



The Inverted World

Christopher Priest

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The city is winched along tracks through a devastated land full of hostile tribes. Rails must be freshly laid ahead of the city & carefully removed in its wake. Rivers & mountains present nearly insurmountable challenges to the ingenuity of the city's engineers. But if the city does not move, it will fall farther & farther behind the optimum & into the crushing gravitational field that has transformed life on Earth. The only alternative to progress is death. The secret directorate that governs the city makes sure that its inhabitants know nothing of this. Raised in common in creches, nurtured on synthetic food, prevented above all from venturing outside the closed circuit of the city, they're carefully sheltered from the dire necessities that have come to define human existence. Yet the city is in crisis. People are growing restive. The population is dwindling. The rulers know that, for all their efforts, slowly but surely the city is slipping ever farther behind the optimum. Helward Mann is a member of the city's elite. Better than anyone, he knows how tenuous is the city's continued existence. But the world he's about to discover is infinitely stranger than the strange world he believes he knows so well.

The Inverted World Details

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Author : Christopher Priest

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From Reader Review *The Inverted World* for online ebook

Paul Bryant says

This is some kind of weird-ass mentalised science fiction stylee, let me tell you. People go through changes in this book, but not in a good way.

Manny says

So, we know from Einstein that space and time are both part of a larger concept that unifies them, and moreover that spacetime is curved.

Much to his credit, Christopher Priest manages to turn this observation into a metaphor which forms the basis of an imaginative, well-written science-fiction novel. There are some startling images, and he gets you curious right from the start. Why is the city on rails? Why does it have to keep moving? Why do they refer to the direction it's come from as "the past"?

It occurs to me suddenly to wonder if there's a link to a passage in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins*. One of the characters has done something truly despicable, and finally confesses it to a friend. He expects the friend to be appalled, but he just looks thoughtful. After a while, he says,

- In a curved moral space, there are no straight lines.

I have always liked this gnomic sentence. It's not out of the question that it inspired Priest's book.

Glenn Russell says

Christopher Priest, Born 1943, British Novelist and Science Fiction Writer

With *Inverted World* Christopher Priest has written a work that is beautiful, powerful and profound. These are the words of critic, scholar and science fiction writer Adam Roberts. Equally important, at least for me as someone unacquainted with science fiction, is that Mr. Priest has written an accessible and enjoyable novel. And part of the enjoyment was having my imagination challenged and expanded - I felt like I do after finishing a rigorous workout, only, in this case, my mind had the workout. Honestly, what a book, one I recommend especially for readers who do not usually read science fiction. More specifically, here are several call-outs:

NARRATIVE VARIATION

The novel is divided into five parts, alternating back and forth between first-person and third-person – our first-person narrator is main character Helward Mann, a newly initiated apprentice guildsman of the city.

Helward is pitch perfect as narrator since, in a very real sense, his story is the city's story. Third-person part two and four underscore and clarify the challenges facing Helward and his city. A most effective narrative device to drive the story and draw us into its unfolding drama.

PACE OF A MEDIEVAL-LIKE CITY

Although science fiction in that the city is of a future time and must continually move by way of a system of tracks, cables and winches toward an ideal point termed 'optimum', pacing of the day-to-day activities of the city are much akin to a city in twelfth century Europe. Matter of fact, compared to the high octane writing of Philip K. Dick, *Inverted World* reads like science fiction in slow motion, which is exactly the appropriate speed to make this story accessible, especially for those of us who ordinarily do not read science fiction.

MEDIEVAL-LIKE GUILDS

The workings of the guild system was founded by the city's founder, one Destaine. The guilds involve the specifics of surveying, laying of tracks, bridge building, securing cables and winching – all of the nitty-gritty of enabling the city to continue moving north. The guilds are exclusive and regimented and central to the overall government of the city. And the guildsmen take their guilds seriously, very seriously. All members have the mindset and work ethic comparable to members of those esteemed medieval guilds.

CONFLICT OF SOCIETIES

But, alas, the inhabitants of the moving city are not alone. There are hostile, half-starving tribes in the lands outside the city. And to add further complication, the city engineers need men from these various tribes to contribute to the heavy, backbreaking work involved in clearing land and laying track. And even more complication: the city must barter for the services of the tribeswomen. A nasty business to be sure.

JOLT OF THE WEIRD

So, we as readers join Helward moving along at the slow, methodical speed of medieval-like time for the entire first half of the novel. Then it happens: the jolt of the weird. I wouldn't want to say anything more specific here but let me assure you, as a reader you will be every bit as shocked and jolted as Helward. Such is the high quality of Christopher Priest's writing. At this point and beyond, the plot thickens, warps and bends.

PHILOSOPHY OF PERCEPTION

We are familiar with George Berkeley's "To be is to be perceived." Well, on one level *Inverse World* is a meditation on perception within the science of Einstein's theory of general relativity. Would we be upset and disoriented if we realized the way we have been perceiving the world and the physical objects contained within – the sun, the directions of north, south, east, west, the size and shape of those around us -- is completely false? You bet we would. Welcome to the bending space of an inverse world that plays with our mind.

MATHEMATICS AND MODERN SCIENCE

Even a non-scientist like myself can see the author includes enough math and science to keep nearly everyone with a background in science both challenged and engaged. As a for instance, here's a reflection from an outsider to the city: "In time a kind of logical pattern appeared . . . but there was one ineradicable flaw in everything. The hypothesis by which the city and its people existed was that the world on which they lived was somehow inverted. Not only the world, but all the physical objects in the universe in which that world was supposed to exist. The shape that Destaine drew – a solid world, curved north and south in the shape of hyperbolas – was the approximation they used, and it correlated indeed with the strange shape that Helward had drawn to depict the sun."

BREAKTHROUGH OF THE ETERNAL

At one point well into the tale, Helward reflects, "I did my guild work as quickly as possible, then rode off alone through the future countryside, sketching what I saw, trying to find in line drawing some expression of a terrain where time could almost stand still." In a way, this is remarkable since the mindset of the inhabitants of the city, including the guildsmen, is totally practical – every drop of ingenuity and effort is geared to sheer, brute material survival. Within the city walls there is no reference to religion, philosophy, literature or the arts – to put it bluntly, these people lack a spiritual and aesthetic dimension. Yet, remarkably, through a stroke of artistic creativity, Helward touches the realm of the eternal, which is perhaps a consequence of being set free from the pull of the city. One theme worth keeping in mind.

SOBER CITY

The people of the city deal with life without powerful drugs, hallucinogenic or otherwise. They are a sober lot, not even beer or wine. No Dionysian frenzy; no dancing; not even the singing of songs within the city walls. In this sense, very different from our own world. However there are a number of challenges and problems the people and the city face that will have a most familiar ring. But this book is much, much more than simply social and cultural commentary. Christopher Priest has written a work of extraordinary vision, one to expand your mind and hone your imagination, and even if you become slightly warped in the process, exercising your grey matter will be well worth the effort.

This *New York Review Book (NYRB) Classic* contains an informative *Afterward* written by John Clute, providing historical and social context for Priest's writing. This edition also has a nifty, eye-catching cover sculpture by artist/futuristic designer, Lebbeus Woods.

(Special thanks to Goodreads friend Manny Rayner for clarifying for me the scientific ideas contained within this novel before I wrote my review).

Andy Wixon says

This is a warning as much as a review - I'm sorry to say that I haven't looked at this properly in about a decade - but basically I just want to say: this book will mess with your head.

Really. The first time I heard of it, it was preceded with the words 'hyperbolically strange' and that's a better capsule description than any I can give. Basically, it's the story of a young fellow named Helward Mann (possibly a crashingly unsubtle piece of metaphor, possibly not) who's just coming of age as a citizen of his city - the opening sentence 'I had reached the age of one hundred thousand miles' may tip you off as to the weirdness of what's to follow'. And as part of learning what makes things tick around the place, Helward is sent off to supervise the ripping-up of some railway lines south of the city, and then see them shipped up north of it...

...and at this point your head sort of turns inside out, as you realise all of your assumptions about what's been happening are wrong - the technical term is, I suppose, 'conceptual breakthrough', but I just think of it as Chris Priest messing with my head. To do this so effectively once would be enough to make this a notable book, but the fact is that it happens again... and again... and again... with each subsequent expansion of your

perception of the situation as startling as the previous one.

I know, I know I'm being vague. I could have put *spoiler warning* on this and gone into detail, but why bother? Suffice to say that the book incorporates some of the most astonishing imagery in SF, and - it ultimately turns out - has a point beyond the display of pyrotechnic conceptual legerdemain that Priest manages to sustain for most of the distance.

It is possibly a little bit dry, solemn, and highbrow, like all of Christopher Priest's work, and someone has pointed out to me an allegedly serious goof, in that it shouldn't be possible for the sun to rise and set on an inverted planet. I'm prepared to give Priest the benefit of the doubt on that. I would recommend you do too. Maybe you won't like it, but you certainly won't forget it.

F.R. says

The middle section of 'The Inverted World' is extraordinary. It's going to be difficult to write about it without giving too much away, but if you want me to reach for easy and cliched shorthand to describe it then, well, it's like an acid trip. I've always liked the big desert landscapes in Sergio Leone movies and I've also always liked the way that his best films have a certain dream-like quality to them; well, the huge and daunting vistas are present, but there's also a trip of the imagination which feels like a fever dream. What makes it more astounding is that before then I thought I was reading a very 'blocky' novel. Obviously 'blocky' is a highly cerebral term used by the finest scholars to have ever studied English literature, so I'll try to make myself a bit clearer to any laymen out there. The first section reads like a story which is moving in precise, straight lines; it read like it was going to move from one block of events to another and that the whole would be those blocks piled up on top of each other. The fact that the setting is a large and domineering block-like city undoubtedly tipped me further into that kind of thinking. But what's really clever here is that while the opening section largely in and around the block-like city does feel as if it's following harsh and straight lines, it's when it leaves the block-like city that it swerves sharply from those straight lines and those blocks are smashed apart to create something other.

We are in a city called 'Earth', which – and this is by anyone's standards a tremendously striking image – is pulled on rails around the circumference of the globe. Our protagonist is Hellward Mann who was born and raised within the city and at the start of the novel joins The Guilds, the organisation that keeps the city moving through hard work, bartering and the constant laying of tracks. Most of the populous doesn't really understand why the city has to move, but as a guildsman Mann is let into the terrifying secret of what they are leaving behind on this terrible planet.

Of course there's no way back to blockiness after the middle section, so the final third of the book ups the game even more by challenging all assumptions of the book so far. 'The Inverted World' is a work of astounding confidence; a fantastically ambitious piece of sometimes surreal science fiction which truly rewards patience.

AC says

Though my knowledge of SF is obviously nearly less than zero – surpassed only on the downside by my understanding of science in general, I'm going to hazard a few thoughts about what seems (from my point of view, at least) to be wrong with this genre.

Browsing today through the Sci-fi lists of some of the GR people I follow, I'm stunned to see that even those who are big, BIG readers of this genre think most of the books that they've read are, basically..., crap (or mediocre, anyway – two and three stars abound). That's DEFINITELY not a good sign....

I think the problem is two-fold. First of all, SF – *good* SF – must be incredibly hard to write. It requires that one be a good writer, obviously – no, an excellent writer – and be able, of course, to develop wonderful plots and characters..., and ALSO have the imaginative genius of a Nabokov... (otherwise, all the fantastical material comes off, as it often does, as merely contrived)...; well, ALMOST Nabokovian, since a REAL Nabokov would be producing literature, and not genre.

On the other hand, there's a huge appetite for SF; ...hence, a supply-demand imbalance.... In other words, a lot more SF, than there are brilliant writers around... Moreover – this appetite comes heavily from that part of the brain that's (still) a 12-year old boy (when a lot of these GR reviewers admit they read this-or-that book which they say they loved so much....). This creates a problem for someone approaching this genre in maturity and without any baggage.

Also – a lot of this stuff is simply written too quickly – people writing 20, 30 books in a career shows a certainly carelessness... That sloppy use of phony-sounding names that I keep harping (let's take anything that pops into our head approach) is a sign of this...

My guess is that a lot of the best SF probably comes in the form of short stories, rather than novels, where the shorter format is probably better able to sustain the reach that's necessary... So maybe I should try to focus more on those.

Anyway – this may all be completely wrong.... So I reserve the right to look unashamedly stupid here six months from now...

And that said – this PARTICULAR book just knocked me out – flat-out loved it.

William1.2 says

I'm no great fan of Science Fiction, but this novel transcends the genre. It has a corker of a plot, which I won't spoil here. The only thing I was not crazy about was the way Priest uses dialog throughout to relay a lot of exposition. That's okay early in the novel because the narrator is a young apprentice of a guild; it's natural for him to ask questions about his new duties and surroundings. Toward the end of the book, however, the device shows its creakiness. But don't let me put you off the scent. The suspense is beautifully handled. You never quite know where the narrative will end up. I think the book's real strength is its masterful use of omission. It withholds beautifully the information the reader needs to solve everything. But at the same time one is not frustrated by that because one is borne along so expertly. Priest subtly hints at resolutions which never occur. Just when you think you know where he's going, he doesn't. Read it.

Nate D says

Reads like a simple adventure story, but with an unexpected level of cleverness and complexity, both of underlying concept and usefulness as cautionary fable. I can't entirely speak for some of the underlying physics (some "hard" sci-fi what-ifs mix well with social concerns here), but its terribly interesting and seems well-thought-through enough that I have no complaints.

Starting simply but intriguingly with a city that must constantly move through an uncertain and perhaps threatening world on tracks, subsequent iterations move us into an elegant mathematical delirium, sociopolitical questions, problems of perception and reality, then still further inversions.

Checking my recent reading again, I'm gonna hypothesize that there's a pretty specific window, maybe 67 through 74, *Ice to Dhalgren*, that encapsulates all my favorite sci-fi impulses, and which this falls into.

Bart Everson says

I've enjoyed an ongoing debate for a few years with a friend about the role of characters in literature. My friend argues that great characterization is more than just a hallmark of great writing. According to him, it's kind of the whole point.

I disagree. In the main he's right, but there are exceptions. Borges comes to mind immediately. And also this novel by Christopher Priest

When I first read *Inverted World* some thirty years ago, it made a huge impression on me. It might make an impression on you, too, if you approach it as I did, which is to say: I was young and, well, impressionable.

Also, I had no idea what the book was about. There were no back-cover blurbs to spoil the discoveries within. That's key, because the sense of mystery is one of the things I found most appealing.

(Needless to say I won't reveal any such details here. Just go and read the book if you're curious. And I hope you are.)

For thirty years I've recounted the basic premise of the book to people I knew were unlikely to ever read it. The fact that I could recall so many details for so long, while other books fade away, surely says something. Perhaps my friends were just humoring me, but nearly everyone to whom I've described the book has been intrigued if not astonished.

Therefore it was with great relish that I returned to this book when it was selected by another member of my reading club. I also felt a little trepidation. What if it did not live up to my memories?

To my delight, the book was just as I remembered it. It's a fascinatingly bizarre story. While there are people in it, I don't think anyone would call them "great characters." The building of another world is the main thing.

It was just as I remembered it — up to a point. About three-quarters of the way through, I encountered developments which I had entirely forgotten. Significant events from the latter part of the story had simply

evaporated from my recollection.

I was also surprised to see how the mysteries of the book were resolved in a rather satisfying fashion. I'd forgotten that they were resolved at all. The story in my mind was one of insoluble weirdness. I remembered the final image more or less correctly, but the details of the last quarter were mostly forgotten.

This edition includes a splendid afterword by John Clute. (How fortunate the editors had the wisdom to put this essay at the end rather than the beginning.) As Clute points out, the structure of the novel adheres closely to certain genre conventions — up to a point.

It's precisely at that point at which the narrative begins to subvert (and invert) conventional expectations that my teenage memory failed.

In other words, I read and understood the book on a very basic level when I was younger. The wonder and the strangeness of the basic premise are what stuck with my youthful imagination. The subtleties of how Priest turns the heroic structure in on itself were lost on me then, simply discarded, but it gave me something to appreciate as an adult.

Now that I've gotten the whole of *Inverted World* inside my head, I can spin it on its axis, regard it from different angles, and aver that it is indeed a thing of weirdly elegant beauty.

Bradley says

This novel is actually all kinds of amazing when it comes to the exploration of a few core ideas and more than very decent when it comes to exploring humanity, perception, and irreconcilable differences.

The story is ostensibly a coming of age story, an acceptance of one's world, and then, eventually a deep dissent without a true solution, but it comes across so easily, so effortlessly, that I'm truly unsurprised that this was nominated for the Hugo in '75 and won the British SF award in the same. So the characters are good, the story is very solid... then what, exactly, makes this novel stand out?

The concept. An intersection of our Earth with these people's Earth. Not original enough? No problem. How about an infinite space of earth along a fluid time? The city is on rails, a direct concept that is carried over to Railsea, travelling slowly into the future and away from the past, which doesn't sound so surprising except when you realize that if the inhabitants actually walk in one direction or another, they actually explore the real past or the future. Infinite space along a traversable time, the inverse of the Earth we actually live in.

But this is where the story gets interesting. There's guilds and explorers and the crossing over along very predefined instants where the two Earths meet, and then we start asking questions about perception.

It's truly much more than this, but it gives you a nice taste and it's truly a grand exploration of ideas across many points. :)

Truly a great recommendation for any SF lover. :)

Joseph Delaney says

This book is set on a world with different physical laws than we experience on earth. The explanation for why things are so is only revealed close to the end of the novel and is a real surprise!

Stephen says

4.0 stars. Outstanding science fiction novel. This is the first novel by Christopher Priest that I have read and I plan to read the rest of his works based on the strength of this novel. Great premise, good characters and a tightly woven plot that is never boring. Unlike some other reviewers, I thought the ending was great. Highly recommended!!

Winner: British Science Fiction Award for Best Novel

Nominee: Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Terran says

I found this book both fascinating and frustrating. Overall, I would highly recommend it, but with caveats.

I had never read Priest before, but I picked this up randomly when I was on travel and running out of reading material. It was shelved next to *The Prestige*, his 1996 (IIRC?) novel that was recently filmed. Susan and I really enjoyed the movie, so I thought that this Priest guy might be worth a gamble. I avoided *The Prestige* as a first cut because I wanted something new. (And I knew how that ended. At least, I knew how the *movie* version ended. Someday I'll check its verisimilitude.)

The Inverted World is reminiscent of Iain M. Banks, the more recent British SF/horror phenomenon, and of Robert Charles Wilson's *Spin*. Like *Spin* and many of Banks's works, *The Inverted World* presents the reader with an enigmatic world seen through questionably reliable eyes. It is told with a prose also reminiscent of Banks's: generally spare, but lucid and carefully drawn. Like a Sumi-e painting, Priest evokes a vivid mood and location with a chosen paucity of pen strokes.

I found the central mystery compelling -- so much so that I read most of this (relatively short) novel on a plane flight. (Granted, a transatlantic flight.) Unfortunately, I can't *tell* you much about it without spoilers, so you'll just have to trust that I found it compelling. ;-) He succeeded in misdirecting me a couple of times, and it wasn't until very late in the story that I made a close guess as to what was going on.

Yet I found the ending ultimately dissatisfying. The revelation, when it comes, is incomplete (at least, to my reading). There were certain elements that I felt were unexplained and that left highly nagging holes in the narrative. Some of this seems deliberate: like John Fowles's *The Magus*, we readers are left a bit adrift at the end, on our own hooks to make what we can of the conundrums of the text. I guess the satisfaction of such a resolution is individual-specific, but I found both of them a bit lacking. This dissatisfaction is primarily what inclines me to give this book 4 stars rather than 5.

Secondarily, I wonder a bit about the characterization. My initial impression was that the protagonist is underdeveloped, serving primarily as a foil for the mystery of the story. But on reading John Clute's effusive

afterward, and reflecting on the story a bit, I have to admit that the protagonist's flattened affect may be deliberate, rather than clumsy -- a symbol of the mystery and a reflection of the environment in which he finds himself. But that still doesn't make him *sympathetic*

Overall, a very engaging read. I will definitely look for more of Priest's books.

If you've read this as well, and would be interested in discussing it in +spoiler mode, please drop me a line.

Krok Zero says

You know how dumb-asses will describe something as being "like ___ on acid." This book is like if Philip K. Dick *wasn't* on acid. Like, if Dick had been a studious young man into engineering and physics instead of a drugged-out freakazoid. The content of Priest's novel is wacked-out and mind-bending in a sort of Dickian way, but the tone is dry and the prose is stilted (well, in that one respect it's not so far from Dick) and the details are scientific. Somehow it manages to be highly engaging and basically boring at the same time. Frankly I have no idea why NYRB reissued it, as it's really more of a curio than anything else and probably could have stayed out of print without the general reading public suffering too much. But kinda cool that it's out there, and if the description or Lethem's blurb intrigues you, you could do worse and you'll finish it within a couple days probably.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"We are a long way from Earth. Our home planet is one I doubt we shall ever see again, but if we are to survive here we must maintain ourselves as a microcosm of Earth. We are in desolation and isolation. All around us is a hostile world that daily threatens our survival. As long as our buildings remain, so long shall man survive in this place. Protection and preservation of our home is paramount."

---Destain's Directive

There is certainly the ring of Winston Churchill in this directive, but what Churchill understood better than anyone was finding a cadence which allows each sentence to build nicely on the one before it. Churchill wanted to rattle the cage of nationalism, prick their eyes with tears, and bring them to their feet.

"...We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be.
We shall fight on the beaches,
we shall fight on the landing grounds,
we shall fight in the fields and in the streets,
we shall fight in the hills;
we shall never surrender...."

Still Destain, not bad. You make a good case that the inhabitants of this city you have created are truly alone. Reliant only on one another. They are bonded together by a common goal to reach a mathematically created goal of optimum.

Are you confused yet?

If you are confused, then the author of this book, Christopher Priest, has you right where he wants you to be. I would like to tell you, fair reader, that you are going to be parachuted into this world with plenty of time to gaze upon the terrain, chat with a pretty bartender about the local scene, and wander the streets with a mystifying smile upon your lips.

The problem is... this is no holiday.

It is going to be more like being dropped into a swampy pond with your legs tucked up against your chest in true cannonball fashion. The world is a swirling blur just before you feel your puckered ass break the surface of the water.

We have a guide, a Helward Mann, a young lad just 650 miles old, who is making his way through guild training. He is made of soft clay. It will be many more miles before he is fired in the kiln and ready to assume his duties as a full guild member. He has been raised in The City, in a creche, on a steady diet of synthetic food, sheltered from the world, completely oblivious of what exists out there beyond the walls of The City.

That is about to change.

Part of Helward's guild training is achieving a deeper understanding of the function of The City. He works on the crew which lays the tracks that The City moves on. They lay track, move The City forward, tear up the track, and lay it back down so The City can move again. They are, after all, chasing the optimum, and if they fall too far behind optimum, the world they are escaping will crush them, destroy them. They use Took labor, tribal starving cultures along their route, who need food and will do whatever The City needs to help alleviate, even temporarily, their subsistence existence. They even lend their fertile women to The City.

To put it mildly, things are out of balance, and a certain level of desperation is starting to guide the decisions of The City. Morality is set aside in the interest of protecting The City, but the real question that haunts Helward and a growing number of people in The City is, are those decisions protecting The City or protecting the directives? With growing unease, Helward is starting to question everything, including the whole concept of chasing optimum.

He meets a young Englishwoman on one of his excursions away from tTe City, and the way she sees things casts even more doubt in his mind. We get to see through her eyes exactly what The City is.

"She had heard the men refer to it as a city, and Helward too, but to her eyes it was not much more than a large misshapen office block. It did not look too safe, constructed mainly of timber. It had the ugliness of functionalism, and yet there was a simplicity to its design which was not altogether unattractive. She was reminded of pictures she had seen of pre-Crash buildings, and although most of those had been steel and reinforced concrete they shared the squareness, the plainness, and lack of exterior decoration."

We accumulate more understanding right with Helward as he uncovers the warped truths, sometimes in the midst of psychedelic apparitions. We start to question along with him what is really going on with The City and with the world that surrounds it. Is this a post-apocalyptic society or something else? Why is the sun squished instead of round? What happens to the world behind them? What happens when they catch optimum? **Why? Why? Why?** Does anyone even remember the truth?

Christopher Priest has a vibrant imagination, and he certainly had me muttering to myself as I was trying to understand the concepts of this inverted world that I willingly allowed myself to be cannonballed into the middle of. I can now safely say that I can navigate The City with some level of acquired street sense. Ahh, yes, and for those travelers that find themselves in similar circumstances, do bring a supply of your own protein bars and a bottle or two of good bourbon. You will thank me later.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Apatt says

Some science fiction books are written just to entertain, some are depiction of the author's vision of the future, and some are for conveying the author's philosophical or political ideas. Occasionally I come across sci-fi books that are pure thought experiments, where the authors sets out to explore some outlandish idea to its logical conclusion. For all I know Christopher Priest had some other intent for the book but clearly thought experimentation appears to be the primary purpose.

Inverted World ("The" is added to the title in some editions) is often found in "best science fiction books" lists, it is a Hugo nominee and the winner of the British Science Fiction Association award for best novel in 1975. All well deserved accolades and perhaps the book is even a little underrated. Certainly it is one of the oddest sci-fi conceits I have ever come across.

Basically *Inverted World* is about a city on wheels called Earth that is being moved in the northerly direction on a railway track that has to be laid ahead of the city's route and removed after the city has passed to be laid down again ahead. An idea reused in China Miéville's 2004 novel *Iron Council*, but *Inverted World* is much more bizarre though as it is an entire city being moved, for unknown destination and even purpose. The "Earth" city's citizens only know that if their city stops moving they will all die. The weirdness does not stop there, the law of physics appears to work differently away from the city. People and objects become wider and flatter to the south of the city and thinner and taller to the north.

In spite of the bizarre premise *Inverted World* is really quite readable and accessible. Priest writes in clear, uncluttered prose with a linear timeline and a single plot strand. Characters are not developed in much depth but their behavior and motivation is always understandable. I can not help but sympathize with their strange plight.

The world building of *Inverted World* is exemplary, once you accept the weirdness of the book's universe it becomes a fascinating place to spend some time in. The author often throws me for a loop with the strange developments in his storyline. Once I settled into the groove of the book reading it becomes quite an exhilarating and jaw dropping experience. In some ways this book reminds me of Hal Clement's classic hard sci-fi *Mission of Gravity* as it is also set in a world where the law of physics appears to change from location to location. However, *Inverted World* is not hard sci-fi as such, there are just too many bizarre

concepts for that particular subgenre label. In fact the reality warping aspect of the book where the relationship between time and space become unreliable puts me in mind of the legendary Philip K. Dick. So if you imagine a collaboration between Arthur C. Clarke and PKD you may have a fair idea of what to expect.

Most of the mysteries are explained by the end of the book and almost everything make sense. If I have one complaint it is the rather abrupt ending which makes me feel as if a few pages have gone missing. In any case *Inverted World* is like a gymnasium for the imagination and I can not imagine a dedicated sci-fi fans not liking it. It is already on my Favorites shelf here on Goodreads.

Szplug says

Feeling really burned after *Nixonland*, I meandered about my home horde, reading some Gass and Kronenberger essays, some of Prestowitz's *Three Billion New Capitalists*, dipping here and there into Borges, Scruton, and Posner, but nothing was really *sticking* other than my skin to the back of my chair. Then I espied my good ol' shelf of NYRB Classics, so beautifully formal, so stiffly aesthetic, redolent of that pulpy pureness that engenders almost a postcoital bliss—so why in the hell not? Summer and *ciencia ficción* go together like weed and inhalation psychosis, so it's *Inverted World* for the win.

Which proved not to be much of a victory. This is one of those *Eh* books, so common, in my experience, to the milieu of science fiction—entertaining, certainly intriguing at the outset, but marred by paper-thin characters, clustered action, expository text that dissipates the sense of otherness so necessary to such fantastic fiction, and an ending that proved tricky but, ultimately, unsatisfying. What's more, I've got a few questions about the point-of-view of the City dwellers that haven't been answered in the course of the story's completion, and I believe that these questions undermine an integral aspect of the resolution provided: to wit, the *aging* effect, which I shan't get into further for fear of spoiling the plot for those yet to partake of Priest's imaginative offering, but it seems a gaping flaw that the developments at the end fail to deal with.

I still mostly enjoyed this—stories that feature dystopian futures set amidst apocalyptic wastelands inhabited by the crude and regressive remnants of a once highly civilized humanity and centered upon an isolated collective vessel of said vanished civilization's descendants—struggling to preserve the faith, mores, and technologies of the *old ways* in the face of the mutations and temptations for a newer set to override and/or supersede them—always rock my boat: in this particular case, the conceit consists of a block-sized, multi-tiered *City* winching itself northwards along a tetrad of railway tracks that are immediately disassembled in the rear and positioned anew in the front as the city structure edges along, forever chasing the elusive *optimum* whose invisible geometric parameters are of a vital necessity to keep within a few miles of the city's physical structure. There's cool physics, archaic and hierarchical governing guilds, apprenticeship rituals, female population imbalance, and nifty perception perturbations that drive the story onwards, with a few narrative shifts that cast a new light upon what is taking place. Furthermore, Priest has crafted some sly allusions to our own hypertrophied hydrocarbonic era overlaid with a spicy sprinkling of Cold War bifurcations.

So, there you have it—a book to which I bestow a somewhat tepid three-star rating. I'm sure that I've inflated its flaws in my mind, and downplayed its cleverness, but the bottom line is that my initial enthusiasm, which was appreciable, began to deflate roughly around the third part of the story, never to regain its momentum. I cannot shake the sense that I *should* be partaking of more serious fare, that such frivolous and flimsy material, whilst fine for a dude in his twenties, has been outgrown and should be consigned to my days of

bong hits, beers, and Bits-n-Bites™. How in the hell can I possibly continue to leave Proust and Powell and Kundera and Serge and Marías idling upon the shelf to follow a track-bound city turtling across the open plains? Perhaps *this* explains why my *Culture* collection—*Phlebas, Games, Weapons, Excession*—gather dust in a corner. If I actually got into them, that recently promoted literary section of my reading consciousness would berate my escapist self to no end—and if Banks' fare proved no better than *Inverted World*, it just might have a point.

Ivan Lutz says

Genijalno!!!

Mislim da nikada nisam pročitao roman koji me je tako matematički razvalio da me je naprosto bolio mozak od silnog poimanja svega što je autor naveo i opisao. Nisam ranije čitao Priestov roman - iako sam čuo da je odličan - pa samim time i kasnim za reakcijom dobrih 40 godina jer je napisan davne 75. godine. Što reći o svijetu koji je opisan rotacijom funkcije $y=1/x$? Nešto nevjerovatno. Neki dan sam barem dva sata crtao hiperboloid i ucrtavao mjesta na kojima bi trebao biti optimum, a na kojima bi trebala biti distorzivne pojave poludjele gravitacije i divlja centrifugalna sila. Po mom skromnom mišljenju, ovo je jedan od najluđih opisa nekog svijeta unutar SF literature i nevjerovatno je koliko je izučavanja dovelo do same postavke ovoga svijeta.

Priča prati Grad u svom vječnom lovu na nedostižni optimum gdje je polje gravitacije relativno normalno pa svi žitelji Grada mogu normalno funkcionirati. Grad je zatvorena tvrđava koja nema doticaja s vanjskim svijetom gdje samo pripadnici tajnih službi koje veže zakletva u vlastiti život mogu ići van grada. Zbog nedostatka vlastitih sredstava ljudi iz Grada moraju tražiti radnu snagu u kolnim selima, boriti se s pokretom otpora i podivljanim domicilnim stanovništvom koje želi uništiti grad.

Neću više govoriti o radnji. Iako je Priest zadnju trećinu knjige napisao kako bi sve razjasnio, ali težište romana bacio na ljudsku psihu i percepciju, ovo je uvrnuto remek djelo ma što bilo tko mislio o tome. Čak i sam završetak knjige je upravo filozofičan i pun sjete, te lijepo govori o tome kako trebamo braniti i boriti se za ono u što vjerujemo. Preporuka svima koji vole matematiku i fiziku.

Richard says

Wow - I enjoyed this. As literature, it's not that special - the characters don't really stand out and the writing wasn't particularly evocative. But the story makes for an excellent puzzle. Translated into stars, it's maybe a 3 1/2. I came across the author from his introduction of another book - *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham. *Inverted World* is a bit of a sci-fi mystery with a premise that's incredibly odd but also fascinating. In a run down landscape, where society seems to have fallen apart, there's a moving city whose inhabitants fanatically try to maintain their civilization. They move their city on rails that are laid, picked up, and then relaid, as the city moves northward towards a constantly moving point, called, "the optimum." Men are hired from the less civilized areas that the city moves through to help lay the tracks and dig them up again as the city continues on its course. The protagonist is a sort of scout who has to travel north of the city to survey possible routes. I'm hesitant to give away anything more, because part of the fun is trying to figure out why the city has to move, what the optimum is, and the strangeness of what is behind and ahead of them.

Jacob says

March 2009

I'll just say what everyone else is saying: this is *not* an easy one to review. On one hand, Inverted World appears pretty straightforward: Helward Mann comes of age in the city of Earth and ventures outside for the first time, where he learns that the city rests on wheels, forever rolling north along tracks. But as we learn what the city is moving towards--and what it is moving away from--the central mystery of the story becomes weird, strange, eerily convoluted, and--for me, at least--a bit difficult to grasp.

There really isn't much more I can say without revealing anything important, but i'll admit this one definitely calls for a re-read or two.

Christopher Priest created a fascinating novel here, with an amazing premise. Character development feels a bit shoddy in places, and occasionally the idea of the story threatens to overwhelm the story itself, but Priest strikes a nice balance. Overall, I'm glad I found this (understatement of the year; this was on my wish list for a long time--along with most of everything else in the NYRB library--and I think I may have let out a small squeal of delight when I found this at the bookstore), and I definitely need to read more of Priest's books.
