

Diamond Dogs

Jess Flarity

2021

a review of

Isle of Dogs by Jon Frankel. Whiskey Tit 2020

Every time Jon Frankel releases a novel it feels as if he's managed to twist the English language into a new, illusory shape: a mobius strip made of words. *Specimen Tank*, his debut in 1994, is a lurid nightmarescape with one foot in the grimmest alley of 1980's New York City and the other in the bizarro universe it took David Wong and all those Eraserhead Press writers another twenty years to finally tap into. If you strip down his latest book from Whiskey Tit, *Isle of Dogs*, it appears to resemble a political thriller—but it takes place in the year 2500 and all the politicians are multi-generational clones who ride flesh-eating horses around a war-torn, biopunk, feudal-dystopian version of crumbling America. It's like sitting down to watch a familiar courtroom drama and discovering your couch is releasing hallucinogenic spores while Netflix beams into your tv from two dimensions away. A word of warning: if you don't first read *Gaha: Babes of the Abyss* (the sequel), you may ricochet off this book's first chapter like a bullet shot into a centrifuge. Frankel must have snorted some Gene Wolfe recently, because he throws his reader directly into the center of the Sargon 4's political web without wasting a single page on backstory, making it feel like a contemporary novel about life on Capitol Hill except now all the congress members have been replaced by techno-Spartans with delicate, epicurean palates. In a single scene, a couple of two-hundred year old clones might casually discuss mass genocide while drinking jasmine tea and referencing the latest issue of *The New York Times*, and Frankel continually mixes the familiarity of our modern day with his surreal vision of the future to keep the prose highly readable, yet somehow...askew. His style is a fusion of literary realism and highly imaginative science fiction that harkens back to works such as Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*, Samuel Delaney's *Trouble on Triton*, and Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. But compared to his other novels, such as *The Man Who Can't Die*, Frankel has pumped the brakes on his graphic depictions of sexuality and violence, to the relief of some his readers and to the disappointment of others. This is possibly because *Isle of Dogs* is told from the perspective of the tyrannical Rulers rather than from their "genetically inferior" victims, and so the story has a familial warmth as the plot passes from character to character, almost as if the reader is peeking behind the curtains of the powerful kings or queens more typical of a high fantasy setting. Again, it's difficult to pin a single genre on this or any of Frankel's other works, but for the kind of reader who longs for a story that doesn't have the slapped-together feel of too much of today's popular fiction or the overwrought stylism of the literary novels hemorrhaging from Brooklyn's coffee shops, this book will activate a part of your mind that you didn't know was there before.

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