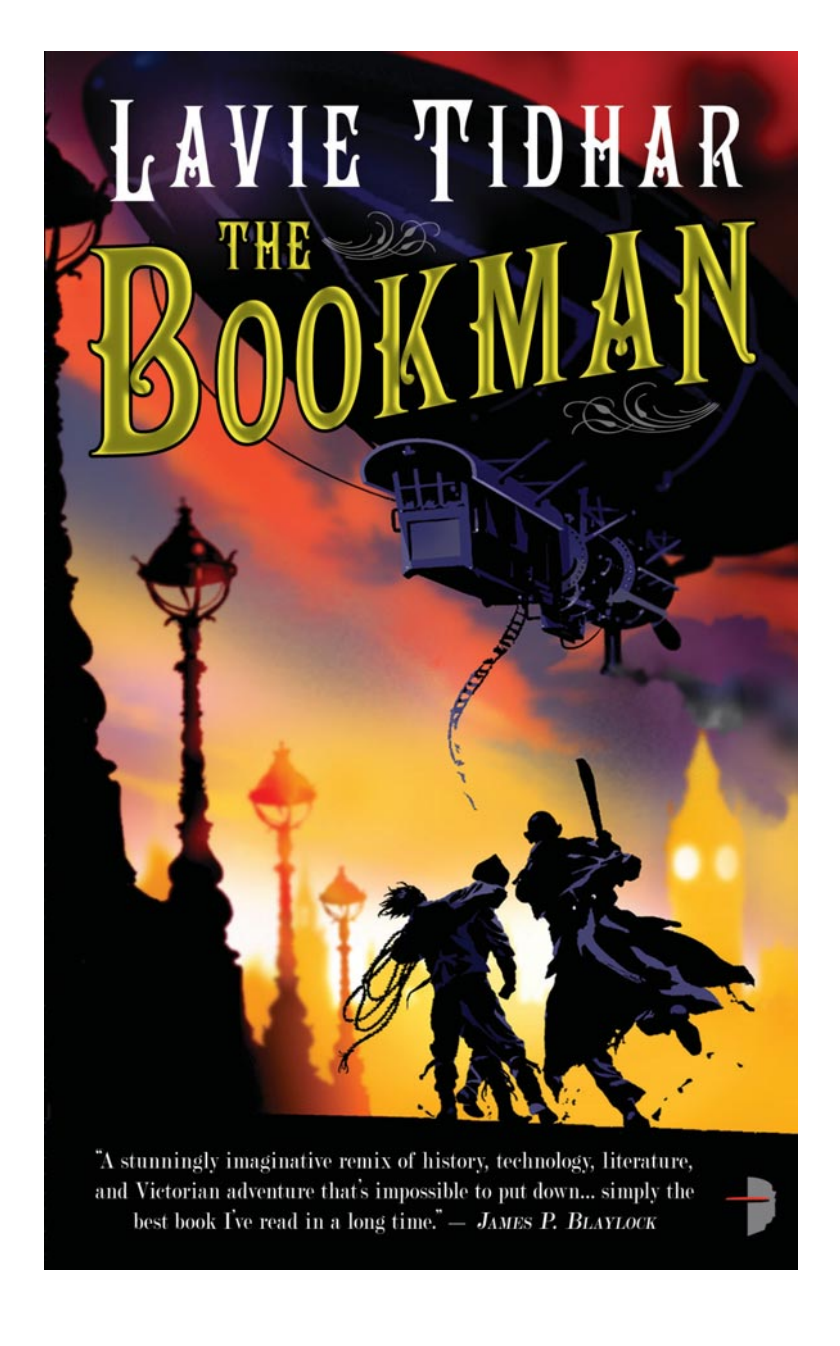


LAVIE TIDHAR

THE BOOKMAN



"A stunningly imaginative remix of history, technology, literature, and Victorian adventure that's impossible to put down... simply the best book I've read in a long time." — *JAMES P. BLAYLOCK*



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THE BOOKMAN

“Lavie Tidhar’s *The Bookman* is simply the best book I’ve read in a long time, and I read a lot of books.

If you’re worried that Steampunk has turned into a mere fashion aesthetic, then you’d better read this one. It’s a stunningly imaginative remix of history, technology, literature, and Victorian adventure that’s impossible to put down. The book is immensely smart and readable at the same time. I very much hope that it’s the first of many such books. Buy it.”

– *James P. Blaylock*

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– *Locus*

“A rising star.”

– *The Zone*

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“Intensified supernatural action-surrealism... saturated with a sense of exotic roundedness, an eerie solidity and reality.”

– *Adam Roberts*

an excerpt from
THE BOOKMAN
Lavie Tidhar

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ONE
Orphan

*Under Waterloo Bridge Gilgamesh slept
wrapped in darkness and the weak light of stars
his breath feeble in the fog:*

*He dreamt of Ur, and of fish,
slow-roasting on an open fire,
and the scent of spring*

– L.T., “The Epic of Gilgamesh”

Orphan came down to see the old man by the Thames. The old man sat alone on the embankment under Waterloo Bridge, wrapped in a horse blanket, beside a small fire, a rod extending from his gloved hands into the dark waters of the river below. Orphan came stealthily, but the old man’s blind eyes nevertheless followed his progress. Orphan sat down beside Gilgamesh on the hard stone floor and warmed his hands on the fire. In the distance, whale song rose around the setting sun.

For a while there was silence. Then, “Did you catch anything?” Orphan asked.

Gilgamesh sighed and shook his head. His long hair

was matted into grey locks that made a dry rustling sound as they moved. "Change is unsparing," he said enigmatically.

Orphan echoed his sigh. "But did you catch anything?"

"If I had," Gilgamesh said reasonably, "it would have been roasting on the fire by now."

"I brought bread," Orphan said, and he reached into his bag and brought out, like a magician, a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine, both wrapped in newspaper, which he put down carefully on the ground beside them.

"Red?" Gilgamesh said.

Instead of an answer Orphan uncorked the wine, allowing its aroma to escape into the cold air above the Thames.

"Ahh..."

Gilgamesh's brown fingers broke a piece of the bread and shoved it into his mouth, and he followed it by taking a swig of wine from the open bottle. "Château des Rêves," he said appreciatively, "now where would a young lad like you find a bottle like that?"

"I stole it," Orphan said.

The old man turned his blind eyes on Orphan and slowly nodded. "Yes," he said, "but where did you steal it, young Orphan?"

Orphan shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. "From Mr. Eliot's Wine Merchants on Gloucester Road. Why?"

"It's a long way to come, with a bottle of red wine," Gilgamesh said, as if reciting a half-forgotten poem. "As much as I appreciate the visit, I doubt you came all this way on a social call. So," the blind eyes held Orphan in

their gaze, "what is it you want?"

Orphan smiled at that. "Tonight," he said, "is the night, I think."

"Indeed?" The eyes turned, the hands checked the anchored fishing-rod, returned to the bread. "Lucy?"

Orphan smiled. "Lucy," he said.

"You will ask her?"

"I will."

Gilgamesh smiled, but his face looked old and, for a moment, wistful. "But you are both so young..."

"I love her." It was said simply, with the honesty only the young possess. Gilgamesh rose, and surprised Orphan by hugging him. The old man felt frail in Orphan's arms. "Let's drink. For the two of you."

They drank, sharing the bottle, Orphan grinning inanely.

"Read me the paper," Gilgamesh said. They sat together, looking at the Thames.

Obligingly, Orphan reached for the stained newspaper. He scanned the small print, the ink already running, searching for an item of news to interest Gilgamesh. "Here," he said at last. He cleared his throat and read the title, which was: "TERRORIST GANG STRIKES AGAIN!"

"Go on," Gilgamesh said, spraying him with crumbs of bread.

"Last night," read Orphan, "'notorious terrorist organisation known as the Persons from Porlock struck again at the very heart of the capital. Their target this time was none other than the famed playwright Oscar Wilde, who was engaged, by his own words, in a work of com-

position of the highest order when he heard an insistent knock on the door, followed by shouts from outside. Rising to see what the commotion was about – having, for reasons of his own, dismissed all his servants for the night – Wilde was confronted by several men dressed as clowns who shouted fragmented lines from Lear’s *A Book of Nonsense* at him, enclosed him in a circle and danced around him until his mind, so he himself says, had been set aw whirl with chaos. The Persons departed as suddenly as they had come, evading the police force that was already on its way to the scene. In his statement, a confused Wilde said the title of his new play was to be called *The Importance of Being Something*, but for the life of him he could no longer recall what that something was. “How long will this campaign of terror continue?” Wilde asked, and called for the Prime Minister’s resignation. “This cannot go on,” he said; “this is a violation of everything our country stands for.” Prime Minister Moriarty’s Office was not available for comment.”

He finished, and all was quiet save for Gilgamesh’s chuckle. “Was he really ‘engaged in a work of composition of the highest order’?” he said, “or was he entertaining the young Alfred Douglas? I suspect the Persons from Porlock wasted their time on this one. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” he said.

Orphan glanced away and was silent. Again, Gilgamesh chuckled. He took another long swig on the bottle and said, “What else is there?”

“Moriarty to launch Martian space-probe,” Orphan said, “ceremony to take place tomorrow at dusk. The probe will carry an Edison record containing the songs

of birds and whales, as well as a small volume of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*."

Gilgamesh nodded approvingly. "Lucy is going to be there," Orphan said. "She has been doing the whale recordings for the past two months, and she was selected to put the record and the book into the probe at the ceremony." He grinned, trying to picture it. The Queen might be there!

"Whales are worth listening to," Gilgamesh said mildly, though his eyes twinkled. "Pray, continue."

Orphan did so. "Fresh fly supply for the Queen was halted temporarily on Tuesday due to suspicion of a contaminated source – most of her public appearances have been cancelled for the next week. The Byron simulacrum gave a poetry recital at the Royal Society..." He turned the page over. "Oh, and rumours the Bookman is back in town."

Beside him, Gilgamesh had gone very still. "Says who?" he asked quietly.

"An unnamed source at the Metropolitan Police," Orphan said. "Why?"

Gilgamesh shook his head. "No one knows where the Bookman will strike. Not unless he chooses to make it known, for reasons of his own."

"I'm not sure I understand you," Orphan said patiently. "Why would he do that?"

"As a warning, perhaps," Gilgamesh said, "to his next victim."

"The Bookman's only a myth," Orphan said. Beside him, Gilgamesh slowly smiled.

"A myth," he said. "Oh, Orphan. This is the time of

myths. They are woven into the present like silk strands from the past, like a wire mesh from the future, creating an interlacing pattern, a grand design, a repeating motif. Don't dismiss myth, boy. And never, ever, dismiss the Bookman." And he touched his fingers to his blind eyes, and covered his face with his hands. Orphan knew he would speak no more that night.

That was how Orphan left him, there on the water's edge: an old man, hunched into an unmoving figure, like a pensive statue. Orphan never again saw him in life.

Who was Orphan and how had he come to inhabit that great city, the Capital of the Everlasting Empire, the seat of the royal family, the ancestral home of Les Lézards? His father was a Vespuccian sailor, his mother an enigma: both were dead, and had been so for many years. His skin was copper-red, his eyes green like the sea. He had spent his early life on the docks, running errands between the feet of sailors, a minute employee of the East India Company. His knowledge of languages was haphazard if wide, his education colourful and colloquial, his circle of friends and acquaintances far-ranging, if odd.

He learned poetry in the gutter, and from the public readings given by the great men and women of the age; in pubs and dockyards, in halls of learning and in the streets at dawn – and once, from a sword-wielding girl from France, who appeared mysteriously on the deck of a ship Orphan was helping to load with cargo bound for China, and recounted to him, in glorious, beautiful verse, a vision of God (he had never forgotten her) –

and he learned it from the books in the public library, until words spun in his head all day and all night, and he agonised at writing them down on paper, his hand bleeding as the pen scratched against the surface of the page.

Who was Orphan? A poet, certainly; a young man, that too. He had aspirations for greatness, and had once met, by chance, the ancient Wordsworth, as the great man was leaving a coffee house in Soho and the five-year-old Orphan was squatting in the street outside, talking to his friend, the beggar *Lame Menachem*. The great man had smiled at him then, and – perhaps mistaking him for a beggar himself – handed him a coin, a half-crown showing the profile of the mad old *Lizard King*, *George III*, which Orphan had kept ever since for good luck.

At present, Orphan was engaged, himself, in a “work of composition of the highest order”: he was busy crafting a long poem, a cycle of poems in fact, about life in this great city. He was moderately proud of his efforts, though he felt the poem, somehow, lacked substance. But he was young, and could not worry himself too long; and, having seen his old friend *Gilgamesh*, the wanderer, and ascertained his (relative) well-being, he proceeded with a light heart to his primary destination of the evening, which was the newly rebuilt *Rose Theatre* in *Southwark*.

Orphan walked along the river; in the distance the constant song of whales rose and fell like the tides as the giant, mysterious beings rose from the dark waters for a breath of air. Occasionally he paused, and looked, with

a poet's longing for the muse, at the cityscape sprawling before him on the other side of the river. Smoke rose from chimneys, low-lying and dense like industrial clouds, merging with the fog that wrapped itself about the buildings. In the distance, too, were the lights of the Babbage Tower, its arcane mechanisms pointed at the skies, its light a beacon and a warning to the mail airships that flew at night, like busy bumblebees delivering dew from flower to flower. Almost, he was tempted to stop, to scribble a hasty poem: but the cold of the air rising from the river compelled him onwards, and at his back Big Ben began to strike ten, hurrying him on. Already he was late for the performance.

Lucy wasn't there and must therefore have been inside; and so he bought a ticket outside the theatre and entered the courtyard, where people still milled about. So there was still time, he thought. He bought himself a mug of mulled wine and sipped at the hot, spicy drink gratefully before making his way inside the building, into the groundlings' floor.

In the spirit of authenticity, the Rose was lit not with gas but burning torches, and their jumping light made the shadows dance and turned the faces of people into fantastical beings, so that Orphan imagined he was sharing this space with a race of lizards and porcupines, ravens and frogs. The thought amused him, for it occurred to him to wonder how he himself appeared: was he a raven, or a frog?

He settled himself against the balustrade separating the groundlings from the lower seats and waited. There was a slim, dark-haired girl standing beside him, whose

face kept coming in and out of shadow. In her hands she held a pen and a notebook, in which she was scribbling notes. She had a pale, delicately drawn face – seen in profile it was quite remarkable, or so Orphan always thought – and her ears were small and pointed at their tip, and drawn back against her head so that she appeared to him in the light of the moon coming from above like some creature of legend and myth, an elf, perhaps, or a Muse.

He leaned towards her. “One day I will write a play for you they would show here at the Rose,” he said.

Her smile was like moonlight. She grinned and said, “Do you say that to all the girls?”

“I don’t need to,” Orphan said, and he swept her to him and kissed her, the notebook pressed between their bodies. “Not when I have you.”

“Let go!” she laughed. “You have to stop reading those romance novels, Orphan.”

“I don’t–”

“Sure.” She grinned up at him again, and kissed him. Two old ladies close by tutted. “Now shush. It’s about to start.”

Orphan relented. They leaned together against the balustrade, fingers entwined. Presently, a hush fell over the crowd, and a moment later the empty stage was no longer empty, and Henry Irving had come on.

At the sight of the great actor the crowd burst into spontaneous applause. Orphan took another sip from his drink. The torchlight shuddered, and a cold wind blew from the open roof of the theatre, sending a shiver down Orphan’s spine. On stage, Irving was say-

ing, "...The bridegroom's doors are opened wide, and I am next of kin. The guests are met, the feast is set: may'st hear the merry din—" and the celebrated performance of the stage adaptation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* began.

Orphan, though he had seen the performance before, was nevertheless spellbound anew. As Irving's booming voice filled the theatre the strange and grotesque story took life, and the stage filled with masked dancers, enacting the wedding ball into which the Ancient Mariner had come like an ill-begotten creature rising from the Thames. The story took shape around Orphan: how the young mariner, Amerigo Vespucci, took sail on his voyage of exploration under the auspices of the British court; how, on Caliban's Island, he discovered and shot the lizard-like inhabitant of that island, by that callous act bringing upon himself unwanted, unwholesome immortality and on his masters, the British, the full might of Les Lézards, the Lizard Kings, who now sat on Britannia's throne. It was an old, fanciful story, woven together of gossip and myth. Irving's adaptation, Orphan knew, had been wildly popular with the theatre-going public – particularly those of a young, mildly radical disposition – but was decried as dangerous nonsense by the palace, though Prime Minister Moriarty himself had so far kept silent on the issue. Either way, it was becoming evident that the play's stage-life would be kept short – which only added to the public's enthusiasm. Speculation in the press as to Irving's motivations in staging it was rife, but insubstantial.

When Vespucci began his return journey home,

Lucy leaned forward, focused, as he knew she would. It was the portion that told of the coming of the whales: how they had accompanied the ill-fated ship all through the crossing of the Atlantic, and further, until they arrived at Greenwich and the city awoke, for the first time, to their song.

He edged towards her. Her hair was pulled back behind her ears, and her fingers were long, smudged with ink and with dirt under the nails as if she had been digging in Thames mud.

"How are the whales today?" he asked.

"Restless. I'm not sure why. Have you noticed the change in their song when you walked along the embankment?"

Leaning together against the balustrade, the crowd closing them in, it was like they had found themselves, momentarily, in a small, dark, comfortable alcove, a private space in which they were alone.

"You're the marine biologist," Orphan said. "I'm only a poet."

"Working with whales is like working with poets," Lucy said. She put away her pad and her pen. She had a small bag hanging over her shoulder. "They're unruly, obtuse, and self-important."

Orphan laughed. He took her hand in his. The skin of her palm always surprised him in its roughness; it was a hand used to hard work. Her eyes were dark and mesmerising, like lode-stars, and small, almost invisible laughter-lines gathered like a fine web at the corners. "I love you," Orphan said.

She smiled, and he kissed her.

On stage, Henry Irving abandoned the role of narrator as the final act began to unfold. Now, with all the considerable verve and power he was capable of, he played Shakespeare, the poet and playwright who rose to prominence in the court of the Lizard King and became the first of the Poet-Prime Ministers.

Both Orphan and Lucy watched as the Ancient Mariner shuffled onto the stage to deliver the story of his life to Lord Shakespeare: Orphan, who had a natural interest in books, observed it closely. It was a heavy, leather-bound folio, the spine facing the audience, with the title *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* etched in gilt onto it.

"I pass," cried the Ancient Mariner (a young actor, Beerbohm Tree, whom Orphan vaguely recognised), "like night, from land to land, I have strange power of speech," (here he took a deep breath, and continued), "that morning that his face I see, I know the man that must hear me: to him my tale I teach!" And he passed the heavy book to Shakespeare, who took it from him with a graceful nod, laid it on the table before him, and opened it—

There was the sound of an explosion, a deafening bang (and for Orphan, everything slowed, as)—

The book disintegrated in a cloud of dust—

Not dust, shrapnel (and Orphan, moving in jerky, dreamlike motions, grabbed hold of Lucy and let himself fall to the ground, his weight dragging her with him, his body first cushioning her fall and then covering her in a protective embrace)—

That tore into Shakespeare/Irving and cut his head

away from his body and sent plumes of blood into the air.

The air filled with screams. The stage collapsed. It was, Orphan thought in his dazed, confused state on the floor of the theatre, holding on to the girl he loved, the definite end of the performance.

