

The Devniad, Book 7

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Viva Horza!

Changing agendas on the reader in front of his or her eyes without kindling resentment or missing a step is a delicate trick. Iain M. Banks manages it beautifully in *Consider Phlebas*. This first in a series of Culture novels seems like a straight space opera/spy thriller, but deepens surprisingly as it goes along.

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If you read Banks years ago, sorry. I'm just catching up. A Scottish author who started in the mid-1980s, since *Phlebas* in 1987 Banks has produced *The Player of Games* 1988, *The State of the Art* (short stories) 1991, *Use of Weapons* 1991, *Against a Dark Background* 1993, and *Feersum Endjinn* 1994. After reading his first, the others are all high on my list.

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Putting your hero "in the shit" is a British specialty that Banks takes rather literally from page 1 of *Consider Phlebas*. (The title is from Part IV of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in a reference you probably shouldn't consult until after reading the book.) You may recall a similar scene in *Waterworld*; Banks has a few nastier twists here, so that his hero certainly smells like trouble from the start.

Said hero is Bora Horza Gobuchul, one of a small race of Changers. With self-induced metabolic and somatic changes, a Changer can to all outward and most inward appearances become somebody else overnight.

Since Horza is a spy, this ability comes in handy at work. He's in the pay of a mid-sized galactic empire, the

Idirans. They're going up against a real superpower, an advanced humanoid space-dwelling communist utopian anarchic computocracy: the Culture.

Horza is soon enmeshed in a quite exciting quest for the book's Maguffin -- an artificial Mind, capable of controlling a new and powerful class of warship and hence sought by both sides in the Culture-Idiran war. Unfortunately, the Mind crashlands upon a Planet of the Dead under quarantine by a mysterious and threateningly potent elder race. Then stuff *really* starts to happen....

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Let's just say that *Consider Phlebas* is at the very least a fine space adventure and a good spy story. But there's more. Something dark and ruthless and death-obsessed stays at the core of the story, and of the main character. Because Horza isn't Kimball Kinnison. He isn't even James Bond. More like a LeCarre victim/hero, or Adam Hall's Quiller.

Most directly, Horza's ferocious determination to complete the mission despite humungous bad luck and truly daunting obstacles -- plus self-doubt, even self-hatred, and no great fondness for his side in the war -- calls to mind the spy in Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle*.

I mentioned obstacles. In pursuit of his mission, Horza is continually chased and thwarted by a better-equipped Culture agent; half-drowned; blown up; kidnapped by pirates; forced into an unarmed combat deathmatch while inhabiting the body of a naked, feeble old man; recruited by pirates; crashlanded a host of times; almost devoured by a cannibal cult leader; shot

at; telepathically invaded; and generally stomped on by all and sundry.

Especially by Banks. The author delights in introducing Very Large Objects -- such as the Culture's Orbitals (like Ringworlds...only *big*) -- which he lovingly deploys to pitch Horza into Very Large Predicaments. So there are a number of huge, magnificently staged set pieces, with some truly bang-up collisions and escapes.

Did I mention there are also plenty of darkly comic laughs? Horza's employers, the warlike Idirans, are three-legged theocratic elephants. The leader of the pirate crew, at first just cruel and coldly murderous, turns out to have a streak of self-justifying, get-ahead blandness reminiscent of a Nixon White House aide. And there's a kidnapped, eternally complaining mechanical who could give master-class whining lessons to both Marvin the Paranoid Android and C3P0.

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Beware of skimming along just sucking up laughs and thrills, though; the book's conclusion takes it abruptly to a level that denies any easy exit. And the backmatter, which at first appears merely a standard set of "future history" footnotes, turns out to advance the plot in a way I hadn't seen before.

An interviewer in *SF Chronicle* piqued my interest in Banks a few years back by saying this book was for her *the* science fiction novel of the 80s.

Could be. I must report I finished *Consider Phlebas* several months ago but am still thinking about it, and stocked up on the other Banksian SF offerings forthwith.

As I said at the top, Banks puts you through some interesting changes here. Especially, you keep reevaluating Horza the Changer.

He's fighting what you gradually realize are the good guys. He kills quite a few people. He even misuses someone who loves him. But in the end, you can't help feeling that, in his own bloody-minded fashion, Horza fulfills every necessary quality of mind, heart, and action to become a really satisfying hero.

Backchat on last time's APA:NESFA (# 303, August 1995)

To all

I attended my first collation with the August issue, also my first visit to the clubhouse. Great to see several of you in between cons -- and others who have been only names on the page. Of course, I feel I know you all from your writings, but you turned out differently than I expected. Taller, and more devastatingly witty and attractive.

Was Iain Banks at Glasgow? What's he like?

To Leslie Turek

Your pretty description of the unspoiled park on a point in Weymouth reminds me of a similar place next door in Hingham, on 3A just west of 228. It's called the World's End Reservation, and it's got the drumlins, the beaches, and the Boston skyline and harbor island views, with bonuses such as big meadows, a pleasant swamp -- and from various hills you can look right over the Hull peninsula to the Atlantic beyond. Plus there's that neat science-fictional name.

For a really perfect day, scramble around World's End for the afternoon, then inhale an early dinner at Saporito's in Hull, a tiny, hidden, gourmet Italian

gem that *Boston Magazine* once named the state's most romantic restaurant.

Bah! Who needs dirty old Paris or London or Scotland?

Thanks for your comments on the Honor Harrington piece. Good observation about the analogies to China and the treaty ports -- I was so busy poking fun I didn't notice. Just got *Flag in Exile*, but selflessly gave it to my sister Liz to read first. How is it?

To Thomas Endrey

Really enjoyed your con report on NASFIC/DragonCon et al.

I believe actor Christopher Lambert of *Highlander* flicks fame is French, not British. Despite his attempt at a Simian/Oxonian accent in *Greystoke*.

Others gave much harsher reviews to the con than you. But you were straight about the fiascoes and found much else to admire. I'm persuaded I might have had a good time anyway, as you so evidently did. Thanks. Looking forward to your Glasgow piece.

To Joe Ross

Great to meet you at collation. See comment above.

From your Garry Shandling quote, perhaps you're a fan of his show as I am. IMHO, one of the best comedies ever on TV. Rip Torn especially is constructing another masterpiece with his portrait of Artie, the producer.

To Ken Knabbe

Great to see you at collation. My brother Michael and I enjoyed all the hustle and bustle of the earlier part of the day with the big crowd, but also the last session for diehards, with you, us, Monty Wells, and Helen Amerault watching Walter Koenig's *Moon Trap*.

All I know about Baltimore is what I see on Barry Levinson's TV *Homicide*,

plus his wonderful movies -- *Diner*, *Tin Men*, *Avalon*, etc. I gather there are row houses, crab cakes, and a harborside QuincyMarketish place. Enjoy. And take notes for the '98 worldcon?

Congrats on beating the reaper so far at work. Seems nightwork can pay unexpected dividends.

Re your box notice on Orson Scott Card's reading at Waterstone's: I called, found this was moved to the Burlington store because of the fire at the mothership on Exeter Street. (What a tragedy! I loved that place. Saw Dorothy Dunnett read on the third floor in front of the big arched window. Magic. Hope they can restore it to its former glory soon.) Turned out I had a conflict, but I really appreciated your notice. That's part of what makes the APA so valuable. Did anyone listening get to Burlington? How was it?

To Anna Hillier

In talking to Mark Hertel and Ken Knabbe, I get the idea that there are plenty of us out here who like to blather into our word processors, but few who know which end of an illustration is up. So you make a welcome contribution.

Also I'm glad you prompted Ken to include that page of fanspeak with your question about "APA." I knew that one, but not about the "fannish intrusive" or "skiffy" or the derivation of "sercon." And what does "FN" stand for?

To Tony Lewis

Your Betty Boop connection was fascinating.

You're probably aware of an even more amazing genealogical linkage. I read this somewhere awhile back, am a bit vague on the details -- but it seems that everyone now alive is related to another famous female comic.

I refer, of course, to Lucy.

To Michael Burstein

Great to meet you and Nomi at collation. Then at Cabot's in Newton before my BCS meeting. What a treat to meet SF persons out in the real world!

I picked up the October *Analog* to read your "Sentimental Value." A good piece of work; went down nice and smooth, with several chuckles along the way. Congratulations. More, more.

Re your trip comments: Go back soon and get aboard *Maid of the Mist*. It's the peak experience of any Niagara Falls visit. I don't care that it costs money and the lines are long. Or that basically all you do is putt over close to the base of the Falls and hang there for 10 minutes wearing trashbag raincoats while the mist tries to soak you through. With the amazing white-out and the water-saturated air and the overwhelming **roar** of it all, you too will end up screaming "WOOOO-OOOOO-EEEEEEEE!" the whole time. Trust me.

I'd come to hear you speak on your neopro experiences. As someone just starting out, you'd deliver a different but still interesting slant on the business than an immortal SF god like Joe Haldeman. As long as they don't schedule you opposite him...

To resolve whether *Apollo 13* should be eligible for a Hugo, and is or isn't science fiction: age-test the voting. If you were born since, say, 1958, your worldview was formed after Gagarin's first flight in 1961, and people in space have always been part of your universe. If you were born earlier, people in space are still a little unreal for you. So we old folks get to regard *Apollo 13* as SF.

Michael, you're obviously a power user. How about an insider's article on SF/fantasy/fandom sites on-line? Where's the good stuff? What authors are on-line? Publisher sites? Isn't GENIE

losing ground? Does it offer much besides SF? Is it expensive?

I've got an ulterior motive for asking. Have finally ordered a modem from my wife's company (Motorola -- it's a 28.8 kbps 3400 Power model) and will soon be deciding on whether to sign up for Compuserve, AOL, etc., or go straight for the Internet; which Web browser to get; so on. Any advice?

To Mark Olson

Another Tarr book! All right, all right, my sister lent me *Alamut* by Tarr, and I'm finally going to get to her.

Re your wonderful account of pre-con English travels: do you jot notes as you go along, write in a journal every night, or just remember everything eidetically upon returning?

The Maritime Museum sounds great. I'm always interested in seeing "gorgeous models." And you just know the British Museum has a decent collection when a visitor tosses off incidental remarks such as "with the Rosetta Stone at the entrance."

Following your adventures in my atlas was a treat. I recognized place names everywhere you went, including Attleborough, southwest of Norwich in East Anglia. And from Austen to O'Brian, Sayers to Tey, Hill to Herriot, your travels traversed some beloved literary country.