



Brasyl

Ian McDonald

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Think Bladerunner in the tropics...

Be seduced, amazed, and shocked by one of the world's greatest and strangest nations. Past, present, and future Brazil, with all its color, passion, and shifting realities, come together in a novel that is part SF, part history, part mystery, and entirely enthralling.

Three separate stories follow three main characters:

--Edson is a self-made talent impresario one step up from the slums in a near future São Paulo of astonishing riches and poverty. A chance encounter draws Edson into the dangerous world of illegal quantum computing, but where can you run in a total surveillance society where every move, face, and centavo is constantly tracked?

--Marcelina is an ambitious Rio TV producer looking for that big reality TV hit to make her name. When her hot idea leads her on the track of a disgraced World Cup soccer goalkeeper, she becomes enmeshed in an ancient conspiracy that threatens not just her life, but her very soul.

--Father Luis is a Jesuit missionary sent into the maelstrom of 18th-century Brazil to locate and punish a rogue priest who has strayed beyond the articles of his faith and set up a vast empire in the hinterland. In the company of a French geographer and spy, what he finds in the backwaters of the Amazon tries both his faith and the nature of reality itself to the breaking point.

Three characters, three stories, three Brazils, all linked together across time, space, and reality in a hugely ambitious story that will challenge the way you think about everything.

Brasyl Details

Date : Published May 1st 2007 by Pyr (first published January 1st 2007)

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From Reader Review Brasyl for online ebook

Ralph Palm says

This is the first novel I've finished in 3 months. I'm glad it was good. Here are the bullet points:

THE GOOD

-Masterful handling of the exposition problem. For example, two characters talking about science, while a third listens from another room. The third character is not a scientist and doesn't fully understand what is being discussed. Furthermore, he has been/wants to be in a romantic relationship with the others, and he feels jealous or hurt that he's being excluded from the conversation. All this characterization is just the setup for a page and a half of talk about quantum theory. In a lesser book, the two scientists would have simply lectured the third. Virtually all of the exposition in the book is handled in this subtle and layered way (except a bit at the end.)

-'World Building'. Artfully establishes the setting, as one might expect in a good SF treatment of an alien world. Except the world being 'built'

is Brazil (present, future, past--in that order). Adapting SF conventions to a contemporary setting is clever (reminded me of William Gibson's latest novels--which is a very good thing.)

-MINOR SPOILER: Treatment of 'parallel worlds' trope. To hear it described, you might think 'oh, I've seen that before'. But again, much subtler and more finely wrought. Especially where the different worlds 'bleed into' each other. For example, a proposed television show in one world is a show people actually watch on another. No attention is really called to that fact--you just have to notice that the titles are the same. And there are lots of these crossovers. The title is another one, but that's not explained until the very end.

--The books three protagonists are a TV producer, a street hustler, and a Jesuit. This sounds ridiculously cheesy but in the end completely works. This is one of those books where the craft of its execution is far greater than can be expressed by any summary, review, or blurb.

THE LESS GOOD

-An amount of sex/drugs/violence that some might find off-putting. Except for some bits toward the end, it's mostly referenced rather than depicted. Personally, this stuff doesn't really bother me, but I recognize that sentiment is not universal.

-Unravels a bit at the end. I guess McDonald wanted to have at least one point where he explains 'what it all means', in case a reader missed the earlier clues. Personally, I didn't think it was necessary and distracted from the overall tone, but I can see why he had to do it.

-Lots of Portuguese. There's LOTS of Portuguese vocabulary worked into the prose. Usually, you can work it out in context and there's a short glossary in the back, but not all the vocab is included. I thought it helped with the 'world-building', but I would totally understand if some people found it distracting.

THE SHORT

-Highly recommended if you are, like me, a fan of 'literary-grade' science fiction. I really liked the last book of McDonald's I read (Desolation Road). Having read Brasyl, he is now firmly on my must-read list. By 'must read', I mean 'must read when a new book is realized, ASAP', otherwise known as 'books I will purchase in hardcover'. Given my lack of resources, this is a very short list: William Gibson, Iain Banks (Culture novels only*), and now Ian McDonald. I still have some more of McDonald's back catalog to go through. Now if I could only read more than one novel every 3 months...

[*=I only read Iain Banks Culture novels not because the others aren't good, but because he's so prolific I wouldn't have time for anything else. Plus the 'hardbacks+poverty' problem.:]

Knjigoholi?arka says

Hej, hej, malo je falilo da zacvrku?em kako je knjiga sjajna, odli?na, legla mi je k'o budali šamar, baš u pravom trenutku!

Ali poslednja dva poglavlja (od ukupno osam) su me smorila do pla?a. Šteta, odavno nisam zveknula pet zvezdica nekom štivu.

Ivan Lutz says

Roman je intelektualno bravurozan, istražiteljski fenomenalan, pa ?ak i dikcijski superioran naspram velike ve?ine romana danas. McDonalda izrazito poštujem, ali ?ini mi se da se moram opravdavati ako mu opizdim dvojku jer ju je po meni zaslužio. Unato? fenomenalnom pristupu u sve tri pri?e(meni je najbolji dio sa sve?enikom koji je po svemu prosta kopija Apokalipse Danas), roman je zbijen i zbr?kan te težak za ?itanje. Kroz dosta konfuznu radnju kao da nas je namjerno vodio konfuzno, te digresije u pisanju mi smetaju, a pogotovo kada se kona?no nešto po?ne doga?ati, izme?u dva dijaloga zna pro?i i ?itave dvije stranice opisa brazilske kulture, povijesti ili ne?ega sli?nog.

Znam i to da se nekome ne?e svidjeti što mi se doslovno površno svidio Brazil, ali me bogovski umorio.

Radnja ne te?e lagano, nego sa zadržkom i kao da se i sama provla?i kroz brazilsku ljepljivu prašumu.

Na fiziku nemam prevelikih zamjerki, ali zamjerki imam na multiuniverzumsku teoriju na kraju romana(nigdje ne spominje brutalno ogromnu energiju da uop?e možemo skakati tamo amo); ali shvatio sam što je htio posti?i i vjerujem da je i sam McDonald zadovoljan što je napravio.

Stilski je svoj do kraja, cini?an, konfuzan, ponekad precizan, a re?enice mu nisu te?ne i pitke nego traže koncentraciju, i moram to re?i, ponekad pretjeruje s opisima i metaforama. Ne, nije ni blizu Blade Runneru u tropima, nit atmosferom nit porukom i iako ovo slovi za najbolji njegov roman, meni je Bespu?e daleko bolji komad literature - ?ak i 3-4 puta bolji.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted here illegally.)

Regular readers know that I ended up lucking into a cool situation this month; I just happened to be able to get my hands on half of the ten books nominated this year for either the Philip K Dick Award (recognizing the best experimental science-fiction novel of the year) or the Hugo Award (acknowledging simply the best SF novel of the year, recognized by most as the most prestigious award in that genre). And as I've made my way through these five novels this month, as a long-term fanboy who has sorta lost touch with the genre recently, I've been reminded once again of one of the biggest and most bitter ironies of genre work in general; that there is just the tiniest difference between a simply okay project and a super ridiculous insanely great one, a difference sometimes so subtle that the author in question isn't even consciously affecting it, but was rather was just born with the ability or inability. And that's ironic, of course, because one of the well-known stereotypes about genre work is that it's easy to get published there; and that's true to a certain extent, or at least to the extent that it's easier for amateurs and fans and beginning writers to get published within genre fields, but it's also true that it's much harder to stand out within a genre than in traditional "mainstream literature" (which I argue is a genre unto itself, but that's a whole discussion we'll table for today), the lessons

for being in the top of your field very subtle ones that are difficult to understand.

I can think of no better example of what I'm talking about, in fact, than the Hugo-nominated *Brasyl* by Ian McDonald, so far easily the best of the now three nominees I've finished and reviewed. Because it's brilliant, frankly, *it's freaking brilliant*, as dense and trippy and plain entertaining as William Gibson in his '80s heyday, even sharing some of his stylistic tricks and plot devices, but also set thoroughly in the modern world and reflecting the exact cutting-edge issues that we all are dealing with in a rapidly globalizing 21st century. But now that I sit down to write my review, I find that I'm having a hard time in my head detailing exactly what about this book made me go gaga, versus the other two award-nominated SF books I've now reviewed (Jon Armstrong's *Grey* and Sean Williams' *Astropolis: Saturn Returns*); because frankly, all three books are thorough genre projects through and through, any of which can be held up by any fan in public while saying, "This is what science-fiction is." So what makes one so much better than the others, in my opinion? What are the tiny little things that make hardcore SF fans go crazy in the first place?

So let's start, then, with a pretty important detail, one that non-fans might not even realize is a hallmark of the genre; hardcore SF fans generally like their books to be kind of confusing at first, a game-like puzzle full of terms they don't yet understand, a plot we're in the middle of without knowing the background yet, and they like to be only slowly pulled into the necessary exposition of the story over the first half of that novel. And that's something I can honestly say is a big difference between *Brasyl* and the other two novels mentioned; that by picking his unknown technology carefully and referring to them lightly, he doesn't overwhelm the reader into throwing down the book in confusing disgust twenty pages into it (something I've heard online reviewers exactly say, for example, about *Saturn Returns*), but by setting it in a hot and sweaty Rio de Janeiro full of actual Portuguese hipster slang terms, he provides that exact sense of confusion and puzzle-solving joy that hardcore fans like. (Psst -- don't forget there's a glossary at the end.) And by actually setting the story among three different time periods of Rio's history at once (the 1730s, 2000s, and 2030s), without explaining until halfway through why he's done so, he also provides the game-like element so prevalent in such fellow great genre projects as *Lost* and *Heroes*.

And in fact, this brings us to one of the first big things about *Brasyl* to remind me of Gibson's work; McDonald is masterful at portraying cutting-edge technology as it might actually be deployed in the sweaty, dirty world of the working-class, a world where cheats and shortcuts are created as often as can be gotten away with, all of it wired together McGuyver-like with baling string and a couple of quantum processors. And in fact by setting two of these stories in 2006 and 2032, he essentially lets us have our futuristic cake and eat it too: he at once gives us a world just like our own but much cooler (think Gibson's *Virtual Light*), full of shirtless kids on motorbikes getting their secret directions from their GPS-enabled cellphone; plus a bonus "world of tomorrow" story (think Gibson's *Neuromancer*), where laptops have been replaced by 'iShades' and there exists huge giant floating city-states that simply circle the globe, circle the globe (which of course is yet another Gibson trademark from his '80s work). And by setting that third story in the 1700s, McDonald *also* manages to throw a steampunk tale in there (think Gibson's *The Difference Engine*), a tale that manages to stick a European "natural philosopher" (proto-scientist) in the Brazilian rainforest with a sword-fighting Catholic monk, both of them transporting an ornate wood and brass device for determining the exact circumference of the Earth once finally reaching the equator, and while tracking a rogue missionary who's gone crazy and started his own Colonel-Kurtz-style indigenous spartan cult out in the middle of the jungle. Sheesh!

In a lesser writer's hands, such material would simply fall apart so very quickly, would become just such a pulpy mess that literally would crumble in your hands; but McDonald, see, has actually made a whole career now out of this exact type of material and these exact types of stories, with a slavish fan base that already exists and a whole pile of awards and award nominations under his belt now. And indeed, what he is precisely most known for as a fantastical author is setting his stories in third-world situations, and making a majority of their plots hang on such details as "refugee cities" and the gray market that makes such million-person communities work; his most famous series, for example, the "Chaga Saga" from the '90s, at least

partially deals with the AIDS crisis in Africa, while his 2004 cult hit *River of Gods* is set in mid-21st-century India. This is what makes McDonald *so* unique, his stories *so* special, even while reflecting the best of what the "cyberpunks" from the '80s had to say as well; he knows exactly how to wrap up cutting-edge concepts and items into a filthy, sweaty, very very real human milieu, knows exactly how to both take you there mentally and put a *Matrix*-like "Q Blade" in your hand once you arrive, without you breaking into laughter at the absurdity of it all.

Because like I said, McDonald takes you down some strange roads by the time *Brasyl* is done, and this is ultimately much more than a simple "the kids of tomorrow all have cool cars" tale; as mentioned, there's a very good plot-based reason that these three stories are told in such different time periods, all of them simultaneously, which I won't get into in any more detail today, but let's just say it's no accident that I've made several references to quantum physics in today's review. Make no mistake, *this is a hard SF story*, as satisfying to any hardcore fanboy or girl as to a general audience member wanting to read a fascinating story about cutting-edge squatter communities and obsessions with World Cup soccer. And this of course is yet another little detail that hardcore fans take seriously, that so many authors are always accidentally getting wrong, of trying to find a balance between the fun understandable elements and the "hard-science" part of it all. Make it too simple (which McDonald almost does here; you'll know what I mean when you read it yourself), and suddenly the genre fans are crying out in Comic Book Guy glee, "Worst! Teleportation! Explanation! Ever!," while make it too complicated and you suddenly have nobody *but* Comic Book Guys reading. (I mean no offense, by the way, to all you Comic Book Guys; I just mean that that isn't a large-enough audience to sustain an entire career.)

This is for sure a difference between *Brasyl* and the other two SF books I've now reviewed this month; *Brasyl* treads this line well, feeds you just enough background information while leaving as much as possible up to the imagination, while both *Grey* and *Saturn Returns* had a lot more problems trying to find this balance. I have to admit, this book was a real treat to read, something that got me excited about science-fiction in a way I haven't felt in years. I think it has a very strong chance of winning the Hugo this year, and I'm now highly looking forward to getting caught up on his past work. It comes highly recommended today, to both existing fans of the genre and people who usually don't touch science-fiction with a ten-foot pole.

Out of 10:

Story: 9.9

Characters: 9.1

Style: 9.4

Overall: 9.6

Oscar says

Con sus tres arcos argumentales, Ian McDonald lleva a cabo en 'Brasyl' malabarismos con tres pelotas, pero antes de llegar al final del camino, y por ende del espectáculo, McDonald no puede evitar que alguna de dichas pelotas se le caiga al suelo, por lo que recibe un aplauso de circunstancias, y no el esperado aplauso unánime. No es bueno lo que hacen muchos editores, eso de comparar el libro presente con otros libros que se han convertido en verdaderos clásicos. En este caso, se habla en la portada de "un universo tan complejo como el de 'Los Cantos de Hyperion' de Dan Simmons". Y, por supuesto, 'Brasyl' pierde en la comparación, ya que Simmons es capaz de mantener siete pelotas (las de los siete peregrinos de 'Hyperion') en el aire, haciendo filigranas, y sin que se le caiga ninguna, por lo que al final no puede esperarle más que una sonora y merecida ovación.

En el año 2006, en Río de Janeiro, conocemos a Marcelina Hoffman, ambiciosa productora de *realities* que

rozan lo obsceno, y que son considerados televisión basura. Pero Marcelina, tiene una nueva idea para su próximo proyecto, relacionado con Barbosa, el famoso portero que no logró parar el balón en la final del Mundial de Fútbol de 1950. Al mismo tiempo, la vida de Marcelina se está viendo afectada por hechos inexplicables que no hacen más que ponerla en problemas.

En el año 2032, en São Paulo, conocemos a Edson Jesus Oliveira de Freitas, un joven favelista, que al conocer a la *quantumeira* (especialista en computación cuántica) Fia Kishida, se verá envuelto en mil y un problemas. En este arco argumental se juega mucho con la física cuántica y algunas de sus posibilidades aplicadas tanto a ordenadores cuánticos como a múltiples universos, pero tratados desde una óptica nada o muy poco hard. Ian Macdonald aplica más bien la fantasía a la física cuántica que la ciencia ficción propiamente dicha.

En el año 1732, también en Brasil, conocemos al padre jesuita Luis Quinn, al que se le ha encomendado la misión de encontrar al Padre Diego Gonçalves, que ha estado construyendo su pequeño reino personal en pleno Amazonas, y pararle a toda costa. En el viaje le acompañará el doctor Robert Falcon, que debe realizar ciertos cálculos. Esta parte de la historia recuerda en parte a ‘El corazón de la tinieblas’, de Joseph Conrad, y es de las más interesantes.

Y estas tres tramas, irán convergiendo según se acerque el final de la novela, que a mí personalmente no me ha parecido el más satisfactorio. La estructura de la novela suena demasiado a la obra maestra de David Mitchell, ‘El atlas de las nubes’. Igualmente, las partes sobre física cuántica no llegan a cuajar del todo, como sí sucede en otros libros con la misma temática, como por ejemplo ‘Cuarentena’, de Greg Egan.

Ian McDonald ha escrito una novela exótica y atractiva, con muy buen ritmo, a veces realmente trepidante, pero que para mi gusto se queda en algo que podría haber sido mucho mejor. McDonald escribe muy bien, pero esta historia me ha parecido interesante sin más, y no creo que mereciese una relectura.

Kemper says

The summary on the jacket for this book says, “Think Blade Runner in the tropics.” That’s wrong. It’s not Blade Runner, it’s more like if you took Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash, Baroque Cycle trilogy and Anathem, the basic plot from Apocalypse Now and some concepts from a crappy Jet Li movie called The One and put them in a blender and mixed them up to come with a unique story, you’d start to have an idea of what this book is like.

There are three parallel stories told in different time frames in Brazil. In 1732, Jesuit Father Luis Quinn is sent on a mission to stop a rogue priest who has gone Colonel Kurtz out in the jungle and is enslaving any native who won’t accept Jesus. In 2006, Marcelina is an ambitious reality TV producer who wants to find a goalie who cost Brazil a World Cup in 1950 and have a televised ‘trial’ to publicly humiliate the man. In 2032, Edson is a cross-dressing entrepreneur who hustles to make a buck and dodge the constant government and corporate surveillance that is part of everyday life. When Edson meets the beautiful Fia, who is a hacker with a new type of quantum computer, a conspiracy that crosses multiple parallel universes is revealed and all three of the characters have parts to play.

Epic doesn’t begin to describe the scope of the story, but by focusing on a few relatable characters, McDonald keeps the story tight. And he also came up with some bad-ass sci-fi concepts here. Quantum computers that exists in multiple universes and all work to solve problems that would have taken eons to complete. Knives with quantum blades that can cut through anything with a flick of the wrist. Break a blade

by hitting another quantum blade, and it'll fall through dirt and rock until it gets to the earth's core. Or how about a tattoo that functions as a computer on your skin?

If any of those ideas made you giggle with glee, then check this book out.

Rachel (Kalanadi) says

While waiting for Ian McDonald's *Luna: Wolf Moon* to come out later this year, I decided to dive into his back catalog with *Brasyl*. I sure thought *Luna: New Moon* was flavored with Brazilian culture (the main family are Brazilian immigrants to the Moon), but *Brasyl* is, well, **all** about it!

Three people in three times are sucked into the dangerous world of quantum computing and parallel universe conspiracies: reality TV producer Marcelina in 2006, flamboyant go-go-go! entrepreneur Edson in the 2030's, and the Jesuit priest Luis Quinn in the 1730's. Marcelina's life is being destroyed by a duplicate of herself while she tracks down a famous soccer player to humiliate him in a new TV program. Edson gets tangled with the illegal activities of quantumeiros in the back of a van and the appearance (and disappearance) of the quantumista Fia. Father Luis is headed up the Amazon to bring the Jesuit priest Goncalves back to the fold and runs into an isolated tribe that uses the poison of a frog to see the multiverse.

How will they meet? Are they past, present, and future, or are their three Brazils parallel worlds?

I found *Brasyl* very difficult to read. It's infused, **saturated**, with Brazil: the tastes, smells, colors, bodies, flashing lights, beating music, glitz, and poverty of Brazil. So many Portuguese terms are used that I had to flip to the glossary in the back every sentence or two to look up a word, which makes for a glacial reading pace. This book has **atmosphere** from its long passages of thick description. On the one hand, this is beautiful and admirable, because how much effort did this take to write?! But it also obfuscates the action. So much attention has to be paid to the descriptions that the small embedded actions are lost.

I thoroughly enjoyed Edson's story. The man is fascinating, with multiple identities, multiple lovers, a business of his own! He's bisexual: how thrilling that this isn't erased or looked down upon, but presented so matter-of-factly! He even has a female alter-identity. Edson knows who he is in this dazzling crazy world.

I'm not sure what really pulled this book down for me, other than the intense concentration needed to parse the language. It was wildly different from other quantum computing science fiction I've read. In fact, the story seemed more about Brazil than quantum computing. I think I'm excused for thinking about it that way, because there are far more words devoted to describing Brazil and its people and its history than the actual plot! And perhaps that is what I disliked.

When I finished the final page, it also occurred to me that I had a sense of unease and discomfort about the way Brazil is presented here: there's a gaze that lingers on the naked bodies, the skin colors and tans, the effects of the pound pulsing music, that fashions Brazil into a hotspot of heat and sensuality. Fascinating. But is this reality or exoticism? I'm still not sure.

Chloe says

As constant (some may say *obsessive*) readers, we have all come to know our individual tastes rather well. We know what books will hit our literary G spots and which will leave us feeling cold and dirty, like the regretful afterglow of a one night stand. We learn to savor those reads that are a “sure thing,” that guaranty a night of debauched pleasure. This is how it was when I first heard of the publishing of Ian McDonald’s *Brasyl*. There is no doubt that I am a scifi junkie. Few books scratch my itch for excitement and intelligent reflection like the worlds of the future, especially those books set in the near future which concern themselves with the cultural and social ramifications of our constant technological advancements- those books that help us to make sense of the present by extrapolating current trends into a fantastic and extreme future. Of course, what is to happen once you’ve read everything that the godfathers of cyberpunk (William Gibson and Bruce Sterling) and the scribes that they have inspired (Neal Stephenson, Richard K. Morgan, and Pat Cadigan) have written?

If you’re anything like me, you scan the newly released books like a hawk in search of new authors breaking ground in a subgenre that many claim is outdated. This is how I first came across Ian McDonald’s *River of Gods*, a rollicking cyberpunk tale set in India as it celebrated its centennial anniversary as a nation. A week or so later, having summarily disposed of that magnificent work, I heard of his follow-up, *Brasyl*, set among the favelas and shanties of Rio de Janeiro. Still, knowing how necessary it is to hoard a sure thing like this, I kept putting off actually reading it until I could stand it no longer and my imagination fairly cried out for a book like this one. They say that pleasure delayed is pleasure heightened and, if this book was any indication, this is an axiom well worth repeating.

Set in three very different eras, *Brasyl* forms a wondrous triptych of vibrant detail and a glimpse into the Brazil that was, is, and could be. In the past we are introduced to Father Louis Quinn, a Jesuit priest sent up the Rio Negro to investigate whether one of his brethren has given in to Kurtz-ian impulses. The Rio of 2006 gives us a glimpse into the life of Marcelina Hoffmann, a producer of reality shows that even Fox would hesitate to air and erstwhile capoeira enthusiast whose search for a missing Soccer legend turns up a doppelganger of the most nefarious sort. Most exciting of all, though, is the Rio of 2032, as introduced through up-and-coming favela talent manager Edson, who has the poor luck to fall in love with a black market quantum computing specialist. McDonald weaves their stories together with careful precision, never revealing too much but just enough to keep the reader frantically turning pages.

While the plot is exciting and the descriptions of quantum realities are probably the most readily accessible that this lay mind has ever read, what makes this book so special is its setting and McDonald’s skill at evoking crystal clear images from only a few words. More than any of the protagonists, it is Rio who is the star of this book. McDonald describes everything perfectly: the capoeiristas practicing in the shadow of the Jesus on the mountain, the walls built up to keep the residents of the favelas from spreading their violence into Rio-proper, the early morning beaches populated only by saggy-skinned fishermen and sun-worshipping cariocas, the fevered excitement and communal pride that grips the nation during the World Cup, even the giant trash mountains of ewaste (discarded computer equipment, etc.) that is continuously picked over by families of scavengers in search of circuit boards to be melted down for their trace amounts of copper and gold. Early in the book Edson attends a baile (think dance party) and the way that McDonald describes the art of turntablism- the dropping in of a rhumba rhythm, how the addition of a guitar squeal at the right minute can amp the audience to ever-higher peaks of joy- is more spot on than any other description of DJing I’ve ever come across in fiction.

So I loved this book. It hit every tried and true trope of cyberpunk without ever feeling derivative or dull and, most of all, it brought to life a region of the world that I have been endlessly fascinated with in recent years. Music lovers who have been enjoying the sounds of baile funk that have been trickling up from our Southern neighbors in the form of groups like Bonde do Role and CSS or the mixes from Diplo will thrill to the playlist of great and hard to find music that McDonald appended to the end of the book. Also, I loved McDonald’s adoption of old-school newsgroup terminology to refer to modern extended circles of friends and acquaintances as alt-dot-families. While a lot of the science fiction that I’ve attempted of late has left me

feeling a little put out, *Brasyl* has exceeded even my wildest hopes and crafted a story so eminently enjoyable that I'm already thinking of reading it again.

Dennis Hearon says

Wow ! What a marvelous book. Isaac Newton once observed that he stood on the shoulders of giants. So too does Ian McDonald stand on the shoulders of giants such as Asimov, Clarke, Stephenson and Gibson. It is also truly refreshing that a modern author can accomplish a work of such staggering imagination in under 400 pages. Like Stephenson's *Anathem*, this is a book that requires some effort to truly appreciate. As a liberal arts major, I found the concepts relating to quantum mechanics and McDonald's use so many undefined Portuguese and Spanish words challenging if not outright daunting. Nevertheless, this did not diminish my appreciation and enjoyment of this literary banquet. The story starts a little slow but builds to an entirely satisfying conclusion. I especially enjoyed the story arc relating to 1733 Brazil with its intriguing parallels to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The character development added so much to what could have been otherwise a sterile exploration of some truly thought provoking ideas. I wish this book had been written 20 years ago when my much younger self would have been sent into paroxysms of rapture. Okay, I guess I have gushed enough about how much I enjoyed this book. I am so glad I stumbled upon it !

Tijana says

Vrhunski SF. Velika pohvala što je uspeo da tri (uglavnom) odvojene linije zapleta vodi tako da nijedna ne preuzme prvenstvo niti deluje zanemareno. Sjajni likovi, jezi?ki savršeno (bonus za odli?an odli?an prevod Gorana Skrobonje), divna demonstracija ?injenice da tvrdi SF može da funkcioniše i u okruženju osamnaestog ili ranog dvaesprvog veka. Jedina zamerka je malo previše otvoreno-otvoreni kraj, ali dobro, to su li?ne preference zbog kojih mu ne bih skinula zvezdicu.

Jason Wyatt says

Extremely difficult intro, largely due to the language barrier (and my own stupidity). The author uses large numbers of Brazilian words that would take whole phrases to describe in English since they don't have direct translations, so I ended up figuring out most of them purely through context. The reason I'm stupid is because there was a brief dictionary in the back of the book that I failed to notice until I finished it.

Besides that, you definitely still need to give this book some time to draw you in. There are 3 different threads running throughout the book, all set in three different time periods in Brazil (past, present, and future). Until you make it through at least one cycle of all three, you haven't really gotten a clue where the author is going.

After that, though, I was pretty-well sucked in. Some pretty-standard sci-fi fair in here with some new ideas as well, all with an interesting concept. The blurb on the book compares it to *Blade Runner*, and I would agree in reference to the future-parts of the story line, at least in tone and style. The past/present sections, though, throw you for a loop until it finally clicks as to why they're important.

My one complaint is honestly with the ending. While I consider it decent, I didn't like the final inclusion of a

twist. It's possible that I had simply gotten my head set in one direction and, when the author swerved on me, I wasn't ready for it. Still, it seemed contrived to me and unnecessary. Not enough of a complaint to ruin the enjoyment of following the characters through the rest of the book, though.

Alexandra says

I fell madly in love with Ian McDonald with *Dervish House*, so I pounced when I found *Brasyl* at the bookshop the other day. Given his other novel is *Cyberabad Days*, he's an author who is clearly very keen to explore non-traditional settings for SF written in English - in a way that, as far as I can tell, is as true to those non-Anglo locales as he can be.

(NB: isn't the cover a riot? There's a mask, and a lizard, and tail feathers, and stars, and circuitry, and a butterfly...)

As with *Dervish House*, I am uncomfortable with making sweeping assertions that this book does not take an inherently white/colonial perspective, because I just don't know - I'm a naive Anglo and I've never been anywhere near South America. However, as with the other book, I can confidently say that it feels sympathetic: it's not simply showing good bits or bad bits or exotic bits, but gives the flavour of a genuine society; and it's not simply set in Brazil because that's a good selling point (I don't even know if it would be). Brazil is absolutely integral to the story, and set anywhere else this would be a very different book. The ethnic mix of the population, the cultural results of that mix - especially the language - the history of colonisation and, in one narrative stream especially, the fact of the Amazon itself are all entirely necessary. And the result is that, perhaps especially to a foreigner like myself, an enchanting and sometimes repellent society with intriguing familiarities and disturbing incongruities.

On the topic of location, one of the marvellous things McDonald does in his worlds is make them contained - they are all that is required. The Rio of 2006 and the Sao Paulo of 2032 are all that is necessary for the stories to proceed. No foreigners, no other locales, are required for an elaborate and intricate story. The only other time other countries are mentioned, basically, is in talking of the soccer teams who have beaten or been beaten by Brazil. (The section set earlier in time does have some foreigners, but we only know them once they get to Brazil.) That I noticed this insularity is perhaps indicative of my earlier reading, in particular, often having involved characters who go to exotic locations to have their adventures, but rarely interact with the locals (except perhaps to sleep with; Clive Cussler, I am looking particularly at you).

Brasyl has eight sections and three separate storylines following through them. In each section, the contemporary story - set in 2006 - comes first. Next the reader is taken to 2033, and then finally to the 1730s. Each storyline is, on the surface, quite different, although there are similar themes bubbling along under the surface, and there are occasional, intriguing, cross-over references. In 2006, we follow Marcelina, a hard-living and hard-nosed TV producer for a TV channel known for making outrageous programmes. Her life isn't an easy one; fads and trends rule, careers are made or broken on the whim of the ratings, and the effort to keep up with Society requires enormous energy and grit. And the occasional back-stab. Existence goes on as normal, until suddenly it doesn't, and Marcelina discovers someone is messing with her life. And things do indeed get messy. Marcelina is a fascinating character. She's good at her job, which makes her quite unpleasant much of the time. The reader is allowed occasional insights into her mind: her love of capoeira, the martial arts/dance; the way she interacts with her real and her "alt dot" families; the way she views everything as potential TV. However, we are never allowed very close to her; she remains essentially unknowable - as she is to most of those around her. I loved reading her story, but I didn't feel as... empathic as I might have. Interestingly, for all that it's set in 2006, I have no idea how true to the Rio of today this story is; the city, the TV, the telenovelas, the obsession with fashion all sound entirely plausible, but could as

easily be that slightly exaggerated 'tomorrow' that McDonald does so nicely in Dervish House and the 2030s part here.

The 2030s narrative follows Edson, budding entrepreneur, who accidentally gets involved with some rogue quantum-computer scientists. In many ways, this story helps to explain some of what is going on in the other two, and why these seemingly disparate stories appear here together, because quantum mechanics and quantum entanglement are at its heart. Edson's interactions with quantum theorists allow McDonalds to posit multiverse theories and explore the repercussions of the idea that the multiverse might in fact be a quantum computer. The info-dumps are skilfully places, always in an appropriate context, an ever so heavy that they detract from the narrative itself. Edson is a more approachable and likeable character than Marcelina; he's more innocent, despite his background, and more open, despite the difficulties of his life. While he shares a "seize any chance that comes along" attitude with Marcelina, he seems to do so with more... joy, really, and less malice. We also see Edson fall in love, and I think that has a humanising impact. Edson's story revolved around the trouble he gets into thanks to quantum computation, but really it's all about relationships: with his family, his neighbourhood as a whole, the bewitching female scientist and the his long-time male lover. The futuristic elements of this section are subtle and believable, epitomised by the Angels of Perpetual Surveillance keeping track of everything and everyone via RFIDs, which I can well imagine some politicians leaping at; and I-shades, which are exactly what they sound like. I think Edson may have been my favourite character.

In many ways I found the eighteenth-century plot the most confronting of all. Still set in Brazil, this is a time of European conquest - military and cultural. It follows Luis Quinn, a Jesuit sent on a quest straight from the pages of Heart of Darkness, and Robert Falcon, a French scientist. There are crazed Europeans and slave raids, dreams of building in the jungle and mysterious tribes, and over it all the immense, imponderable bulk of the Amazon rainforest that, by the 21st century, barely plays a part. I really enjoyed this section, despite its unrelenting acknowledgement of the horrible actions undertaken by Europeans, and it did require some faith that McDonald would actually connect it to the other two narratives. Quinn, on a most difficult task, is the sort of man the Jesuits wanted: deeply committed to his God and to the task at hand. Falcon is the classic 18th century opponent: Christian, but foremost a scientist, obsessed with calculations and the natural world. Together they discover some brutal truths both about the jungle and the actions of the other Europeans in the area.

All three narratives do indeed have links, although they really only become obvious towards the end. There are some similarities in theme that tie them together - trust, friendship, quest, and Brazil, most obviously. I would recommend each story on its own merits even if they didn't coincide, to be honest. It's a wonderfully written book, with intriguing characters and a really marvellous sense of place.

ambyr says

From a sample size of two, I deduce that what McDonald is interested in writing and what I am interested in reading have very little overlap. Despite the frenetic pacing, fights, explosions, sex, and drugs, I mostly found this book, well, boring. It's not a bad book. It's just not targeted for me. I enjoyed some of the quantum computing and many-worlds metaphysics, but just as that started getting interesting, the book ended, leaving me with no sense of pay-off for the many pages of action-without-purpose I slogged through.

Ian James says

This book leant heavily on Brazilian culture and vocabulary in an attempt to make it more interesting. The science was not at all convincing to me: the description of being able to see into parallel worlds was not at all believable, and it made no sense that the poison from a frog conferred the ability to do so in humans, just because that frog's retina is supposedly capable of detecting a single quantum of light (and is thus able to see into the quantum world). Also, just because you can see billions of parallel worlds does not mean you can predict the future, find out answers to questions in your own world, or be able to travel in time. It made NO sense, and it was not explained at all. There was some gibberish about quantum computers somehow causing a sort of gateway between parallel worlds, but this unconvincing psuedo-scientific explanation was muddled up with the hallucinogenic or mind-altering psychic power "explanation" in other parts of the book.

The book was frustratingly filled with nonsense, and the Brazilian colour was not enough to compensate.

It makes no sense that this book was nominated for the Hugo, nor that it actually won the British Science Fiction Award for best novel in 2008. It reall wasn't that good.

Bradley says

So, you know that author who constantly comes out with deep characterizations and even deeper worldbuilding, flitting about from one huge idea concept to another but always keeping the narrative tight to the MC's? The one who wrote Luna and it's sequel, not to mention an earlier favorite Desolation Road? Or Dervish House?

Yeah. Him. He who dazzles with amazingly detailed characterizations in wildly descriptive settings, be it a luna colony done as the Godfather, or an extended future Mars colony quite UNLIKE KSR's.

Have him turn his sights to Brasil of the present, future, and past. Anchor it with a Jesuit priest, a sordid sensationalist reporter, and a complex minor thief in the future, then WRITE A NOVEL JUST LIKE CLOUD ATLAS.

Seriously. Not the particulars, but the style. As in, sprawling locales and amazingly drilled-down MCs, make you wonder where the hell the novel is going or whether these weird mysteries are MEANT to go anywhere for 3/4ths of the book, and the slam us with the big reveal that ties everything together in a really huge SFnal way.

Just like Cloud Atlas.

Want tons of alternate realities, quantum knives, organizations that kinda police it all from above, or massive quantum hacking, mysticism from remote tribes doing the same thing, or chasing mysterious doppelgangers ruining your life?

Well, this novel is right up your alley.

Well written, dense as hell, rich the way you think god in nature must be rich, and taxing on your patience every step of the way. Or maybe that's just me. The payoff is much later in the novel. The rest of the time I just have to sit back and try to enjoy the ride. It's always interesting, but it's nearly impossible to predict.

Nommed for Hugo back in '08. Rich, but not exactly my best cup of tea. :)

Bob Rust says

Brasyl (2007) intricately exploring the Brazil of the heart-of-darkness past the present and the Quantum-Computer-transformed future though plot concerns are perhaps here foregrounded too heavily.

Pablo Flores says

Is the term "epic" overused? Maybe, but I cannot say any less about Brasyl. The book starts out at a nice pace and picks up speed along three parallel scenarios (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and the northeast of Brazil, transitioning into the Amazon) and three timeframes; though common themes are suggested, it is not until well into the book that these threads begin to converge. The finale in the jungle of trees echoes the greater finale among the many worlds of the multiverse. Local colour is conspicuous and at times a bit forced, but for the most part the author paints a fascinating picture of past, present and future Brazil: in reality as in fiction, a continent-sized expanse of terrible deeds, of oppression, of constante change, of growth, heat, rot, flow and (maybe?) rebirth. For those of us fortunate enough to have visited, Brasyl brings back memories (and Google StreetView queries!): a wealth of saudades.

tim says

Edit. Everything is edit, cutting down those endless tapes of footage to meaning... Take a sample here, another there, put them together, smooth over the joins with a little cutaway. A new reality.

A simple enough recipe for achieving life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Throw into the mixture a handful of spices: quantum computers, quantum knives, quantum tattoos. Sprinkle in some Gaian Goddesses and robotic surveillance angels; add a dash of Cosmic Christ. But don't let anyone know that the secret ingredient is a little known golden frog capable of watching with its amphibian eyes the passing of one photon of light at a time, therefore seeing through the veil of our one world to the true overlapping nature of the multiverse. Go ahead, try it. One lick of the golden toad won't hurt.

I like this book more now that I've finished reading it. While immersed, I felt underwhelmed at times, bored almost. The ideas are fantastic, though. The place descriptions are astounding. Humid, strange, and vivid. So why was I often impatient to be done with reading this? Perhaps it was because more than a few characters were fragmented and underdeveloped. Or that a couple of the story lines left something to be desired in the end.

Despite my inability to overlook what I perceived as *Brasyl's* flaws, Ian McDonald succeeded in piquing my slumbering interest in Brazil (Brasyl, Brazyl, &c., ad infinitum)—with all of its/their endlessly overlapping cities and crowded favelas, its/their flooded, fecund jungles, and the quantum-leaping reality police fighting to keep the true secret of the universe from being known—that there's not just one, but an infinite number of connected universes containing all possibilities. Because once this knowledge is discovered, anything is possible. One such outcome: the editing of time to create new realities.

Sandi says

Ian McDonald is one of my favorite authors. He probably has more imagination than any other author out there. He creates futures that are totally bizarre and makes them completely believable. In my opinion, "Brasyl" is one of his best novels. It's been nominated for the Hugo award and deserves to win.

"Brasyl" explores the concept of multiple universes in a whole new way. The end was a total surprise. I will definitely be re-reading this book.

Fuchsia Groan says

Tras leer la magnífica *Camino Desolación* tenía muchas ganas de sumergirme de nuevo en los mundos creados por McDonald. Sumando mis altísimas expectativas a las excelentes críticas y numerosas nominaciones a distintos premios, el resultado ha sido un pequeño chasco.

Mi entusiasmo inicial no tardó demasiado en evaporarse. La prosa de McDonald me parece excelente, los mundos creados y la ambientación son de sobresaliente, pero aquí ni la historia ni los personajes me han cautivado. Es más, en pocos momentos me han llegado a interesar.

La novela se divide en tres arcos argumentales, todos magníficamente ambientados en Brasil.

En 1732 acompañaremos por el Amazonas al jesuita Luis Quinn y al doctor Robert Falcon en la búsqueda del Padre Diego Gonçalves, quien ha estado fundando su propio imperio. Esta ha sido mi parte favorita, la más interesante sin duda.

Más recientemente, en 2006, en Río, acompañaremos a Marcelina Hoffman, productora de telebasura, mientras se ve envuelta en todo tipo de situaciones extrañas.

Y por último, en el futuro (2032, São Paulo) nos veremos inmersos en una trama plagada de física cuántica y universos paralelos (siendo más fantasía que ciencia ficción, al estilo MacDonald) al lado de Edson Jesus y de la quantumeira Fía Kishida.

Sé que suena interesante, y la novela no es mala, desde luego, pero creo que esta ocasión el autor no consigue enlazar los hilos de manera coherente.
