



The Algebraist

Iain M. Banks

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It is 4034. Humanity has made it to the stars. Fassin Taak, a Slow Seer at the Court of the Nasqueron Dwellers, will be fortunate if he makes it to the end of the year. The Nasqueron Dwellers inhabit a gas giant on the outskirts of the galaxy, in a system awaiting its wormhole connection to the rest of civilization. In the meantime, they are dismissed as decadents living in a state of highly developed barbarism, hoarding data without order, hunting their own young & fighting pointless formal wars. Seconded to a military-religious order he's barely heard of—part of the baroque hierarchy of the Mercatoria, the latest galactic hegemony—Taak has to travel again amongst the Dwellers. He is in search of a secret hidden for half a billion years. But with each day that passes a war draws closer—a war threatening to overwhelm everything & everyone he's ever known.

The Algebraist Details

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Author : Iain M. Banks

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From Reader Review The Algebraist for online ebook

Dan says

Probably my least favorite of Iain Banks' scifi novels. The writing is uneven, and in need of editing. There are just too many of those short Point Of View chapters from people about to die. Tom Clancy does it a lot, Iain, don't be like Tom Clancy.

On the plus side, most of the book involves wandering through a anarchist society, made possible by abundance, and long arguments about how any anarchist society could work.

There's an interesting contrast between the protagonist's dangerous but free traipsing through an anarchist society of Gas Giant dwellers in search of a long lost secret, and the massive space battles (complete with orbital bombardment and mass death) going on in the background story between two hierarchical, expansionist empires.

Craig Dean says

Let me start by saying Banks is a master author. He creates a galaxy and populates it with living creatures of substance and depth. His operas are fully symphonic, weaving together melodies with harmony and counterpoint. Nowhere is this more evident than in his SciFi, and the Algebraist flaunts his prodigious talents to the full.

However, even his characterisations don't hide what, for me, is an irredeemable plot. The main reveal is so obvious and telegraphed that I found myself groaning when it was flourished in the final act with all the panache of a children's party pseudo-magician. At the risk of mixing metaphors, I felt like I was a pantomime, lacking the energy to scream "it's behind you"! And the side plot involving the nefarious acts of his spoiled friend is so easily removed as to be completely redundant, similarly the Archimandrite is a carefully crafted villain, with absolutely no relevance.

But how sumptuous a tableau; the master has captured his subject with perfection - it's his subject that is utterly dull and uninspired. For anyone else it wouldn't be worth even 2 stars, but for Banks? There will no doubt be those who think I am mad, but no, the emperor really has no clothes...

Stevelvis says

THE ALGEBRAIST by IAIN M. BANKS -- An extremely rewarding though very complex read rating a 10 on all the scales of complexity due to writing style, amount of characters to follow, and the number and variation of cultures and species. The fast-paced action takes place on several planets all around the universe, includes one major character with quite a few other important characters including several totally alien species and several hierarchal structures involving religion and politics. It also includes a big emphasis on science and technology and a sense of humor. Amazingly entertaining but best for the Advanced SciFi reader. Of all the books on this list, this is the one I want to re-read the most due to its challenging epic nature.

THE ALGEBRAIST by Iain M. Banks

I understand why this book was nominated for the Hugo award for best novel, and I also understand why it didn't win. The author takes an action-packed wartime space drama and makes it more complicated with a writing style in which he starts chapters with dialog without telling you who is speaking until half a page later. He also uses the paid-by-the-word style of writing by using 5 or even 10 phrases to describe something totally unnecessary when 1 or 2 would have sufficed. There is complex technology and a complex military hierarchy, actually several complex military hierarchies between the galactic empire, a sadistic totalitarian upstart, an anarchistic group of rebels, and an ancient very alien species of beings who inhabit the giant gas planets similar to Jupiter. There's also room for love and back-stabbing.

That said, don't let me stop you from reading this book. In fact, I recommend it very much and will search out other books by the same author because I like a good challenging read. The characters are rich and the plotline is actually believable while some of the technology and alien beings are unlike any I've read in other books. The action is wild, non-stop, unpredictable, and even humorous with strange landscapes which range from one end of the galaxy to the other. At 430 pages in small print trade paperback it's a bigger read for the more accomplished reader, especially those familiar with speculative fiction.

Stuart says

The Algebraist: Endlessly creative, perhaps overly so

I've had *The Algebraist* on the shelf for quite a few years, patiently waiting its turn in the reading rotation. But since Iain M. Banks is most famous for his post-scarcity AI-dominated *Culture* space opera series, I suspect his non-*Culture* novels often get less attention. In particular, *The Algebraist* is a fairly hefty tome, so I hesitated to tackle it. However, I discovered an audio version on Audible UK (many of his books are strangely unavailable on Audible US) and was about to buy it before I saw that dreaded term scorned by all audio purists...ABRIDGED. Then I realized that the entire thing is only 7hr 42m long and narrated by Anton Lesser, not the go-to narrator Peter Kenny who does all his *CULTURE* books.

I'm sure that many readers already consider audiobooks a short-cut vs the real experience of the written page, so an abridged audiobook is practically like reading the Cliffnotes for Shakespeare. Well, I can't deny that viewpoint, but then again I figured that this would be an easy way to squeeze in this book now, rather than two decades later when I am retired, peacefully reading books in the den of my comfy house next to the lake with the dogs curled up near the fireplace.

Anyway, long story short, I gave the audiobook a whirl, and basically it was a lot like my experience of listening to Banks' *Excession*. Such a complicated galaxy-spanning story, chock-a-block with strange and ancient alien races, numerous space-faring factions all battling to recover an incredibly -powerful weapon/codex/black-body artifact. Once again, dozens of different characters clamor for the reader's attention, each more baroque, eccentric, barbaric, and ironic than the next.

The Dwellers are the headliners of this gig, an ancient and powerful slow-moving race that populates gas giants throughout the galaxy, and count their lifetimes in the millions or billions of years. They are rarely bothered with the quick races who may blossom, proliferate and wither away in the proverbial blink of an eye. They accumulate knowledge in an enthusiastic but haphazard manner, building up scattered libraries that may house powerful secrets for those willing to delve deeply enough.

Fassin Taak, a Slow Seer at the Court of the Nasqeron Dwellers, is one of those humans who spends his days plumbing their treasuries of knowledge. One day he is surprised to be drafted by a faction of the

Mercatoria, the galaxy-spanning empire of the moment. Apparently he accidentally has unearthed some clues to the legendary Dweller List, a compendium of rumored wormholes created by the Dwellers in ancient times, which would revolutionize the political and economic structure of the Mercatoria empire. Suddenly a host of different groups is converging on Nasqueron, seeking to grab this list first, including the Archimandrite Luseferous of the Starveling Cult, a larger-than-life villain who revels in cruelty and will stop at nothing to seize power.

Stop me if you've heard this one before. Fortunately, Banks is a very skilled practitioner of his own high-energy, intellectually-playful brand of space opera. He can spin off a seemingly endless font of new ideas, worlds, and battle set-pieces like a neutron star, and still sprinkle an ample helping of ironic observations on various political and social institutions. He is very adroit at combining whimsy with serious topics, weaving these speculations into a complex and action-filled plot, and filling everything with crazy little details. So it's never a dull ride, though you can easily fall off the wagon if you aren't paying attention.

However, as was the case with *Excession*, this sometimes overwhelmed my ability to connect with the characters, who are so numerous that they get very little screen time. Add that to the fact that I was listening to an abridged version of a very-detailed story, and it was inevitable that narrative continuity would be harmed. I've read many reviews of the *The Algebraist* that essentially say that there were too many details, too much creativity, and not enough authorial discipline to deliver a focused plot and message. Lots of fireworks and cleverness, but not enough emotional engagement. Though I'm only basing my opinion on an abridged sample, I'd have to say the sounds about right. If I was willing to devote more time to it, I'd like to read the whole book in hardcopy to give it proper attention. Because even a lesser Banks work is still sufficiently entertaining to be worth reading. Someday, in that house by the lake...

Adam says

There is a lot here. Arguably too much. Banks probably puts a plot thread too many in this book of endlessly inventive but excessive creation. The middle section is one of my favorite things he has ever done. The Dweller culture is more decadent and selfish version of his own Culture, but possibly funnier bringing to mind Moorcock's end of time adventures and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. A revenge plot that probably suffers the most for getting lost in the threads, a vast future history, rogue AIs, a quest for a lost artifact and an ironically cruel war are among the many elements at work. The parts with the main "villain" (moral and political ambiguities abound in this book) are I think intentionally tongue in cheek and poke fun at a pulpy Ming The Merciless style villain (and get to show of Banks's love for the grand guignol). So, in the end messy but recommended.

Apatt says

As I write this review Iain M. Banks has passed away about three weeks ago. It makes me sad that our genre has lost another great writer. So I picked *The Algebraist* to be my "tribute read", alas I find that prefer his Culture novels. That said *The Algebraist* is not at all shabby.

The Algebraist (correct me if I'm wrong) is Mr. Banks' only non-Culture sci-fi novel, it does have some of the magnificent madness that you get in his Culture books but after reading it for a while I started wishing the Minds or the drones would crash the party, the "Banksness" of the writing style just goes so well with the Culture elements. OK, no more mentioning of the Culture from this point!

In a nutshell the story mainly concerns the search for a secret system of wormholes which makes FTL space flight possible (through space shortcuts). The setting is a universe where humanity have spread across the galaxy and coexisting with various extraterrestrial species as part of a galactic empire called Mercatoria. The most interesting feature of this universe is the existence of an extraterrestrial race called The Dwellers who are basically too cool to bother with joining the Mercatoria empire because they have existed for billions of years and have (presumably) seen it all and done it all. These Dwellers are a wonderful invention, they are partly a satire of certain type of people who have been around too long to bother with the unwashed masses. Due to their practically immortal life span they live in "slow time" basically doing everything at a slow speed relative to how humans (a Quick species) live. They also have many quirks and weird traditions in their culture which make them memorably *alien* aliens which is always a major attraction of sf books, space operas especially. I remember reading a review that criticized the aliens in this book as "too anthropomorphic" I guess the reviewer is not too familiar with humans and should endeavor to get out more. In any case the Dwellers are the latest addition to my list of favorite fictional aliens (not that I have a list of non-fictional ones)

Another concept I really like is the different types of human, aHuman and rHuman (advanced and remainder Human), the aHuman were kidnapped thousands of years ago from a "pre-civilised" human race and sort of uplifted and cultivated to create a separate strain of human to keep the original humans (rHuman) from becoming too uppity when the latter has achieved interstellar travel. There are numerous other clever ideas such as the description of life on a gas giant, the gascraft, a personal size vehicle that enable humans to live on gas giants, the ideas are just brimming all over the place as you can expect from Banks. However, I did not find the Algebraist to be an easy read, the pacing is uneven and the main characters are not as well developed as in other Banks books that I have read (some of the aliens are better developed than the protagonist). There are too many side characters that pop in and out without leaving much of an impression. I quite like the subplot about a woman out to avenge the death of her friend but it flits in and out of the narrative and does not seem well integrated into the main story. Banks also liked to play around with the narrative timeline with sudden switches into flashback without any warning, I guess he just liked to keep his readers on their toes. The patient readers should sort these things out without any trouble though.

As with all Banks novels witticisms and literary flourishes abound, here is a passage that made me laugh and manage to convey the idea of Quick and Slow species particularly well:

"(The Dwellers) could get bored with the species that came to talk to them, and by selecting only those numbered amongst the Quick they ensured that they would never have to endure for too long a time the attentions of people they only looked forward to seeing the back of. Just wait a bit and – in a twinkling of an eye by Dweller standards – their troublesome guests would evolve out of nuisancehood."

Also this Dweller's comment about humans

"Your passion for doing each other harm never ceases to amaze, delight and horrify!"

In conclusion I can recommend this book with some reservations because of the uneven pacing. For Banks neophytes I would recommend starting with the awesome The Player of Games instead.

At least I can confidently declare that I have never read a bad Iain M. Banks book.

R.I.P Mr. Banks.

Oscar says

‘El algebrista’, del desgraciadamente fallecido Iain M. Banks, es una novela de ciencia ficción que no pertenece a su ciclo de La Cultura. En ella se nos cuenta cómo el observador Fassin Taak, dedicado a observar la vida y costumbres de los Moradores, una especie cuya edad se calcula en billones de años, es requerido para una importante misión. El sistema Ulubis y los habitantes del planeta gaseoso Nasqueron están en peligro, y la mercatoria le encarga que investigue cierta información referente a una mítica red de portales estelares. A partir de aquí, Fassin se verá envuelto en una serie de persecuciones y aventuras, a cuál más inverosímil.

Esta novela, que ya es extensa de por sí, todavía se me hizo más cuesta arriba. La historia tiene puntos positivos, como ese universo plagado de razas alienígenas inteligentes, que da una idea de la heterogeneidad de culturas que podrían pulular por la galaxia. Pero en el aspecto negativo está el ritmo extremadamente lánguido de la historia, que tarda una eternidad en arrancar y cuando lo hace estás francamente saturado. Para mi gusto hay mucho relleno, mucha paja que no va a ningún lado y no ayuda al avance de la historia. Me gusta la paja, siempre que sea entretenida. De las novelas ambientadas fuera de La Cultura, esta es la más floja. En este sentido, me sigo quedando con ‘El Artefakto’ (Feersum Endjinn) y, sobre todo, ‘Contra la oscuridad’.

Me parece una injusticia que Banks haya fallecido sin haber ganado nunca un premio Hugo o un Nebula (si es que estos premios son indicativo de algo), cuando tiene novelas realmente excelentes. Como Iain M. Banks: ‘Pensad en Flebas’, ‘El uso de las armas’ o ‘Inversiones’. Como Iain Banks: la perturbadora ‘La fábrica de avispas’, la interesante ‘Una canción de piedra’, la transgresora ‘Cómplice’, la inclasificable ‘Pasos sobre cristal’ o la genial ‘El puente’. Banks todavía tiene obras en castellano sin publicar. Espero que no se demoren y acaben traducidas y publicadas.

mark monday says

a non-Culture sci-fi adventure from Banks, one whose intriguing major topic is the relativity of morality. the aliens are pretty much humans in alien form - not much attempt to convey a truly alien viewpoint. but it is all fascinating nonetheless, and many of the characters - alien and otherwise - are sympathetic or fearful creations. expansive world/universe-building, per usual. some real narrative surprises from beginning to end. the novel's Villain with a capital V is almost a parody, as if this character and his eventual purpose in the novel were specifically designed to mess with reader expectation.

in the twists and turns of the protagonist's backstory and motivations, i was able to see the genuine sympathy that the author has for those who fight against authoritarianism. it is also interesting to compare the perspective on AIs between this novel and the Culture novels. in this universe's demonization of artificial intelligence, Banks is able to fully illustrate the horror (and stupidity) of demonizing and oppressing *any* community.

what i didn't enjoy were the many descriptions of an alien species' habit of enslaving, tormenting, and killing their young - but hey maybe that's just me. i understand the rationale for its frequent inclusion, but gosh it was appalling and left a sour taste. they were some pretty loveable aliens and then it all had to be ruined by those noxious activities! ugh. well, i suppose that's just Iain Banks the stridently *moral* moral relativist... he will never let me have my cake and eat it too. so annoying! but in such a good way.

this review is a part of a longer article on Iain Banks posted on Shelf Inflicted. that article also includes a self-indulgent rant regarding a blog post that i found to be infuriatingly moronic; my apologies in advance.

Edwin Priest says

The Algebraist is my first get together with Iain M. Banks, and boy, does he seem all over the place in this book. It seems that he just can't decide exactly what he wants to say in here. And it gives me some consternation about his other books.

There was much to like in this book. There were richly imagined aliens and worlds. There was a race of "slow" beings that live billions of years, impacting their culture, morals and interactions with the rest of the universe. There was a rather interesting plot premise involving a hidden set of travel portals and a Dan Brown-esque quest to discover them. There was certainly a lot of potential in here.

Unfortunately, it all got rather lost in the mayhem and unevenness. The plot became choppy and erratic, dragging at times and at other times racing, ultimately to the books' rather abrupt and anti-climactic ending. Fassin's quest began to feel like a nonsensical wild goose chase. The characters in particular came across as inconsistent and goofy, failed attempts to mimic the creative absurdity of Douglas Adams, or maybe Terry Pratchett, the Dwellers in particular. The evil villain, Luseferous, was a caricature, evil just for the point of, well, being evil and other than being the device needed to create tension, did very little to actually enrich the story.

And overall, I couldn't figure out if this was a hard-edged, space-opera science fiction story, or something entirely else. There were on the one hand space battles, wormhole portals, and weapons of mass destruction, and then on the other hand yacht races and open air homes with furniture and curtains, on Jupiter for goodness sake. Everyone wandered around in goofy esuites (or whatever they were called) as if taking an afternoon stroll or a jaunty trip to the beach. It was all very inconsistent and confusing.

So in the end, after high hopes, I had to give this book a disappointed 2-1/2 stars, which I generously rounded up to 3, just because of its' rich potential, albeit unrealized.

Kevin Kelsey says

I've been reading through all of Banks' novels these last few years, mostly focusing on The Culture series and working my way outward through his other "M." novels, and into his "non-M." writing. This is my fourteenth Banks book, and my second non-culture "M." novel.

Banks' had such an interesting way of writing his novels so that the real story unfolds in the background the whole time, mostly hidden. He did this in Consider Phlebas, and again here in The Algebraist. The foreground story is of course, engaging, and action-packed in the typical space opera sense, but the more interesting story for me, is what's happening on the periphery of the main narrative, and it of course deals with Artificial Intelligence, human rights, religion, and the nature of reality.

I have a little headcanon that allows The Algebraist to be a Culture novel, even though officially, I know that it isn't. My evidence is very thin, and involves something so tropey that I'm glad it just can't be. It definitely reads like a Culture novel though, which is probably why I enjoyed it so much more than Against a Dark Background. I really struggled with that one, and I'm very pleased that The Algebraist felt like a return to form.

The prose isn't quite as good as some of his other work, but it's serviceable, and I can overlook what it lacks in poetic quality in favor of the interesting concepts it explored.

Gavin says

This is the reason I read science fiction. Banks creates multi-level space opera in a universe filled with humans and aliens. He has put a huge amount of creative imagination and must have had tremendous fun bringing this universe to life.

Shawn Davies says

Whilst the Culture hangs over all Iain M Banks writings, this is a departure to a fully realised place in time and space that lets Banks create and historically delineate another Space Opera reality, and he does this spectacularly well.

The Dwellers have to be one of my favourite creations, insouciant aliens in a galaxy teeming with interstellar life, civilisations, empires and technology. In the midst of this crowded galaxy our hero Fassin Taak must seek the secret of the Dwellers, but his is really the endless struggle of an individual against the state. The rights of the one against anyone else, freedom and justice in a galaxy that maybe advanced but is still beset with conflict and tyranny.

To this end the Dwellers seem to offer an alternative, barely registered by anyone else and which might only work on their terms, but it is the closest thing to a harmonious civilization.

Fassin Taak's quest, spanning the Galaxy, visiting a xenomorphia of creatures and beings, deep into the Dwellers Gas Giant planet and to the outer edges, gives Banks the opportunity to display his brilliant imagination, his verve for set pieces, his subtle humour and virile horror and gore. This is an endlessly entertaining journey in the company of creatures and beings you do not want to leave, in a confusing and crowded Galaxy you wish to explore further.

Sandi says

I keep hearing about what a great author Iain Banks is. This book was a book of the month last year for a reading group I belong to. I didn't like it. It had so much potential, but it was simultaneously underwritten and overwritten, if that's even possible. Probably my biggest beef with the book was the liberal use of the f-word. Now, I'm not a prude and God knows that the use of the f-word has become very commonplace. When my husband is watching Mafia movies, I always tell him that the over-use of the f-word is the screenwriter's way of adding a lot of words without really saying anything. I think it's even more of a crutch to use the word in novels set in the far future. Thirty or forty years from now, people will read this book and think it's so locked in the first decade of this century. It would be like a book from 1968 using the word "groovy" throughout.

Now that I've got my language rant out of the way, I'll have to say that even without the liberal use of the f-word, I still wouldn't have liked this book. I had trouble telling the characters apart. I didn't care what

happened to them. I just couldn't get a reasonably mental image of the aliens. Dialog was hard to follow because everyone, human and alien alike, talked the same way.

Maybe Iain Banks is as great a writer as his fans and the critics say, but I'm never going to find out. This book turned me off to reading anything else by him.

Alan says

It's all a bit too much, isn't it? I mean, every page—sometimes every paragraph on every page—of *The Algebraist* throws in the names of new planets, principalities and vast empires; lost races and common aliens of endlessly inventive forms, habitats and abilities; unheard-of technologies, world-sized starships and robots smaller than grains of sand, automated castles, weapons of both mass and intimate destruction... clans, clades and clubs; cross-generational romance... bizarre medicines and foods and drugs and sensations... it's *exhausting!* And, perversely, this very flood of specificity seems to have made this particular book *less* memorable, at least for me; I recognized bits here and there, but the plot as a whole (and, for a long time, even the Big Reveal) rather evaded me on second reading.

This very overwhelming, mind-blanking quality (as if I were a Banks character myself—they're always getting their memories tampered with, at least in this book) prevents me from being as enthusiastic about this book as I might otherwise be. For it is a great and sweeping tale, a science fiction mystery with a mathematical bent (as one might guess from the title), a space opera whose conflicts range from the grandest to the most intimate scale.

Fassin Taak is at the center of it all. A Slow Seer whose expertise is in communicating with the Dwellers—a whimsical gas-giant native species whose individual members measure their lifespans in billions of years. The Dwellers whom Fassin Taak studies live within the turbulent atmosphere of Nasqueron, the largest such gas giant in the Ulubis system. Fassin's home is on 'glantine, one of Nasqueron's more habitable moons, where he is a member of Sept Bantrabal, one of the more successful groups of Seers. (See how complicated this is getting already? And we're really not even scratching the surface!)

The Dwellers seem like capricious, frivolous dilettantes—there's some debate about whether they're civilized at all, despite their longevity and obvious intelligence—to the humans and other "Quick" species who slow their metabolisms and Delve into the atmosphere of Nasqueron to interview and study them (when they're allowed to). The Dwellers' long history and inquisitive nature leads them to collect an immense amount of information that is of historical and sometimes even scientific interest. But... the Dwellers are also rotten catalogers—all of their various collected libraries are a hodgepodge of unindexed, disorganized records. The Seers try to tease a few threads of order from the chaos.

That's really all Fassin Taak wants to do. But he's due to be yanked out of his complacent, contemplative work for Sept Bantrabal... because Fassin is also a citizen of the Mercatoria, the star-spanning Human civilization (well, mostly Human) which has successfully eradicated rogue AIs (artificial intelligences who came close to subjugating humanity) and connected hundreds of Earthlike planets in a faster-than-light network of Arteria, the paired wormholes through which interstellar travel is essentially instantaneous. Wormhole networks are easily disrupted, though—one of the reasons why Ulubis is such a Galactic backwater is that its own wormhole connection to the rest of the Galaxy was destroyed a few centuries earlier, necessitating a replacement be sent from the nearest connected star system by the Mercatorian Engineers who are the only ones allowed to create and maintain these particular bits of critical infrastructure.

Meanwhile... the self-styled Archimandrite Luseferous, an Evil Genius in the classical mode (inventive

methods of torture; giant leeches in the dungeon; an obsession with ranked battle cruisers and other such ostentatious military toys) has cast his eye on the isolated Ulubis system as the next—the one hundred and eighteenth, to be exact—to join his Starveling Cult. His fleet is on its slow way towards Ulubis too...

And why all of this interest in what really is, on a Galactic scale, the equivalent of a sleepy little college town? Well, that's the thing that ties all of these elements together. Supposedly, somewhere in all of that vast collection of data the Dwellers hold dear might be a clue to the Dweller List... which might be a trick, or a myth, or it might just be a comprehensive list of a few *million* wormholes that the Mercatoria and other Quick civilizations could use. If they could just find them.

The Dweller List is the deceptively simple McGuffin that drives Banks' ornate engine of plot. And in the end, I enjoyed the drive Banks took me on using that engine—twice. So... not such a bad ride after all.

Bettie? says

Walking mp3: Tjörn Reserve: <http://www.naturskyddsforeningen.se/k...>

Unabridged. (Clipper Audio) [Audio Cassette]

Geoffrey Annis (Narrator)

Publisher: W F Howes Ltd (2005)

ISBN-10: 1845053079

ISBN-13: 978-1845053079

There is an abridged version read by Anton Lesser out there however don't be tempted with that.

This loses a star because the baddy is such an obvious nasty with the name Archimandrite **Luseferous** of the Starveling Cult, happily though this is an exciting and busy storyline crammed full of don'tlookawayincaseyoumisstheinformation.

Some of the action is very cruel and sadistic, and if you have a problem with children-hunting for sport then this is not a tale for you, however don't complain if you rated the Hunger Game trilogy 3* and up. This aspect of the Dwellers is particularly galling.

Uncle

In an interview in 2004 Banks stated that "It probably could become a trilogy, but for now it's a standalone novel." The Algebraist was shortlisted for the 2005 Hugo Award for Best Novel. In 2011, the novel was short-listed for the NPR Top-100 Science Fiction, Fantasy Titles.

The action begins when the wormhole that connects Fassin Taak's solar system with the rest of the interstellar community is destroyed and the star system is threatened with invasion by a rival human culture.
<http://sophyanempire.wordpress.com/20...>

Not 42, a duck egg.

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-

3* The Wasp Factory

1* The Steep Approach to Garbadale (aka as The Steep Descent to Garbage Pail)

2* Stonemouth

As Iain M banks:

4* Look to Winward

3* The State of Art

4* The Algebraist

TR Matter

Sarah says

That is hours and hours of my life I will never get back. My experience is that this book is the most boring book on the face of the planet (okay, there are a few that could beat it) and I can't for the life of me imagine why it was nominated for a Hugo. However, I do have friends that like it, so I'm going with this wasn't to my taste.

There was this weird secondary plot too that seemed entirely unnecessary, and in a book that was bloated with confusing flashbacks, lengthy sentences, excessive use of commas, and side stories that never went anywhere, it seems like he could have cut some things out. A lot of things.

The entire reason that I kept pushing through this time consuming book was that it was my 100th book off the Sci-Fi and Fantasy group's bookshelf and I didn't want to DNF #100. The joke's on me, I miscalculated and The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack was number 100. So I didn't DNF #101 and I really should be patted on the back because it really sucked.

Sandi says

This review is rife with spoilers.

First off, I found it fascinating that the method used to control and pacify humans and other 'alien' galactic species is to coopt the evolution of those different species. By kidnapping earlier groups of humans, introducing genetic modifications and advanced technology to their societies then waiting for the rest of humanity to make it off Earth on their own, it seriously placed the rhumans at a disadvantage. As a method of taking control of the universe, it is brilliant. This keeps the rhumans focused on trying to catch up rather than cause more trouble, which humans normally would be prone to do.

I loved the concept of the Dwellers, and I loved the wackiness of the individual Dwellers, but the idea of the actual Dwellers species did not match up for me. They seemed too much like eccentric British aristocracy playing around with life rather than actual alien races with alien thought processes and life rhythms. I can understand the idea of ritualized war and the hunting of the youth as a form of natural selection but it did not actually convey other-worldliness, just self-indulgent idiosyncrasy. I did find the idea of the Quick versus the slow intriguing, but again, the actual implementation did not convey that idea. I really did not buy the actuality of the time frame being discussed.

Another idea that did not quite work for me was that of Fassin being housed within a type of ship contrivance. That was interesting but then Banks kept referring to the way in which Fassin would move around his habitats that implied machinelessness. At times, the author made it obvious that Fassin was

ensconced within a machine, other times it seemed forgotten.

One thing - periods are severely rationed within this text. The number of 150 word sentences staggered me. I am normally quite comfortable with long sentences. But when you read half a page of text and realize that you have yet to reach the end of a sentence, then I question the decision made by the author. These are not the interminable but understandable descriptive paragraphs of the unusually verbose, these are the ramblings. They could easily be broken into 2 or more much more understandable and readable 80 words sentences(lol). These passages really slowed down my reading and made me want to skim. And if I am going to skim a book, I might as well just go out to Wikipedia and have someone else tell me in a thousand words or less what it is all about (which I am not going to do - that's is not why I read). It was annoying that I would begin to enjoy reading a section then all of a sudden, come to a screeching halt. The number of sentence paragraphs I stopped to count was indicative of the stupidly irritating roadblocks that were being thrown in the way of my appreciation.

I am marking the rest with a spoiler tag because I want to rant a little and some of it has to do with the actual progress of the book.
(view spoiler)

Ben Babcock says

Warning: This review contains spoilers about the review. Continue reading only if you have already read this review or if you are unconcerned about ruining the ending of this review.

Open with a joke about the size and weight of this book making it good for a number of non-reading-related purposes. Go on to comment on the excessive amounts of esoteric terminology.

That's probably how most reviews of this book begin, and they're probably right in doing so. Of course, plenty of books are justified in their length (or at least, we tell them they're justified for fear that they'll sneak off our shelves and kill us in our sleep if we say otherwise). And I see plenty of reviews that go on to say that they like Banks' no-holds-barred use of terminology, counting it as a sign of good worldbuilding. I'm not as convinced that *The Algebraist* is satisfactory in either regard, but let's give it the benefit of a doubt. Let's assume that Banks is justified in both these respects and go on to address the next question: if a reader can get past these two hurdles, does he or she find a worthwhile story?

(Review spoiler alert: the answer is "No.")

The heart of this space opera is Fassin Taak's search for a mathematical Transform that will unscramble a list of coordinates of secret wormholes that connect almost every inhabited system in the galaxy. The Mercatoria, ostensibly the good guys, would kill for this sort of information, since wormholes are the only viable method of faster-than-light travel and connecting two systems by wormhole is an arduous process. Come to think of it, anyone would kill to get the information, or to keep it hidden, which makes Fassin's search quite difficult.

Banks spends the majority of this book (and that is a lot of book right there) keeping coy about whether or not any such secret wormhole network exists. In the end, the revelation is somewhat disappointing, and even a little predictable to those well-versed in this sort of science fiction story. (Gas-dwelling alien species think

alike.) And it turns out not to have much bearing on the other major plot in the book, the invasion of Fassin's home system, Ulubis, even though Fassin's in such a hurry to find the Transform so he can get help before the invasion fleet arrives. So the two main plots become disconnected, and neither are very satisfying on their own.

(Review spoiler alert: I'm trying to do this review without any actual plot spoilers, so forgive my ambiguity.)

To discuss the Dweller List and its Transform, one must discuss the Dwellers themselves. I have to confess to having a soft spot for absurdist, relaxed aliens who have a society based on the accumulation of "kudos" but happen to be lying on a cache of hyper-advanced weaponry should a threat come calling. Pretty much all of the Awesome in *The Algebraist* is a result, directly or indirectly of action or utterance of a Dweller or Dwellers. My favourite example would probably be where Archmandrite Luseferous begins shooting live humans out into space unless the Dwellers produce Fassin:

Luseferous pointed furiously at the line of bodies heading slowly towards the planet. "Don't you *fuckwits* understand? *That* doesn't stop until I get what I want!"

The three Dwellers twisted to look as one. "Hmm," Peripule said thoughtfully. "I do hope you have enough people."

I'll save talking about how this pushes Luseferous from deliciously evil to laughable stereotype for later. I just want to revel in how wonderfully apathetic the Dwellers are. Not that I condone apathy toward humans. But the Dwellers' attitude is very alien, and as the above example demonstrates, they really have no reason to care about human lives.

(Review spoiler alert: The following is about the only praise I have for *The Algebraist*, so lap it up while the lapping is good.)

Unfortunately, our glimpse at Dweller society is brief compared to the time Fassin spends traipsing about the rest of the galaxy meeting a couple of other random species. We learn that the Dwellers don't really fight in factions anymore so much as have "Formal Wars" over somewhat trivial issues. Nevertheless, Dweller society isn't very cohesive—many Dwellers are completely ignorant of matters like military capability and whether or not they have a secret wormhole network. There's just so much potential in this single species. Despite the fact that a good chunk of the book happens in Dweller gas giants and Fassin spends most of his time with Dwellers, there's so much more we could have learned.

(Review spoiler alert: And now we resume our regularly-scheduled criticism.)

Compared to the intriguing Dwellers, the actual object of Fassin's quest is far less interesting. Banks makes a big deal over the fact that Fassin needs to find "the Transform," which turns out to be an equation written in "alien algebra" (hence the title, *The Algebraist*). Supposedly this list and its Transform are so important because they'd give the Mercatoria (or its enemies) access to a pre-existing network of wormholes. If this network exists, the Dwellers so far haven't offered to share it with the Quick species. No one seems to mention why finding proof of this network would motivate the Dwellers to change this position. And if the Mercatoria has the means to find the wormholes, what do they intend to do? Take the wormhole portals by arms? Because we've already established that the Dwellers, while never openly hostile, don't permit that sort of tactic and tend to respond with overwhelming force.

The actual quest is a mundane journey that consists of following various Dwellers who may have

information Fassin needs. Along the way, he gets into a series of scrapes. At first, there's pressure to find the Transform as soon as possible, so that the Mercatoria can summon reinforcements before Luseferous' invasion fleet arrives in Ulubis. Gradually, however, this becomes less of an issue, and in the end Fassin's search doesn't have any effect on the outcome of the invasion. Not that it matters, since the invasion itself turns out to be a minor problem anyway.

The invasion's mastermind, Archmandrite Luseferous, also begins the book as a credible threat. He's intelligent, ruthless, and sadistic. Also, Banks goes out of his way to make it clear the Luseferous isn't a delusional megalomaniac who ignores his advisers and compromises his plans out of ego or pride. This credibility erodes gradually as Luseferous' fleet travels to Ulubis, culminating in Luseferous' humiliation and defeat because he antagonizes a couple of Dwellers in search for this mythical Transform. And there's no real reason for this sudden change in characterization, other than the fact that Banks needs Luseferous' invasion to fail, of course. That the invasion failure is a result of miscalculations and bad characterization should be enough to set off alarms in the cautious reader's head.

Sandwiched in between, among, and pretty much everywhere these two plots aren't, are various sub-plots, revenge plots, and miscellaneous exposition about the types of species that inhabit the galaxy. The signal-to-noise ratio of *The Algebraist* is terribly low. There are so many names, species, and places irrelevant to the plot that I had trouble *following* the plot (although maybe this wasn't a bad thing). The fact that artificial intelligences are anathema forms an important point in the structure of the Mercatoria, which is fine. But then Banks includes an entire subplot involving hidden artificial intelligences, and Fassin's Head Gardener turns out to be an artificial intelligence, and all the while I'm just wondering . . . *why?*

There's a lot going on in *The Algebraist*. And a lot of it goes wrong. But it all goes wrong for the same reason: after a strong opening, the book presents a weak resolution with every possible threat declawed before it could be defeated. It's as if *The Algebraist* is a simmering pot of water that, about 100 pages in, comes to a boil, and then all of the water boils away. The threat just evaporates by the end of the book. Long before that happens, however, my patience evaporated. Judging from the praise that others have heaped upon this book, this is a situation where your mileage will vary. However, I urge you to think twice. There *is* a story somewhere in the depths of *The Algebraist*, but extracting and parsing it is not for the faint of heart . . . and I question whether the end result worth the effort.

Matt says

So Banks seems to ripen with age. Banks' earlier titles were wrought with fanciful, min-blowing brain candy yet lacked a certain cerebral edge or literary finesse. I have to admit that he kind of stumbled slightly with *Excession* but certainly made his mark with the novel in various other ways. Consider *Phlebas* was a near masterpiece as was *The Algebraist*. Here, Banks gets a pretty good clip going and his writing even smacks of literature. That, plus set in amazing fantastical settings (futuristic, of course) with round and complex characters with distinct voices, the novel was thoroughly entertaining. One thing I appreciate about Banks' style is his lack of apology for certain conventions owing to his expository writing methods. Iain Banks somehow gets away with telling while showing. Not only does it lend weight to the fantastic futures he envisions, the exposition in and of itself is fascinating stuff. Owing to the roundness of his characters, Banks makes them engaging and interesting. This is quite a feat since Banks likes to populate his worlds with incredibly thought out alien species unlike any human. I don't believe I've ever read a novel where a creature who consists of merely a sac of gas can quip violently funny tirades. The device he employs to achieve this is simple, Banks makes the assumption that any creature capable of interstellar commerce and practical civilization building are most likely imbued with the same qualities. Sense of humor, compassion, a twinge of altruism - basically, human. This is a poetic license I am willing to grant in this case.

The story is drawn out and complex and I don't remember enough detail to accurately describe it here. Namely the names as such. It involves the sequestration of a young gentlemen to appeal to an ancient race of "Dwellers" who inhabit various gas giant planets for their wisdom and aid to stave off an interstellar war.

The novel is active and spirited. Well-written and certainly a bar-raiser for the SF genre. Highly recommended.

Richard says

Meh.

Well, better than that — 3½ stars — but not as good as I'd hoped.

There were two major problems. The first I could almost forgive—as simply not being to my taste, the same way I don't enjoy the silliness of Terry Pratchett. *The Algebraist* tossed together rather high-concept themes (persecution of AIs, morally ambiguous revolution against a powerful hegemon, mass-death tragedy) and silliness bordering on stupidity. The major alien race is depicted as bumbling Woosters enjoying the life of a Gilbert & Sullivan farce... except when it is convenient for one or more to suddenly turn into James Bond. The high and low concept was like a radicchio-marshmallow salad.

The other problem was simple carelessness. For example...

Our hero spends most of the novel inside his micro-spaceship. It is described as "about five metres long, four across the beam if you included the outboard manoeuvring nacells and a little under two metres in height." So, in its smallest dimension it is a bit bigger than a typical adult male. Yet much of the time Fessin is stuck inside this oversized coffin, he seems to be strolling the corridors of spaceships and otherwise moving naturally. Yet this is in the same text as careful depictions of how narrow wormholes are, and thus the reason for "needleships".

Another problem is the bewildering decision of Quercer & Janath. Why on earth did they take that risk? And the Voehn knew who they were? How, and why? And the megalomaniac psychopath really deserved either a novel of his own; his subplot was so obvious and dead-ended so casually it was a pity the author spent so much time on him. The occasional eruptions of profanity and sex were bizarre discontinuities.

I have the sneaking suspicion that Banks was working out a really clever novel, using graph paper and plotting out relationships and plot arcs on butcher paper tacked to the wall when he realized he was putting too much effort into a non-*Culture* novel and shut it down. Then he came back some years later and stormed through it to get it out the door, but he had coincidentally just re-read and become inspired by *Good Omens*.

I'll read Consider Phlebas 'cause the *Culture* series deals with topics some friends think I'll find interesting, but I'm wary.
