Motel of the Mysteries

David Macaulay

David Macaulay is a brilliant illustrator and author whose many books illuminate the workings of humankind's technological achievements.

It is some time in the very distant future, and archaeologist Howard Carson has made the archaeological discovery of the century or, perhaps, the millennium (and no, it is not a coincidence that Howard Carter was the actual discoverer of the tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tut-ankh-amun). As you read this excerpt from Macaulay’s book, it will become clear that Carson is excavating nothing more than a sleazy twentieth-century motel, though he manages to construe the place as an ancient, sacred necropolis. The book is especially hilarious if you know a bit about the history of archaeology. Some of the lines achieve their humor (at least for archaeologists) by being actual quotes from Howard Carter (he’s the real archaeologist, and he really did reply in response to the question, “Can you see anything?” as he first gazed into Tut’s Tomb, “Yes, wonderful things.”) Reading Motel of the Mysteries can be a humbling experience for an archaeologist. But it also is a valuable reminder of the mistakes we can make when we impose a preconceived perspective on the archaeological record. And besides, it’s very funny.

The ground below his feet suddenly gave way. He was precipitated headlong downward. When the dust had settled and he had recovered his spectacles, he found himself at the bottom of an ancient shaft, facing the entrance of a long-forgotten tomb. The shaft, probably dug by tomb robbers shortly after the tomb was sealed, had been covered initially by the natural vegetation of the surface. More recently, the whole area had been buried under vast quantities of soil from the adjacent excavation.

Unimpressed and rather annoyed at this inconvenience, [Howard] Carson’s first thought was to call out for assistance, but, before he could utter a sound, light from the shaft caught the area around the handle on the door. Upon closer inspection, he discovered that the sacred seal which was traditionally placed ...
dedicated group of volunteers, Carson began the first of seven years' work on the excavation of the Motel of the Mysteries complex, and most specifically on the removal and recording of the treasures from Tomb 26.

While Carson paced back and forth in a supervisory manner, Harriet numbered each of the items surrounding the entrance as well as those on the great door. Descriptions of the most significant discoveries are to be found in her diary:

Number 21, "the gleaming Sacred Seal, which had first caught Howard's attention, was placed on the door by the officials after the burial to protect the tomb and its inhabitant for eternity."

Number 28, "the Sacred Eye, which was believed to ward off evil spirits."

Number 18, "the partially exposed Plant That Would Not Die. One of these exquisite plants, which had apparently been grown in separate pieces and then joined together, was placed on each side of the entrance."

Numbers 19 and 20, "containers in which the sacrificial meal was offered to the gods of eternal life."

Once the exterior of the tomb had been recorded in detail, preparations for entering it were begun. With a steady hand, Carson, who had presumably picked up a few tricks in his time, jimmed the lock. With his helpers peering nervously from a safe distance, he cautiously pried open the door. The creaking of the ancient hinges, in Miss Burton's own words, "cut through the silence like the scream of a ghostly fleeing spirit." Suddenly, to Carson's astonishment, the door stopped dead. A frantic but successful search for the obstruction revealed a beautifully crafted chain about two thirds up the inside of the door, linking it with the sturdy frame. Clearly this stood as the final barrier between the present and the past. Once the workers had sawed through the chain, they withdrew, and Carson continued to open the great door.

At first, everything was dark. Carson lit a match. Still everything was dark. Carson lit two matches. Still, everything was dark. Attempting to avoid a rather protracted delay, Harriet eased the large spotlight toward the entrance with her foot. As the blanket of darkness was stripped away from the treasures within the tomb, Carson's mouth fell open. Everywhere was the glint of plastic. Impatiently, the others waited for a response.

"Can you see anything, Howard?" they asked in unison.

"Yes," he replied...

"WONDERFUL THINGS!"

Everything in the Outer Chamber faced the Great Altar(No. 1), including the body of the deceased, which still lay on top of the Ceremonial Platform(No. 5). In its hand was the Sacred Communicator(No. 3) and around its wrist was a flexible golden band(No. 4) bearing an image similar to that of the upper altar. Signs of the ancient burial ritual were everywhere. A variety of garments, including the ceremonial chest plate(No. 2) and shoes designed to hold coins(No. 6), were scattered about the chamber. Various contain-
ers (No. 9) which had once held libations and offerings stood on the altar and around the platform. A statue of the deity WATT, who represented eternal companionship and enlightenment, stood faithfully next to the platform. To ensure maximum comfort during eternal life, several pieces of beautifully crafted furniture were placed in the room, along with additional garments stacked carefully in a specially designed rectangular pod. Perhaps the single most important article in the chamber was the ICE (No. 14). This container, whose function evolved from the Canopic jars of earliest times, was designed to preserve, at least symbolically, the major internal organs of the deceased for eternity. The Yanks, who revered long and complex descriptions, called the container an Internal Component Enclosure.

Aware that the two pairs of shoes implied a double burial and having seen only one body, Carson immediately began searching for another chamber. By the time he had found the entrance to what eventually became known as the Inner Chamber, Harriet had already catalogued and numbered it. Quivering with excitement, Carson removed his shirt and began the delicate operation of dismantling the door.

Although it seemed hardly possible, the contents of the Inner Chamber were even more dazzling than those already discovered. Harriet immediately began tagging and identifying each item while Howard drew...
conclusions. As he had predicted, a second body was present, and this one appeared to have been buried with more care and ritual than the first. Wearing the Ceremonial Head Dress (No. 8), it had been placed in a highly polished white sarcophagus (No. 9), which had in turn been sealed behind an exquisite and elaborately hung translucent curtain (No. 10).

The proportions of the sarcophagus had been precisely determined to prevent the deceased from ever sliding down into a fully reclined position. The similar postures of the two bodies led Carson to the conclusion that the proper burial position had the chin resting as much as possible on the chest. Although the outer surface of the sarcophagus was plain, there were two sets of ceremonial markings on the inside. The first consisted of ten parallel rows of slightly raised discs along the floor of the sarcophagus over which the body had been placed. The second was an almost entirely faded line that ran all the way around the walls parallel to and about ten inches above the floor. Two water trumpets, one about five feet above the other, projected from the end wall facing the deceased. Some of the music required during the final ceremony was produced by forcing water from the sacred spring through the trumpets and out through a small hole in the floor of the sarcophagus. Other music came from the music box (No. 6) situated above the Sacred Urn (No. 2). Articles No. 1 and No. 4 were used in preparing the body for its final journey and No. 5 was the Sacred Parchment, pieces of which were periodically placed in the urn during the ceremony. Carson was overjoyed to find that the Sacred Point was perfectly preserved on the sacred parchment. Very few had previously been uncovered, and none in such remarkable condition. The Headband, which bore the ceremonial chant, and the Sacred Collar (not numbered) were still in place on the Sacred Urn to which they had been secured following the ceremony.