



Fugue For A Darkening Island

Christopher Priest

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War has devastated the African continent. Millions of homeless, hungry refugees have fled to other lands. In England, as more and more Africans arrive and set up communities, normal life soon begins to disintegrate, with the entire population irrevocably factionalized into the Afrims and their supporters; the right-wing government and its supporters; and the ever-growing British civilian refugee group, ousted from its communities by the Afrims.

Forced by violence to leave their home in London, Alan and Isobel Whitman attempt to drive to Bristol with their daughter, Sally, to seek shelter with relatives. But the car breaks down and the Whitmans find themselves at the mercy of roving bands from the various factions. Separated from and reunited with his family, forced to suffer from indignities and dangers, torn by loyalties and sympathies, Alan is unable to give his allegiance to any of the three warring groups until a final brutal decision is made for him.

Fugue For A Darkening Island Details

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Author : Christopher Priest

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From Reader Review Fugue For A Darkening Island for online ebook

Simon says

It can be hard for us living in relatively comfortable places like Britain to really relate to and understand people living in war torn African countries where normal society has broken down, the land is split into various factions fighting for control with continuously shifting territories and bands of marauding men are wandering the countryside raping and pillaging as they go leaving countless refugees displaced from their homes with no where to go.

So how better to bring this home to people than to *literally bring it home* in the form of science fiction? Priest envisages the collapse of British society caused by an extremist right wing government's bad handling of a massive influx of African refugees fleeing a nuclear holocaust in their homelands. The country collapses into civil war between the nationalists who want to drive the African illegal immigrants away and those who sympathise with their plight and want to accommodate them. Foreign powers wage war with each other by proxy by supplying one side or the other with weapons, America tries to police the situation and the UN tries to intervene on humanitarian grounds. Chaos and confusion reign.

This is a bleak story, from beginning to end, which parallels the turmoil of the protagonist's external environment with his inner, emotional turmoil caused by breakdown of his marriage. The narrative is highly fragmented, nipping back and forwards in time and so we are gradually able to build up a picture of how the situation unfolded and an insight into the man himself. He is not a particularly likeable character and is both emotionally disconnected from his family and the wider conflict, always feeling like an observer, an outsider looking on.

This is one of Priest's earlier works and quite different from anything else I have read by him. An intriguing, powerful and hard hitting story that is certainly not for the feint hearted.

Daniel Etherington says

Firstly - really, how bad is that cover image? It's not just an awful image, it's an inappropriate image, which doesn't really have any connection with the story of Fugue For A Darkening Island. I love a good vintage copy of a book, but seriously - what were they thinking at Pan when they decided to go with this image?! It's sort of grotesque-kitsch.

Anyway. I've read a few books by Christopher Priest before - The Prestige, which is superb (do not bother with the film "adaptation" though, it's poor, irrelevant and misses everything that's great about the book), and The Separation, which I just didn't get.

This one is from much earlier in his career, and while it still features a distinctive approach to narrative (in this case, achronological), it's a very dated book. It's been suggested that in genre terms it connects with the portraits of apocalyptic British social collapse presented by John Wyndham, in such books as The Day of the Triffids or The Kraken Wakes, but it's 20 years more recent. It reminded me a little more of books by Samuel Youd, aka John Christopher, such as The Death of Grass or A Wrinkle in the Skin, but again, it's more recent than them, and from, arguably, a harsher era - late into the Vietnam war etc.

It's still very much a product of the early-1970s though, and as such can be hard to read. Its premise is strong - an atomic exchange in Africa has brought about mass migrations. When immigrants arrive in a Britain, run by a strong rightwing government, violence and civil war ensue. But Priest's notion of Africans, here "Afrims", is oddly generic, and although the book isn't exactly racist, its use of terms like "Negro" and "coloured" are unpalatable.

Most of all, though, I found the book oddly unsatisfactory. Priest cross-cuts between the collapse of Britain with the collapse of the protagonist's relationship with his wife. She's got some kind of sexual disorder (it's vague; she's just not interested in him sexually), he philanders. When the social collapse comes they're separated. He tries to find her, and their daughter, again. We get vignettes of his travels with refugees, the varied communities emerging in southern England, violence, debasement, disarray. But ultimately, it just, well... ends. There is a nominally narratively significant, even symbolic conclusion, but it felt perfunctory to me.

The book features some solid imagery of an alternative Britain, and an interesting idea, but really, I would rather give it 2.5 stars. An average score.

Stephen Curran says

Having enjoyed getting my mind broken by Christopher Priest's *THE INVERTED WORLD* a few years ago I decided to go back to the beginning of his career and work my way through. His debut novel, *INDOCTRINAIRE*, turned out to be a disappointment, undercooked and zest-free. *FUGUE...*, sadly, is even worse. In the introduction to the revised edition, the author describes how he was influenced by the "cool detachment" he detected in the British New Wave, which allowed for "the description of thrilling or horrific events in unemotional language." Although the rewrite was intended to let the "anger find a voice", the dispassion remains. The characters are little more than names and genders; the technique of rapidly shifting between four different time lines succeeds in doing what it may have originally been intended to do, and keeps the reader at a distance, never letting us engage with a narrative; there is an awful lot of telling and almost no showing.

Other reviewers have done a better job than I ever could of addressing the racial attitudes on display (for the record, I think some good intentions are dangerously sullied by poor execution) but just as a piece of storytelling, I disliked it. Which is another way of saying I was bored.

Mitchell says

Fugue For A Darkening Island presents a tale of gradual social collapse that should be familiar to anyone who's ever read Wyndham or Christopher; typically the only variable in these stories is what causes the collapse. In this case it's a nuclear war in Africa sending millions of refugees flooding onto British shores.

And this is the disturbing part. For much of the book, I thought it was severely racist: a story of thuggish blacks invading the white British homeland and causing death, anarchy and destruction. It was written more than thirty-five years ago, before the UK became the multi-cultural melting pot it is today, when the idea may have reflected the concerns of many British citizens (or, alternatively, the concerns of many citizens in modern-day Australia). As the book progressed, it seemed somewhat less racist - the British government in

the story is extremely right-wing, fascist and engaged in overt genocide, and the narrator is portrayed as a hapless civilian refugee caught up between the two forces, light and dark. He sums it up in the last few pages:

In my unwitting role as a refugee I had of necessity played a neutral role. But it seemed to me it would be impossible for this to continue in the future. I could not stay uncommitted forever.

In what I had seen and heard of the activities of the Secessionist forces, it had always appeared to me that they had adopted a more humanitarian attitude to the situation. It was not morally right to deny the African immigrants an identity or a voice. The war must be resolved one way or another in time, and it was now inevitable that the Africans would stay in Britain permanently.

On the other hand, the extreme actions of the Nationalist side, which stemmed initially from the conservative and repressive policies of Tregarth's government (an administration I had distrusted and disliked) appealed to me on an instinctive level. It had been the Africans who had indirectly deprived me of everything I once owned. Ultimately, I knew the question depended on finding Isobel. If she and Sally had not been harmed my instincts would be quieted...

Priest appears to be arguing here that while we will always harbour a natural instinct to distrust the Other, defend our family and fight off outsiders, we should rise above that with our intelligence and civilisation, and hold to the better part of human nature. This is a wise argument, which is also the defining theme of *Cloud Atlas*, one of my favourite books of all time.

Yet there are certain elements of *Fugue For A Darkening Island* that still seem racist - white Secessionist forces always treat the protagonist more humanely than black militants, there's an unrealistic shallowness to the portrayal of African refugees (a fairly unified force that speaks Swahili across the board), and there's the squirming feeling I get simply from reading this scenario put into words. It's not an unreasonable hypothesis - the population of the Third World greatly outnumbers that of the First, and Europe and Africa are geographically close... though you'd think continental Europe would cop the brunt of it, rather than Britain. I would be remiss if I didn't point out the handful of Muslim riots in France, which right-wingers interpret as evidence that immigration has turned Paris into a corpse-strewn wasteland identical to Mogadishu, and that some kind of apartheid should naturally be introduced.

I digress. I don't want to accuse Priest of being racist. Science fiction is all about exploring speculative scenarios, especially with a political bent to them, and while significant parts of the book made me uneasy I'm not going to cast judgement on his decision to write it.

But, having barely cleared the political correctness board, Priest must now pass the literary merit test. And he fails. *Fugue For A Darkening Island*, allegations of racism aside, is simply not a very good book. The bulk of it consists of the protagonist scavenging, conflicting with other parties of survivors, picking up what bits of news that he can and wandering through refugee camps and ruined towns looking for his family. It's not a badly realised world, but neither is it an original or compelling one. This isn't helped by Priest's decision to tell the story in four different timeframes at once, rapidly switching between them, mixing up pointless adolescent sexual misadventures and taking us through the protagonist's marriage problems. Finally, the cold and detached tone that seemed perfectly natural in *Inverted World* does him a great disservice here, portraying the narrator as an emotionless bastard with a tediously analytical mind. *Fugue For A Darkening Island* is a fairly unremarkable book, which is why I was so puzzled at the decision to bundle it with *Inverted World*, an excellent science fiction classic.

Alex Storer says

I read the recent revised edition of *Fugue For A Darkening Island*, though Priest's new introduction promises that the story itself remains unchanged. *Fugue* is one of Priest's early novels, and while I wouldn't rank it among my favourite of his books, it does contain all the hallmarks present in his later works.

While the book deals with a catastrophic and war riddled environment, there is an underlying exploration of sex and relationships at the story's backbone (again a common theme in the author's future works). We are met with disorder, despair and violence as well as typical British two-facedness in a struggle for survival where the whole world seem against our protagonists.

In some respects, Priest was still finding his feet and establishing his style with this book - I found the storytelling a little confusing, as you're constantly switching between three points in time, and it only becomes clear towards the end of the book which is which. Perhaps a little too ambitious, but you can't ignore the bleak and brutal impact of Priest's early apocalyptic vision.

Overall a harrowing and traumatic story, depicting the country's downfall, with certain elements which only seem all the more profound and significant today.

Andrew McClarnon says

This was a re-read from about fifteen years ago, prompted by the current scenes of chaotic immigration. The book is a very bleak picture, somewhat strange as a novel. We have an unlikeable protagonist whom we follow, jumping in short passages backwards and forwards through a period of societal breakdown. Gradually we piece together his story, though his direct, unemotional rendition rather distances us from the horror. His quest ends, and he wanders off into the lawless countryside, allied to no one, with nowhere to go.

I generally enjoy Christopher Priest's books. This shares his direct, but unsettling style, but there is an incompleteness here which deprives the reader of a sense of a satisfactory read. We can only hope that the basis of his sketch, where the different responses to desperate immigration lead to a civil war, stays on the page in this most disturbing time.

Jo Bullen says

I just couldn't see the point of this. It reminded me of how the second book in dystopian trilogies seem to go: lots of wandering around with no real purpose. The rather confusing structure at least lifted the monotony of the wandering. Just boring, in my opinion, and the main character was distinctly unlikeable. I'm hoping studying this will bring out some redeeming feature.

Oscar says

‘Fuga para un isla’, publicada originalmente en 1972, es una visión oscura y perturbadora de un futuro que, desgraciadamente, podría estar demasiado cercano. Christopher Priest se sirve del protagonista de la novela

para plantearnos un posible escenario: África se ha visto asolada por una guerra atómica, donde los supervivientes, huyendo de la miseria y la radiación, buscan refugio en el Reino Unido. Los cargueros no hacen más que llegar repletos de inmigrantes africanos, alcanzando la cifra de los dos millones. Pero el estado, que en estos momentos está gobernado por un partido ultraconservador, no es capaz de buscar solución a este problema y sólo se le ocurren medidas represivas. El conflicto y la guerra civil son inminentes.

Alan Whitman, el narrador, que vive con su mujer, Isobel, y su hija, Sally, lleva una vida monótona y sin afecto hasta el momento de la llegada de los refugiados. Al poco tiempo, las casas son saqueadas y sus dueños expulsados de las mismas por los africanos y los que son afines a su causa. El resentimiento contra los negros no tarda en llegar, provocando la guerra civil. A Alan y su familia no les queda otra que buscar refugio allá donde pueden, entre personas de todo tipo. El infierno está servido.

La historia está narrada de forma fragmentaria, al más puro estilo *new wave* de la época, lo que hace que la novela sea un tanto confusa, aunque enseguida te acostumbras. Las diversas tramas van intercalándose, de esta manera sabemos de la infancia y adolescencia de Alan, de sus primeras experiencias sexuales, de su insatisfacción matrimonial, al mismo tiempo que se nos cuenta cómo fueron llegando los barcos de refugiados, y cómo es la vida posterior al conflicto, entre la barbarie.

No es la mejor novela de Christopher Priest, que tiene verdaderas obras maestras, como son 'La afirmación', 'Un mundo invertido', 'El prestigio' o 'Un verano infinito'. Se trata de una distopía, deprimente y una tanto ambigua, aunque interesante.

Mark Hodder says

Britain is in the grip of a right wing government whose harsh economic policies are causing untold hardship for the population. Meanwhile, immigrants, fleeing war, are flooding into the country, resulting in social instability and a dramatic rise in racist sentiment. Does that sound familiar? Does it sound like 2016? Yup, but Christopher Priest's *FUGUE FOR A DARKENING ISLAND* (his second published novel) was written in 1973, making it a remarkably prescient work of fiction. Here, the immigrants are Africans, and their unstoppable influx results in a three-sided civil war. There is racism, of course, and it's difficult to digest (mostly due to outdated terminology), but actually no more unpalatable than the assumptions and ill-concealed prejudices on display in contemporary newspapers, and here it's at least justified by the story. I was fascinated by the novel's relevance and plausibility, and by the fact that Priest has, since this edition, heavily revised it. I'd be interested in reading the newer version, just to see what he thought needed changing (aside from the obvious politically incorrect language). Overall, this is a traumatic study of a disintegrating country and the crumbling psyche of the lead character. Brilliant and disturbing.

Emma Victory says

Well. That was one of the most depressing things I've ever read.

Mmyoung says

This is one of those books in which the reader comes across language and imagery that is so offensive that one feels the need to warn other potential readers.

While parts of this book seem prescient:

"The emigrants headed for nowhere in particular. . . only away from Africa. They landed in due course in countries all over the world: India, France, Turkey, the Middle East, America, Greece. In the period of evacuation, it was estimated that between seven and eight million people left Africa. In the course of about a year, just over two millions of them landed in Britain. The Africans, the Afrims, were welcome nowhere. But where they landed, they stayed. Everywhere they caused social upheaval; but in Britain, where a neo-racist government had come to power on an economic-reform ticket, they did much more."

I found it nearly unreadable for the level of racism, sexism, and classism.

I am old enough to have been an adult when this book was first published and no, the context of the time does not excuse the level of racism and misogyny reflected in the writing. Throughout the entire book there is not a single completely realized female character, nor a completely realized Black person, nor a completely realized member of the working class.

Yes, I am aware that the protagonist is not supposed to be likeable but the underlying attitudes of the author pervade the entire book.

Andy Phillips says

I have been trying to find this book literally for years, but have only recently managed to do so without spending a fortune. While it had its good points, it didn't really live up to my expectations. However, this book features on a lot of lists of apocalyptic fiction, which was the reason for me buying it, and I think my disappointment was mainly due to the fact that I don't really think it belongs in that genre. I only enjoyed it enough to score 3 stars, but I think it really deserves 4, hence my rating.

The story centres around a man struggling to survive a civil war raging between three sides throughout the UK. The conflict essentially arises from a tide of African immigrants arriving in the UK as they attempt to flee a nuclear war occurring within Africa itself. It is told in a non-chronological order with three main strands - one set in the far past when he met his wife, one in the recent past at the outbreak of the conflict, and a third in the present, during the war. The tale jumps between these periods, with small passages that reveal the story gradually. It's not a brilliant book but it did keep me reading and is certainly worth picking up if you can find it.

Alejandro Gamen says

This book is strange. Not in the plot or anything like that. It's strange because beyond the **big theme** pervading it (I can sum it up as racism vs tolerance, how absurd it is to try to stay neutral and also how difficult it is to remain tolerant in the face of horror), the main character's arc is kind of... pointless.

Spoilers (maybe)

The thing is, the main character (Alan Whitman) is not only unlikeable. You want to curse him for his inaction or stupidity at different points of the story, but I get that we're supposed to feel identified with his inaction in the face of coming disaster. But the fact that he remains so non-committed to any of the different postures regarding the war, the exiles, etc, just makes it seem... a little fantastic. Not even the most mild-mannered, wimpy academic would remain aloof from the atrocities and the injustices he sees.

The recurring flashbacks (or rather, back and forth jumps) try to show the time before, during and after the deluge of refugees that spawns the civil war and its horror. But it doesn't work, mainly because we spend too much time watching Alan stroll through his earlier life, focusing on women he pursued and trying to explain his distance from his wife. Is it really important to show he had a misguided sense of romance? No, I don't think so. Also, his wife is barely above two-dimensional, and the poor daughter of the pair (Sally) doesn't even get a couple of lines of dialogue. All of her actions are narrated, stripping her completely of agency and personality. That, to me, is the most egregious offense in the book. If some people mistook this story as somehow being racist, well, they're just bad readers. What it is is a truly sexist book. It's all about Alan, so we don't even care about what happens to the mannequin-like wife and daughter. For a book that's supposed to make us care for their plight, it fails horribly.

A shame, because I liked "The Affirmation" so much. But this is Priest's earliest works, so I'll just read the rest and see if they achieve the heights of that other book.

Steven says

Good book but what the hell at the main character. He's such a fence sitting little bitch that I felt like he deserved every bad thing that happened to him. These foreigners are on his soil and take his house and eventually his wife and daughter and he doesn't do a fucking thing. He doesn't even KNOW if he wants to fight them. He's in turmoil over it, which makes him one of the most pathetic protagonists of all time. Very English.

Alex Torres says

I was a teenager when I read this and remember enjoying it very much. Haven't re-read it since but I wonder if it's slightly racist. Might re-read to find out.
