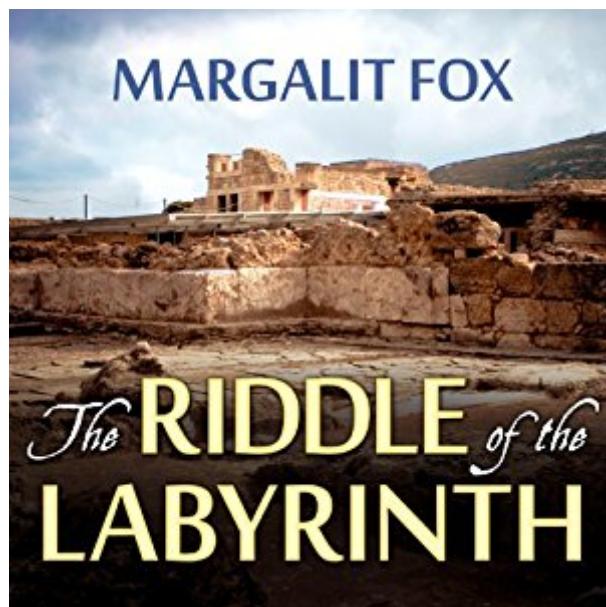


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The Riddle Of The Labyrinth: The Quest To Crack An Ancient Code



Synopsis

In the tradition of Simon Winchester and Dava Sobel, *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code* tells one of the most intriguing stories in the history of language, masterfully blending history, linguistics, and cryptology with an elegantly wrought narrative. When famed archaeologist Arthur Evans unearthed the ruins of a sophisticated Bronze Age civilization that flowered on Crete 1,000 years before Greece's Classical Age, he discovered a cache of ancient tablets, Europe's earliest written records. For half a century, the meaning of the inscriptions, and even the language in which they were written, would remain a mystery. Award-winning New York Times journalist Margalit Fox's riveting real-life intellectual detective story travels from the Bronze Age Aegean—the era of Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Helen—to the turn of the 20th century and the work of charismatic English archeologist Arthur Evans, to the colorful personal stories of the decipherers. These include Michael Ventris, the brilliant amateur who deciphered the script but met with a sudden, mysterious death that may have been a direct consequence of the decipherment; and Alice Kober, the unsung heroine of the story whose painstaking work allowed Ventris to crack the code.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Margalit Fox is the obituary writer for the New York Times, and she knows how to write. I've always marveled at her way of getting into the essence of the person she was writing about, capturing in a few words how that person affected society and how the contributions s/he made were reflected in their life. Fox shows that same ease of writing in "Riddle of the Labyrinth", her second work of

non-fiction. I think everyone knows by now about the Rosetta Stone and how its discovery in Egypt in 1799 by forces of Napoleon led to the deciphering of hieroglyphics. But it took French, British, and other European scholars until 1824 to finally complete the work. Another such effort was needed to decipher the code on tablets found by British archeologist Arthur Evans, in the excavations on Crete, near the palace of Knossos in 1900. The writing and the language on the tablets, soon referred to as "Linear A" and "Linear B", became the focus for the next 50 years of scholars and archeologists and, one architect, all of whom worked in relative solitude in their attempts to decipher the coded languages. "Relative solitude" because in the days before the internet and the mass sharing of both information and individual effort, attempts to reach out to others working on the same task was difficult. In the United States, the main scholar working on the code was a Brooklyn College classics professor, Alice Kober, who worked for years by herself. While she did maintain written correspondence with others in England - and visiting Oxford twice to see the original data - she really was alone in her work. And working during the years of WW2 and the post-war, with paper shortages both in the US and the UK, Kober made discoveries that took her to the brink of deciphering the code.

Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, thought to be written in the eighth century B.C., are among the oldest written works of Western literature we know. Imagine the excitement, then, when hundreds of clay tablets were discovered on the island of Crete in 1900, and they were dated back to sometime between 1400 and 1450 B.C.; in other words, hundreds of years before Homer did his work and even before the battle of Troy he described. During the Victorian era, the sun never set on the British Empire--as you may have heard--and Victorian gentlemen trampled all over the empire and the world digging up artifacts of ancient civilizations. In 1900, one of these gentlemen, Arthur Evans, discovered a huge, ruined palace on Crete, where the clay tablets were preserved by fire after the palace was apparently sacked and torched. Some of the symbols on the tablets were pictograms, lovely little representations of horses, for example. Mostly, though, the characters were a mystery. Nobody knew what language was used on Crete at the time the tablets were written, and the characters that weren't pictograms were just tantalizingly ornate hints of life in this long-ago civilization. Margalit Fox tells the story of the three preeminent figures in the life of "Linear B," as Evans called the script on the tablets. Evans, the archeologist whom she calls "The Digger;" Alice Kober, an assistant professor of Classics at Brooklyn College, who spent most of the 1940s sitting at her kitchen table painstakingly making note cards, charts and graphs to crack the code of Linear B; and Michael Ventris, the precocious English polymath with a prodigious systematic memory, who

made the final breakthrough discoveries that allowed the mystery of Linear B to be solved.

I was totally enthralled by the concept of this book: the curiosity factor about the process of uncovering an unknown language suited my puzzle-loving brain, the ability to find knowledge from the ancient past that is not conjecture but in the words of those who lived in the time was too good to pass up. Words and language are eternal, as long as you are equipped with the ability to understand the concepts / read the language / understand what concept or information the writer is attempting to convey. While not written as purely a biography, this book provides great insight into the people thought to be most important in discovering the keys to solve the puzzle that was Linear B. Dated to 1000+ years earlier than the classical texts of the Ancient Greeks, this treasure trove of artifacts was unearthed on Crete in 1900; yet 50 years passed before the cuneiform and pictographic clay tablets were deciphered and understood. Most memorable to me was the work of Alice Kober, a classics professor who spent years, pre-computer, to handcraft her own database / enigma-style machine with matchbooks and bits of paper. While the crafting of the physical accoutrements to solve the puzzle was unbelievably complex and a testament to some serious determination, the continual and systemic discounting of her work, and the lack of recognition that seemed to be wholly sexist in its genesis was frustrating to me as a reader. Often it is said people are born 'before their time' - Kober is my new reference point.

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