book of Two Ways*, all published in 2021.

Sykora, Leire Olabarria and the entire Dayr al-Barsha team, without whom our knowledge of the greater Dayr al-Barsha region would be very limited indeed. I thank the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for generously supporting field-work at the site, and Wouter Claes for sharing inside information about the Elkab excavation house.

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