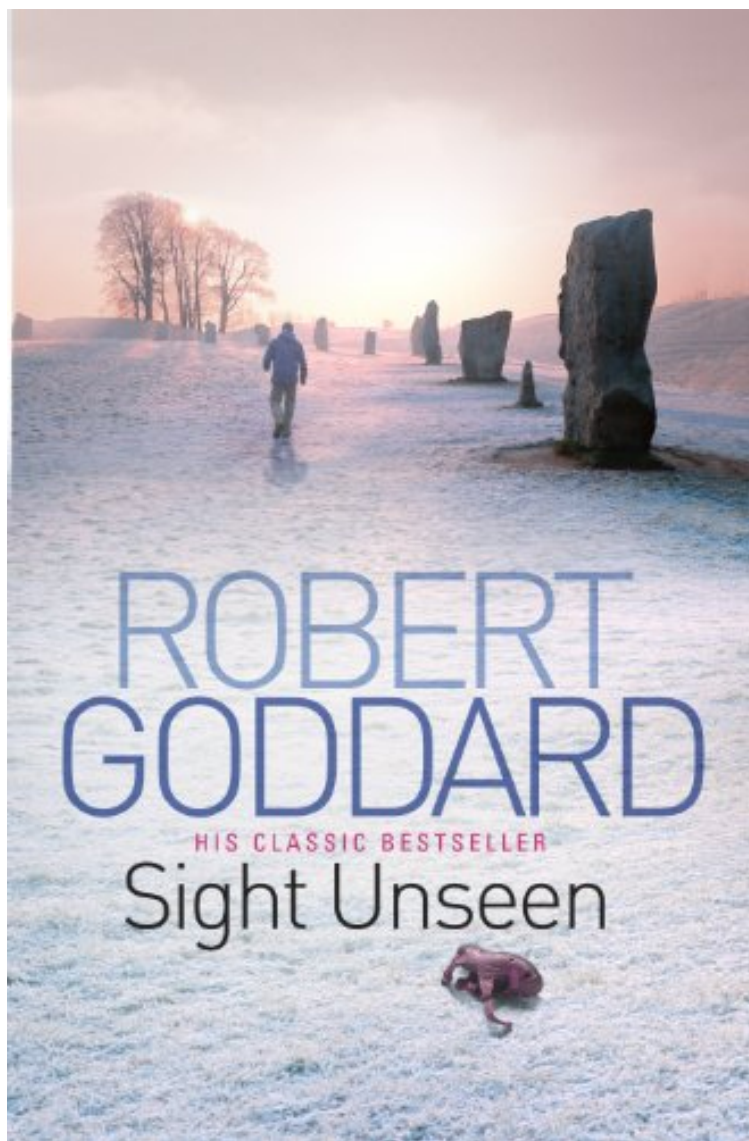


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Sight Unseen



Par Robert Goddard
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt is a hot summer's day in the tourist village of Avebury. A man sits outside the Red Lion pub, waiting. He sees a woman with three young children, two of them running ahead while their sister dawdles behind. A child's voice catches on the breeze.For want of anything more interesting to do, the man watches. He sees nothing sinister or threatening. Even when another figure enters his field of vision, he does not react. The figure is ordinary - male, short-haired, stockily built.But he is moving fast, at a loping run.And then it happens. In one swift movement, the running man grabs the youngest child and carries her away. Still the man outside the pub does not react. Suddenly, awhite transit van bursts into view, its engine racing, its rear door slamming shut. The child and her abductor are inside. The child's sister rushes forward. The man outside the pub jumps up...The tragedy begins at Avebury. But it does not end there.ExtraitChapter OneIt

had been a fickle winter in Prague. Yet another mild spell had been cut short by a plunge back into snow and ice. When David Umber had agreed to stand in as a Jolly Brolly tour guide for the following Friday, he had not reckoned on wind chill of well below zero, slippery pavements and slush-filled gutters. But those were the conditions. And Jolly Brolly never cancelled. Umber's exit from the apartment block on Sokolovska that morning was accordingly far from eager. A lean, melancholy man in his late forties, his dark hair shot with grey, his eyes downcast, his brow furrowed with unconsoling thoughts, he turned up the collar of his coat and headed for the tram stop, glancing along the street to see if he needed to hurry. He did not. There was no tram in sight, giving him a chance to examine the letter he had found in his mailbox on the way out.

Deducing from the typeface visible through the envelope window that it was in fact a bank statement, he thrust it back into his pocket unopened and pressed on to the tram stop. God, it was cold. Not for the first time when such weather prevailed, he silently asked himself, "What am I doing here?" The answer, he knew, was best not dwelt upon. He had stayed on after the end of his teaching contract last summer because of Milena. But Milena had gone. And so had the temporary post he had found for the autumn term. He had a small circle of friends and acquaintances in Prague, happily including Ivana, Jolly Brolly coordinator and entrepreneuse manquee. But he also had plenty of evidence to strengthen his sense of drift and purposelessness. He stood at the stop, shifting from foot to foot in an effort to keep warm, or at least to avoid getting any colder. The heating in his apartment block was in dire need of an overhaul. That could in fact be said of pretty much everything in the block. He had moved there as a stopgap measure when his much more salubrious and ironically cheaper flat near Grand Priory Square had vanished under the waters of the Vltava during the cataclysmic flood of August 2002. He had been in England at the time, but virtually all his possessions had been in the flat. The flood had claimed those tangible reminders of his past, leaving a void in his sense of himself that the sixteen months since had failed to fill. The red and white nose of a tram appeared through the murk. Those waiting at the stop shuffled forward, some of them taking last drags on their cigarettes before flicking the butts into the slush. Umber squinted towards the tram, struggling to read its route number. It was a 24. Well, that was something. If it had been an 8, he would have had to stand there for another bone-chilling few minutes. The number 24 pulled up and the passengers piled aboard, Umber hopping onto the second car, where there were more vacant seats. He slumped down in one and closed his eyes for a restful few moments as the tram started away. As a result, he did not notice the short, barrel-chested man muffled up in parka, gloves, scarf and woolly hat who jumped on just as the doors were closing. He had no cause to be on his guard, after all. A Prague tram at the back end of winter was hardly where he would have expected the past to creep up on him. He was not thinking about any of that. But then he did not need to. David Umber's past was of an order that did not allow for genuine forgetting. It was not necessary to apply his mind to it consciously. It was simply there, always, pulling him back, dragging him down. It would never leave him. All he could do was refine his tactics of evasion. And this, he knew but did not care to admit, was why he had stayed on in Prague. It was a refuge, a hiding-place. It was far from anywhere tainted by all that he did not wish to recall. But it was not, he was to discover before the day was out, far enough. The tram trundled on through the streets, picking up more passengers than it shed, so that by the time it reached Wenceslas Square it was crammed. Umber got off with a mob of others and headed for the Wenceslas Monument in front of the National Museum. That was the appointed meeting-place for those hapless tourists who had decided to spend a thousand koruna on a six-hour walking tour of the city's principal attractions, with lunch thrown in, in the care of an old Prague hand replete with local lore. (Jolly Brolly never knowingly undersold itself.) About a dozen tourists were waiting by the statue of Bohemia's patron saint. The cold weather had taken its toll on numbers, for which Umber was grateful. He would not have to shout to make himself heard by such a small group. They were the usual mix of ages and nationalities, clutching their polyglot of guidebooks. Ivana was in the process of unburdening them of their cash. She acknowledged Umber's arrival with a relieved smile. "You're late," she whispered as she handed him his staff of office a rainbow-patterned umbrella. "Je mi lto," he replied, apologizing being one of the few aspects of Czech he had mastered. "I overslept." Ivana's smile stiffened only slightly as she set about introducing him to his charges. A doctor of history, she called him, in order to forestall any complaints about his clearly not having been born and bred in Prague. It was not a technically valid description. Umber had never finished his doctorate. But, in another sense, which afforded him some wry amusement, it was true. There would be a little doctoring of history before the tour was over. He could guarantee that. There was one latecomer who settled up with Ivana after she had said her preliminary piece. Having failed to register the man's presence on the tram, Umber naturally made nothing of his last-minute arrival. Ivana wished them a

good day and hustled off to the bank with the takings. She would soon be back in the warmth and relative comfort of the Jolly Brolly office. A phone call to Janouek, proprietor of U Modr Merunky, where they were scheduled to stop for a "typical delicious Czech lunch," and her duties would be concluded. Lucky her, thought Umber, as he took a deep breath of cold Czech air and launched his commentary with some loosely framed thoughts on the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. It was a well-worn theme. He was a historian, after all, albeit not as well qualified as Ivana had implied. He was on autopilot before they had even reached the Monument to the Victims of Communism. And on autopilot he remained as the tour proceeded. They reached Old Town Square in good time to see the Astronomical Clock's march-past of apostles when it struck the hour, crossed Charles Bridge, popped into and out of the Church of St Nicholas, then took the funicular railway (fare included in the price) up to Petrn Park. The snow was ankle-deep in the park, which slowed their progress, those inadequately clad and shod only now realizing what they had signed up for. Umber had allowed for this, however. Some deft abridgements during their visits to the Strahov Monastery and the Loreto had them at U Modr Merunky, halfway back down the hill to Prague Castle, more or less when Janouek was expecting them. The exact nature of the deal between Ivana and this less than glorious example of Czech innkeeping had never been disclosed to Umber. It was certainly not predicated on the quality of the food. The roast pork was gristly, the red cabbage vinegary and the dumplings unyielding. But no-one complained. Those at Umber's table even praised the food. Perhaps they did not wish to hurt their host's feelings. Umber could have told them, but did not, that Janouek did not actually have any feelings on the subject that could be hurt. The latecomer to the tour, Umber's fellow-passenger from the number 24 tram, sat at a different table and said little to his companions. Removal of his woolly-hat revealed a bald head with a dusting of shaven white hair above his deeply lined brow, piercing blue eyes and hollow cheeks. He was a short, broad, bony man of sixty or seventy, whom nobody seemed eager to engage in small talk and who looked as if that suited him fine: he was nobody's fool, his bearing proclaimed, and nobody's favourite uncle either. His gaze appeared to be fixed throughout the meal on the back of David Umber's head. But of that David Umber was unaware. Lunch over, but already repeating on some of them, the group slithered down to the Castle in time for the two o'clock Changing of the Guard. This was followed by a circuit of St Vitus's Cathedral before they made their way to the Royal Palace for Umber's account of the famous Defenestration of 1618 that sparked off the Thirty Years' War. He was mildly worried at this stage by the chance that someone might ask him to explain the whys and wherefores of that long-ago conflict. But the moment passed with questionless ease. They made a gingerly descent of Old Castle Steps, crossed back over the river and entered the Jewish Quarter. Three synagogues and one cemetery later, they returned to Old Town Square, where the tour ended at the birthplace of Franz Kafka. Umber cracked his customary joke about hoping nobody had found the day too much of a trial. There were more smiles than laughs and a few expressions of thanks, extending in one case to a (very) modest tip. Then the group dispersed. It was late afternoon now and growing colder. Umber hurried round to the Jolly Brolly nerve centre, two second-floor rooms about halfway between Old Town Square and the Prague branch of Tesco, where he planned to buy his dinner. There was no sign of Ivana in the office. She had left it in the languid care of Marek, her youthful and, in Umber's view, useless assistant. Marek was sitting with his feet on the desk, smoking a Camel cigarette and texting a friend when Umber walked in. Marek nodded a greeting and slid a small, square manilla envelope across the desk. Umber poc...From Publishers Weekly

This compelling stand-alone thriller from British author Goddard (*Play to the End*) opens in 1981 with the kidnapping of two-year-old Tamsin Hall and the hit-and-run death of Tamsin's seven-year-old sister, Miranda, in the ancient town of Avebury, at the foot of two massive, mysterious monoliths, part of a Neolithic stone circle. Fast forward to the present, where historian David Umber, who witnessed the double crime and later married the children's nanny, hears from now retired Chief Inspector Sharp of the Wiltshire constabulary, who has received an anonymous letter with clues to what happened that center on the identity of an 18th-century political gadfly known by the pseudonym Junius, the subject of Umber's Ph.D. research. Umber's realization that his wife's suicide years before may actually have been murder spurs him to join Sharp in pursuing this new evidence. The solution to both the identity of Junius and the perpetrator of the crimes against the children is satisfying, intelligent and refreshingly straightforward. (Jan.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.