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Anarchist Science Fiction

Iain McKay

2013

It is with a sad heart that I write this article – Iain Banks, the Scottish writer, has died at a far too early age. Reading the many interviews and obituaries, it is obvious that one of the good guys has shuffled off this mortal coil. In terms of his writings, I've only read his science fiction works and I would recommend them to all anarchist SF fans – particularly the Culture series.

To be honest, I'm surprised by how sad it makes me feel to think that there will be no more Culture books. I read *The Hydrogen Sonata* this year, which was fun (although not as fun as *Surface Detail* – particularly the wonderful chapter sketching the rise of artificial heavens and hells). I've read them all and the only one I found disappointing was *Matter* and even that was worth reading (it mentions anarchist revolutionaries!). My one quibble is that the books tend to have somewhat anti-climactic endings – Banks builds up the story, the ideas, the threat so well that when it ends it always seems somewhat less than hoped for. However, while the destination may be less than hoped for the journey makes it worthwhile.

For those who don't know, the Culture is a post-scarcity communist/anarchist utopia and it does present a fun vision of a free

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Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #60, Summer 2013

theanarchistlibrary.org

society. So in terms of SF it gives a glimpse, particularly the novella *The State of the Art* in which Culture agents visit Earth in 1977 and the obvious contrasts are made:

On Earth one of the things that a large proportion of the locals is most proud of is this wonderful economic system which, with a sureness and certainty so comprehensive one could almost imagine the process bears some relation to their limited and limiting notions of either thermodynamics or God, all food, comfort, energy, shelter, space, fuel and sustenance gravitates naturally and easily away from those who need it most and towards those who need it least. Indeed, those on the receiving end of such largesse are often harmed unto death by its arrival, though the effects may take years and generations to manifest themselves.

I particularly liked the speech by a Culture member noting that, compared to Earthlings, he was the richest man alive as he had access to the vast economic, social and cultural wealth of a vast chunk of the universe but he was also the poorest man alive as he owned none of it. Banks was clearly a man who understood what Proudhon was getting at, the core idea of socialism which recognizes the difference between use-rights and property-rights. He did, however, indicate a certain attachment to central planning (as indicated in *The State of the Art* and in an interview I read). Suffice to say, if central planning requires hyper-intelligent supercomputers to work then just as well proclaim that all we need is fairy dust as well.

Which is one of the many reasons I love Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed* – it remains my favorite anarchist SF novel precisely because it does not invoke technology much more advanced than we have and, moreover, suggests that a free society will not be perfect, will face difficult decisions, will face problems. The Culture is fun and expresses the mind-set well, but it is utopian. She also clearly understands anarchism and the anarchist mind-set as shown by *The Dispossessed* and the excellent short story "The Day Before the Revolution." If you have not read her works, do yourself

a favor and do so – starting with *The Dispossessed!* You can tell that her parents were anthropologists given the richness of her work.

Reading David Graeber's *Debt* (which I would urge you to do, as it is an important work) two things struck home. Graeber notes the poverty of imagination of most economists (who basically project a money economy backwards and then remove the money, causing them to invent a barter system which no tribal society ever had). Second, the poverty of imagination of most SF writers (particularly the "classic" ones from the mid-20th Century) whose characters are white, male, middle-class Americans in space. In terms of fantasy, much the same can be said – Conan's world is just our world's history with slightly different names.

This point was made by another one of my favorite writers, Michael Moorcock in his essay "Starship Stormtroopers." This first appeared in *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* (the anarchist movement needs something like this these days), but I first read it as part of *The Opium General* which also included a review of Michael Malet's book on Nestor Makhno. These got me aware of anarchism and when I read the introduction to *The Anarchist Reader* and the extracts on Makhno in it, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the ideas I had developed by myself had a name – anarchism. And talking of Makhno, Moorcock has him fighting Stalin in an alternative 1940s in the fun *The Steel Tsar*, the final part of his *A Nomad of the Time Streams* trilogy regarding the adventures of Captain Oswald Bastable. The first book in this series (*The Warlord of the Air*) also has anarchists in it. Both are worth reading.

I should also mention Marge Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time* and *Body of Glass*, both excellent (her *City of Darkness*, *City of Light* is also excellent, set during the French Revolution it made me read finally read Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution* – something else I would urge revolutionary anarchists to do). And it would be remiss of me not to mention Alan Moore, specifically *V for Vendetta*. Do not let the film put you off. Its best bits are those taken straight

from the book and the politics are gutted, anarchism being mentioned once – when someone shouts “Anarchy in the UK” after stealing from a shop when the totalitarian surveillance system goes down! The book itself is a classic and V’s speech to the nation is a brilliant piece of anarchist propaganda. And, no, it is not an inspiration for anarchist tactics (as some clueless Marxists suggested when the film came out) as it is, obviously, a superhero comic.

I should also mention the ex-Trotskyist (and friend of Iain Banks) Ken MacLeod and his Fall Revolution series, which I did not particularly like. I read *The Stone Canal* first, being drawn in by it starting at Glasgow University (which I attended long after MacLeod). The “anarcho”-capitalist utopia is unpleasant, as you would expect, but the end suggested that *The Cassini Division*, with its libertarian socialist utopia, would be more interesting. It was, although very much a Marxist-inspired stateless communist utopia, and unlike the rest of the series, it was the only one I wanted to know how it ended. I then read *The Star Fraction* and *The Sky Road*, neither of which appealed. Finally, Leninist China Mieville. I’ve read two of his books (*Perdido Street Station* and *Iron Council*) and they were enjoyable enough (I would say they were a bit long, but I cannot complain about others on that score!). They were very imaginative, so it came as a surprise to discover he was then a member of the British SWP! Saying that, *Iron Council* did show his SWP politics by taking Marx’s “revolutions are the locomotives of history” a bit too literally, not to mention “the anarchist passion” of one of the protagonists (who very much acts in terms of “propaganda by the deed” which does seem to be the Leninist notion of “real” libertarian tactics!). Still, Mieville seems to have made the right decisions in terms of the recent crisis in the SWP which is good news and I would by far prefer to pick up with one of his books than MacLeod (to be totally honest).

I’m sure that there are other SF and Fantasy writers and works of a libertarian nature – who would you recommend?