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Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Iain Banks's *Against a Dark Background*: The Ray of Light in Dark Future

Mrs. Shailaja Arjun Changundi

Associate Professor,
D. K. A. S. C. College, Ichalkaranji.

Against a Dark Background is Iain M. Banks's forth novel in the science fiction series, the earlier three being *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons*. It takes place in a single solar system centered around Golter, the home planet. *Against a Dark Background* is a science fiction novel by Scottish writer Iain M. Bank, first published in 1993. Though it is a fiction it is reliably exciting, well written, and most importantly, totally based on scientific reality. It alerts us about the future disasters that the human world is going to face

Thousands of years have already passed since the excitement of that planet's expansion; now, a sense of despair and decay has settled onto the system's humans due to the impossibility of exploring beyond their narrow band of space. Sharrow is one of the last aristocrats from Golter, from a family that was once fabulously wealthy but has since become poor due to the adverse judgments of the powerful World Court. When the book opens, we discover that the ancient Huhsz sect, who has had a grudge against Sharrow's family since one of her ancestors stole the sect's Lazy Gun, has successfully applied for a one-year assassination order from the World Court to hunt down and kill Sharrow. To avoid getting killed, Sharrow calls together her old combat team from the Second War to hunt for the system's last Lazy Gun in an attempt to appease the Huhsz. But things quickly get more complicated.

Iain Banks tells the history of the Lazy Guns which are eight in number. Seven of the original eight Lazy Guns were destroyed before the events of *Against a Dark Background*. One disappeared with its user when he tried to fire it at the local sun, one suffered a lucky strike during an air raid, and two self destructed when investigators tried to take them apart and another was destroyed by an assassin. A sixth was destroyed when investigators fired it with its lenses looking through an electron microscope. The seventh, found before the events of the book by the Lady Sharrow and her team, was destroyed by the university it was sold to when they tampered with it. The resulting explosion devastated the city the university was located in.

The hunt for the eighth and final Lazy Gun is the main plot theme of *Against a Dark Background*. Much of the novel concerns Sharrow's adventures in searching for and acquiring it. Her motivation is that the Huhsz religious cult regard it as a sacred object, and that if she can find it and give it to them, their vendetta against her will lapse. Sharrow encounters various political systems on her travels across Golter. She also meets the Solipsists, a gang of pirate mercenaries on a hovercraft, who hold very unusual philosophical beliefs. When the last Lazy Gun is eventually discovered, it is guarded by an elaborate defense system incorporating a genetic key which Sharrow has to deactivate.

After a very confusing start, *Against a Dark Background* swiftly settles into the pattern of a caper story, with Sharrow and her crew haring after one precious artifact after another in a sequence that will hopefully lead to the Lazy Gun. The story is full of Banks's trademark imagination. The Lazy Gun itself is hilarious: an ancient gun that, when fired, wreaks humorous but somehow appropriate havoc upon its target (for instance, causing a thermonuclear blast, or replacing the victim's head with an anvil for about ten seconds). When it is fired at humans, many different things may occur. An anchor may appear above the person, giant electrodes may appear

on either side of the target and electrocute them, or an animal may tear their throat out. Larger targets such as tanks or ships may suffer tidal waves, implosion, explosion, sudden lava flows or just disappear. When fired at cities and other such targets, thermonuclear explosions are the norm, although in one instance a comet crashed into the city. It is a mysterious ancient object and is the only weapon known to display a sense of humour. A Lazy Gun is roughly half a meter long, 30 cm wide and 20 cm tall. The Lazy Gun is "light" but "massy" and weighs three times as much when turned upside down. The Lazy Gun is the only weapon known to display a sense of humour. The story also benefits from a deep sense of history: Golter and its system are deeply aware of their history, despite the fact that many records were destroyed by the two dreadful Wars that have afflicted the civilization. All of this gives *Against a Dark Background* a rich background within which Banks can spin his tale. It is Science Fiction at its best. Suspense, love, action and high-tech gadgets are used in a well thought-out universe with interesting characters that you get to know so well that you will actually care about what happens to them.

Sharrow is an ex-soldier who finds herself hunted around the planet of Golter by the religious cult, The Huhsz and soon she finds that she will need the help of her old friends-in – arms; not just to escape the Huhsz who believe that her lack of being dead is the only obstacle standing between themselves and the return of their "messiahs", but also to find the lost, ancient weapon The Gun. The old combat team takes us on a tour of a strange world that is a credit to Banks' imagination.

This futuristic dark vision of Iain Banks in the novel *Against a Dark Background* makes us think about our own future which really will be dark, and the use of today's advanced science and technology in a wrong way is the main reason behind it. Iain Banks has something prophetic in mind in *Against a Dark Background*, but it may have been a bit too subtle for most of the critics to get.

The group move at a furious pace through a wide variety of well-imagined locations, such as the Log Jam, a city built on a raft of thousands of ships, and the Entraxrln, a plant the size of a continent. The plotting is rather flimsy in places (the final stage of the journey to the Lazy Gun in particular, seems to have come out of a D&D game). On the other hand, there's plenty of action, the characters are well developed, and Banks' black humour is put to good use, so the book is good fun to read.

Against a Dark Background occurs in a single solar system centered around Golter, the home planet. Thousands of years have already passed since the excitement of that planet's expansion; now, a sense of despair and decay has settled onto the system's humans due to the impossibility of exploring beyond their narrow band of space

Golter has never outgrown its atavistic tendencies, and so it has suffered devastating wars that have wiped out the technological achievements of past civilizations, leaving behind only destructive relics such as the Lazy Guns. Sharrow's own past seems to mirror the violent history of the planet, the story pits her against both of them, and the ending of the book leaves little room for optimism about anything but survival, either for her, or for Golter.

Sharrow is one of the last aristocrats from Golter, from a family that was once fabulously wealthy but has since become poor due to the adverse judgments of the powerful World Court. Sharrow and a group of her friends as they travel around the planet Golter and its neighbours. They are they are in search of the last Lazy Gun, a devastating weapon with a sense of humour, and they are pursued by the Huhsz, a religious cult who wish to kill Sharrow to ensure the birth of their prophet. When the book opens, we discover that the ancient Huhsz sect, who has had a

grudge against Sharrow's family since one of her ancestors stole the sect's Lazy Gun, has successfully applied for a one-year assassination order from the World Court to hunt down and kill Sharrow. To avoid getting killed, Sharrow calls together her old combat team from the Second War to hunt for the system's last Lazy Gun in an attempt to appease the Huhsz. But things quickly get more complicated.

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Lady Sharrow, a former pilot and antiquities thief, lives in exile on a planet called Golter, which, with its sun Thrial, lies a million light years from any other star. An eccentric cult, the Huhsz, believes that the messiah cannot be born until the end of her bloodline. The only way to escape their hunting passport lies in the recovery of the last Lazy Gun – an ancient weapon which has a surreal and humorous approach to death.

Sharrow, who as a child narrowly survived the assassination of her mother, joins up with her former combat team on a series of quests. The group locates a number of Antiquities – including the Crownstar Addendum, one of the most valuable pieces of jewelry in the solar system, and the Universal Principles, an ancient book – on the way to the final quest for the last Lazy Gun.

The idea of a world trapped forever in the vastness between galaxies, undergoing social and technological change and disruptions over millennia of advanced civilization without hope of ever being able to leave its star system is fascinating. The population of this world is larger than life characters, with dubious motives, mysterious institutional vendettas, strange and unique weapons. The presentation of the novel is very dark, and more than normally depressing.

Against a Dark Background takes place in one star system, mostly on two habitable planets, with no interstellar contact. This book is a stand-alone, and not part of the Culture series, although it takes place in the same universe, and the isolated position of this star means that the Culture has never come calling.

This novel is Iain Banks's space adventure and sophisticated prose, complex characters, and an unbridled imagination combine in this tale of high drama and intrigue. There are some really interesting concepts; a prison without locks, a tree that covers half a planet, and the city that was abandoned due to radiation which is now a city of androids, And of course the Lazy Gun.

The book tells a story of a bewitchingly attractive noblewoman, who becomes a metaphor for the star system she lives in called 'Golter'. Unlike the Culture novels, the "Golter" system is at least a hundred million light years from the nearest star. It is entirely isolated. This system society has colonized all the planets and moons in their system, but has no hope of ever reaching anyone else. Sharrow, in the same way, is alone, even while surrounded by others.

As the book starts, Lady Sharrow is preparing to go on the run, as the Huhsz, a religious cult who murdered her mother and are determined to destroy the female line of her family, are about to be granted a year-long passport to track her down and kill her. Rather than going into hiding, Sharrow decides to go on the offensive, and track down the Lazy Gun that her ancestor stole

from the cult, as its return will end the hunt. It's a strange idea, that giving people carte blanche to kill someone legally for a limited period would prevent assassinations.

On the run from a cult of intergalactic religious fanatics who want her death, the Lady Sharrow emerges from retirement to seek out a powerful artifact that may save her life--the legendary Lady Gun, a weapon that kills by altering the reality around it. There are some really interesting concepts; a prison without locks, a tree that covers half a planet, and the city that was abandoned due to radiation which is now a city of androids, And of course the Lazy Gun. It's set against a marvelous background, a world full of twisty legal codes, microstates, a wealth of half-forgotten history and half-remembered knowledge, and a truly baroque legal system..

Sharrow was once the leader of a personality-attuned combat team in one of the sporadic little commercial wars in the civilization based around the planet Golter. She came from one of the more disreputable aristocratic families. On an island with a glass shore - relic of some even more ancient conflict - she discovers she is to be hunted by the Huhsz, a religious cult which believes she is the last obstacle before their faith's apotheosis. She has to run, knowing her only hope of finally escaping the Huhsz is to find the last of the ancient, apocalyptically powerful but seemingly cursed Lazy Guns. But that is just the first as well as the final step on a search that takes her on an odyssey through the exotic Golterian system and results in both a trail of destruction and a journey into her own past, as well as that of her family and the system itself; a journey that changes everything.

As the system society begins to attack itself, so, too, does Sharrow lose friends. Entire cities are wiped out. The finish of the book is quite profound, and ties the rest of the story together. What Banks is getting at is the good that actually came out of all the death and destruction in the book. Sharrow is heir to a noble family, which is much less useful than it could be since her grandfather was declared a criminal by the powerful World Court and most of her family's property was confiscated. She's a former military officer and squad leader, and now is a retired antiquities hunter and retrieval specialist. She's also the target of a religious cult, who murdered her mother and who believe that either all the female members of her family line have to die or an artifact known as the Lazy Gun must be returned to their collection for their messiah to return. They are on the verge of getting a Hunting License from the World Court, a legal document giving them a year to murder her with full legal protection.

Sharrow was once the leader of a personality-attuned combat team in one of the sporadic little commercial wars in the civilization based around the planet Golter. Now she is hunted by the Huhsz, a religious cult which believes that she is the last obstacle before the faith's apotheosis, and her only hope of escape is to find the last of the apocalyptically powerful Lazy Guns before the Huhsz find her. Her journey through the exotic Golterian system is a destructive and savage odyssey into her past, and that of her family and of the system itself.

The final antiquities contract Sharrow and her half-sister took was finding and retrieving the second-to-last remaining Lazy Gun, which promptly exploded and destroyed most of a city when people attempted to analyze it. The last remaining Gun is the one supposedly stolen by her family from the cult. Sharrow plans on finding it, since the alternative appears to be death. Family lore has it that a clue to its location was left in a legendary book called the *Universal Principles*, a book her half-sister believed was kept in the fortress of the Sea House. Sharrow's half-sister is now imprisoned there for attempting to loot their treasury, with the price of her release being the *Universal Principles*.

Sharrow's squad during the war underwent a process called synchrononeurobonding, which means that they can anticipate each other's thinking processes in combat situations and make extremely

accurate guesses about tactics such as which direction one of them would dodge away from enemy fire. It also makes them very close. Sharrow's second act in the book, after approaching her half-sister for clues to the location of the *Universal Principles*, is to pull together the remaining members of her squad. That's when *Against a Dark Background* falls into shape: this is, at core, a caper novel. A small, close-knit, diverse team combines their skills to pull off dazzling heists, following a trail of clues through various antiquities to the last remaining Lazy Gun. This is great fun. Banks protagonists against a memorable background in search of an artifact that's delightfully odd. It's more fun to find out what a Lazy Gun is in the full context of the book.

There is also a strong cyberpunk sort of theme- the decay of highly technological civilizations, coupled with the survival of highly advanced, perhaps sentient technology which saves as the focus of destructive and cruel power struggles. The novel describes the splendid variety of nature in space travel. It also tells painfully the effects of the struggle for power where the means or will to technological/economic/ spatial growth has been lost.

Lady Sharrow is a leader of a once-military team that re-assembled to help her escape the persecution by the Huhsz. The latter is a military religious order that is given a one year hunting license for Lady Sharrow, unless she can return to them the last Lazy Gun stolen 6 generations ago by her great-great-grandmother. Sharrow and her team appreciate good technology, but things they acquire are meant to be used. They don't take things apart and try to understand them; they use them for their immediate requirements until they break or they have to leave them behind, and then they acquire new things. This mentality extends to almost everything in their world. Banks ventures somewhat into the morality of this and provides some emotional justification in the extensive flashbacks that tell Sharrow's life story. The story gets its depth more from Sharrow's flashbacks to her childhood with her half sister and her time in the military than from any of the current interactions between the characters.

Against a Dark Background follows the Lady Sharrow, a noble from a family who has lost much, on a series of adventures as she tries to keep herself alive and find different old antiquities. The plot is interesting and the universe is original, but really it is a never ending sequence of brilliant action sequences. It's a solid SF caper story that feels better grounded in real emotions, believable characters, and deep history than nearly all SF. It's about discovering, designing, building, analyzing, and taking things apart. It's about Special Forces troops.

Golter history creates much curiosity in our minds. It is such a place where thermonuclear war is tactical and a part of regular business where religions and corporations take the place of countries and legislate their desires through a World Court, and where all is part of enlightened Dark Age. Lady Sharrow's character is rather unique. Other characters, especially the character of an android named Feril who joins the crew later in the novel, are colorfully designed with clever dialogues. Iain Banks has constructed a richly hued, far-future tapestry for his latest space adventure. The appeal of *Against a Dark Background* is its darkness, for in the most interesting kinds of darkness lies mystery.

Iain Banks comments on his own novel. He says:

"People were always sorry. Sorry they had done what they had done, sorry they were doing what they were doing, and sorry they were going to do what they were going to debut they still did whatever it is. The sorrow never stopped them; it just made them feel better. And so the sorrow never stopped."

All in all as *Daily Mail* observes it, *Against a Dark Background* is "Imaginatively brilliant".

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