

Brainwashed - China Mieville, "King Rat"

Written by Justin Patrick

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This novel is a resplendent supernatural tale moving to the brain rattling pulse of Jungle and Drum 'n Bass. These musical styles are the natural soundtrack for the book which was published when they were reaching an apex of popularity and polish in the late '90s. The arc of the story follows the deep bass tones of the genre, reverberating into the underworld of the sewers, and clamoring with explosive hi-hat snaps and brittle piano rolls onto the tarmac and slate roofed tops of London, where the book is set. This is a city book about city music crafted in apartments and blasted from cars, boom boxes, and sound systems smuggled into disused warehouses. This is a city book about city rodents sniffing through back alleys, searching refuse bins for a bit of scran, trying to avoid the daylight eyes of the human population. It is a book that agitated my mind in a most delightful way, as it has always been my opinion that good fiction—and music—should uproot the moorings of reality. This book did so with thunderous quakes and rhythmic undulations.

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The story is wrapped around the life of a young man named Saul whom gets arrested on suspicion of murder after waking up to find out that his father is dead, having been flung out a window. Saul and his pop never got along very well. They tolerated each other, but his son grew bitter over his father's socialist leanings, of the Lenin book given to him for Christmas, of his tiresome fixation with the working class. It grew to the point where they barely spoke. But he certainly didn't kill his father. That doesn't stop the authorities from hauling him away.

Enter King Rat, a diminutive man who smells putrid, having lurked in places most humans would not normally go, namely the sewers. But the King is more Rat than human. He breaks Saul out of the cop shop, and when they are safe from the searching eyes of the police, high on the rooftops overlooking London, King Rat gives him a new version of his family history. Saul learns that he is part rat.

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Much of the story concerns itself with the protagonist's unraveling of his true family history, which was not like the version he got from his dad or from King Rat, who just wants to use Saul as a weapon to fight the Piper. That's right the Pied Piper, the one from Hamelin who used his flute to lure the rats infesting the town out into the river where they all drowned. King Rat was there and his subjects—little nestlings and their parents—never forgave him for not protecting his people. Unfortunately he had been just as much under the spell of the flute as the rest, and had nearly drowned himself. King Rat never forgot, and remained on the lookout for a way to off the Piper, a way to get his revenge. Saul hadn't bargained for being part of that revenge.

Natasha, a Drum and Bass producer, and a good mate to Saul, gets tangled up in the drama. Working on some new tracks in her apartment, she notices with a mixture of chagrin and delight that some toff is down on the street below playing a flute solo to the accompaniment of her beats. She is surprised that it actually sounds good, but when the Piper makes the proposition that they perform together she initially recoils. She thinks the guy is kind of creepy, and that maybe he just wants to get into her pants. Yet his flute has a way of hypnotizing people, persuading them to do as he wishes, causing them to march to his tune. He is insistent, and eventually she complies, despite her fears of being ridiculed by others in the scene, of being some kind of bootleg electronic Jethro Tull. In the process Jungle music becomes the Piper's ultimate weapon.

From this point the book progresses inexorably to a rave-death climax. Sandwiched between the covers are some really beautiful passages. Mieville's prose is not as intensely stylized as it became in his trilogy of *Bas Lag* books (*Perdidio Street Station*, *The Scar*, and *Iron Council*), and the police investigation element is not as highly developed as it became in

The City and the City

, but the novel remains a masterful first. It is not only a unique take on an already horrific fairy tale, but China shows he could have made an interesting side line for himself as a music writer. He writes, "The beat was all snares at first, fast and dreamy, and a sound like a choir welled up and then resolved itself into electronic orchestration, fabricated emotion, a failed search for feeling. ... And then the bass line. ... More and more often gusts of flute would appear, overlaying each other. Another and another would join in, a cacophony of simultaneous forces of nature, half-musical, half-feral, artificial, commentary, an intruder in the city that shaped it contemptuously, sculpted it... Flute, white noise, snares and bass line, stretching off for a long time, an unbroken architecture of deserted beats." I would be keen to hear a song inspired by this book.

The copy I have is from Paul Miller's Earthling Publications and was issued in a signed edition of 400 numbered copies, and 15 lettered copies. It is a gorgeous production with stunning black

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and white illustrations by Richard Kirk, and an introduction by Clive Barker. It is not a very long book, but put together with the quality paper, fine binding, and black slipcase it has a nice heft. Just as MP3s did not replace the market for quality vinyl records, but rather enhanced it, so eBooks will not stop the purveyors of fine books from creating beautiful works of art for the collector.