

Bank's Inversions

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 Apr 1999

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Peter T. Cash — 23 Apr 1999, 23:20

WARNING: Mild spoilers below for Ian Banks' _Inversions_.

I was writing a post for the rec.arts.sf.written newsgroup about Ian Banks' novel _Inversions_ when I was struck by the realization that Banks' narrative technique and plot development in this book are very Wolfean. Briefly put, it's the story of two people, a beautiful (as well as female) doctor and a hyper-efficient bodyguard with a partiality to black leather and disfigured women. The reader soon realizes that one or both of these characters is not native to the planet on which the two stories took place. On the surface, it seems as though the stories are not connected, though eventually we find clues to the contrary. I don't want to reveal more about the plot, since that would definitely ruin this plot-centric book for you. I will say that some important ethical questions are addressed--in particular the question of whether the ends justify the means. I will also say, "Beware! Things may not be as they seem."

One similarity between Inversions and some Wolfe works is the Suspect Text. As in "Seven American Nights" and _Fifth Head of Cerberus_, we have reason to suspect that the narrator may not be telling the entire truth, or that the text may have suffered some corruption as it passed through the hands of others. It may even be that the text is mostly or entirely invented (a lovely notion in a work of fiction, I think). The narrative is a redacted manuscript half of which was originally (and allegedly) written by the doctor's assistant, Oelph. That Oelph was smitten by love for the beautiful doctor is one reason to suspect that he may have shaded the truth. Also, Oelph's knowledge of the doctor and of her actions is very limited. I will not tell you who I think wrote the other half of the manuscript (the one about the bodyguard), but I will say that this person was a participant in the events described by the story, and has reasons to shade or hide the truth as well.

Another similarity is the use of misdirection. Like Wolfe, Banks plants some clues that seem to point in one direction, but perhaps should not be taken at face value. Also, it is evident at the end that a whole lot of things have been going on behind the scenes, and that these goings-on may completely change our understanding and evaluation of the characters and their actions. Like Wolfe, Banks has mastered the use of ellipsis.

I do think that if you like Wolfe, then you are likely to enjoy the Banks novel. And if you read it, I'd like to discuss the details with you.

You do not have to be familiar with Banks' other novels in order to enjoy this book, though a familiarity with the "Culture" novels (e.g., _Player of Games_ and _Use of Weapons_) will help you understand some nuances that you might otherwise miss. Since I think you should go straight to _Inversions_ and read the others later, I will give you a crash course in the Culture.

Here is all you need to know:

1. The Culture is an interstellar...well...culture populated by very bright people and

hyper-intelligent artificial Minds.

2. The Culture sometimes interferes with primitive civilizations if it's necessary to remove a threat.

3. The organization that does the dirty work is called "Special Circumstances". Special Circumstances agents are usually very well armed (e.g., with intelligent "knife missiles" and other scary paraphernalia).

At certain points in Inversions, you may find the words "culture" and "special circumstances" used. You may wish to draw conclusions from this. Or you may not.

Sgt. Rock