

Perdido Street Station Study Guide

Perdido Street Station by China Miéville

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Contents

Perdido Street Station Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Commissions, Part I.....	5
Physiognomies of Flight, Part II.....	7
Metamorphoses, Part III.....	10
A Plague of Nightmares, Part IV.....	12
Councils, Part V.....	14
The Glasshouse, Part VI.....	17
Crisis, Part VII.....	19
Judgment, Part VIII.....	21
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

Readers with a grasp of quantum mechanics would do well to brush up on the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle before tackling this book. Those without need to know that modern physics believes the act of observing subatomic particles changes their properties and behavior. Thus, it is impossible to accurately understand the true nature of creation at the invisible level because of the unpredictable nature of up and down quarks, bosons, muons and all the rest. With that idea firmly in mind, the reader will have the correct framework to approach China Mieville and his coprophiliac world called New Crobuzon. It's a place somewhere in time (past, present, or future) where everything is in flux. Strange hybrid creatures, possibly the result of an unleashing of the Torque, pursue each other with idiopathic motives that bear only a passing resemblance to those of humans. There are flying snakes, beetles as big as a house, insect-human hybrids, giant carnivorous moths, talking centipedes and all manner of flying, crawling and creeping critters in addition to homo sapiens. In New Crobuzon, it seems the forces of evolution have taken a dark, retrogressive turn.

A Sambo-like obsessive compulsive scientist named Isaac pursues crisis energy, a force he learns about by observing the water sculptures of an inscrutable race of Wyrmen. His lover is Lin, a part human-part grasshopper artist. Together, they feel like outcasts in an already-freakish world where they must hide their affair for fear of public censure. The author begs but does not answer the question of how this menagerie of hybrids and mutants came into existence in the first place. There seems to be no time to address such fundamentals when there is a huge, pulsating pupa in Isaac's laboratory and a depressed garuda who will pay a handsome sum of gold to be outfitted with a reasonable facsimile of the wings he never had. With this all-too-human motive, Isaac ransacks every science book he can find in search of the best way to power these avian prostheses. He settles on crisis energy.

The bugwoman Lin works on a lucrative contract to make a sculpture of a perverse drug dealer named Mr. Motley, by using color excreted from behind her head carapace. When she and Isaac meet, they make furious human-insect love, complete with gentle stroking of her feathery wings. Things get truly nasty when Lin is murdered by Mr. Motley's thugs as events in New Crobuzon go from weird to frightening. The vengeful drug lord, a paranoid Mayor Rudgutter and a militia equipped with 17th Century weapons are joined in an apocalyptic battle between the forces of civilization in New Crobuzon and the forces of death and destruction unleashed in a swarm of carnivorous, man-sized slake moths that soar through the skies looking for humans and any other "blood creatures" to consume.

At this point, the author seems like a necromancer stirring his cauldron of monsters of the id to a frenzied climax and resolution. The author creates a world of half-humans whose drives and motivations are cryptic, which can pose a challenge for the reader. The "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary for a strong connection between author and reader is strained to the breaking point, for example, when Isaac and his companions—fleeing a militia hit squad—encounter a network of "constructs," or robotic



forms of intelligent half-life, self-constructed from industrial waste. Happily, this Construct Council sides with Isaac and his friends against the hungry slake moths.

Shallow character development is apparent when Derkhan, one of Isaac's companions, asks him whether he is grieving after the murder of his lover, Lin. Isaac replies that there is hardly time for emotion in the crisis unfolding in New Crobuzon.



Commissions, Part I

Commissions, Part I Summary

Chapters 1-5

Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, maverick scientist, awakens in bed one morning beside Lin, his insect/woman lover. Below them, the street is flooded with creatures of all sorts buzzing about the open-air market in the oozing, suppurating chaos and stench of Shadrach Street in New Crobuzon. Isaac notices a parasitic grub in the bed, and a big fuss is made about getting a bath. Lin tells Isaac she must travel to the Old City to buy colorberries produced by Khepri women and sold in a spittle shop, so she can eat them to produce a colored substance secreted behind her head that she uses to paint pictures. But they start another playful bout of lovemaking and do not arise until 11 a.m. Isaac stops for a beer on his way to his tenuous job at the university physics department.

He buys a piece of watercraft, or water sculpture made by the mutant Vodyanoi, in the shape of a small figurine. In his office, he ponders how the Vodyanoi are able to sculpt water into forms that are semi-permanent by manipulating the surface tension of water. He hears someone approaching his laboratory, and opens the door to discover a Garuda, or human-avian mutant, named Yagharek who pleads with Isaac to restore his ability to fly. Instead of wings, Yagharek has fake wooden structures on his back that resemble wings. Lin meets with a hybrid named Mr. Motley who wants her to make a life-sized model of himself. She hesitates, but accepts the commission because of its revenue potential.

Yagharek tells the astonished Isaac that he came to New Crobuzon after researching it in his local library in pursuit of a place with scientists who might restore his ability to fly. Isaac tells Yagharek he is not a traditional scientist, but a blend of many kinds of scientists, somewhat like Perdido Street Station where many trains arrive and depart in all directions. But Yagharek gives him a pouch of gold coins and tells him he will be in touch. Isaac writes a list of books he needs from the university library to research flight and gives it to Teafortwo, a squat, talking avian messenger known as a wyrman. He gives Teafortwo a coin and says he'll get another after he makes delivery to the librarian if he allows Isaac to make sketches of his wings for study.

Commissions, Part I Analysis

The first section sets the scene for the narrative, including the cast of unlikely characters, and gives some insight into their motivations. The reader sees that Isaac is a driven scientist whose unconventional behavior causes conflict between himself and his superior at the university sciences department. The reader also is introduced to Lin, Isaac's insect-human hybrid lover. Although the upper part of her body, including head



and shoulders, is insectoid, the lower part of her body is shaped like a woman's with breasts and other female characteristics. Because she has no lips, Lin cannot speak but must communicate through sign language. Lin and Isaac do most of their communications physically, in long bouts of lovemaking.

A significant part of Isaac's motivation stems from his contract with the avian-human hybrid named Yagharek. Yagharek has had his wings cut off for some unnamed crime in his Raruda community, and wants to pay Isaac in gold if he can invent some kind of new wings to replace those he's lost. Poverty and intellectual curiosity drive Isaac to make this bargain with Yagharek. Another significant motivator for Isaac is his affection for Lin who, for similar reasons, signs a contract with an odd collection of disparate animal parts known as Mr. Motley, to produce a life-sized sculpture of him. Both Isaac and Lin enter into these ventures in good faith, without knowing the real motives of their employers.



Physiognomies of Flight, Part II

Physiognomies of Flight, Part II Summary

Chapters 6-17

Isaac dives into the material brought to him by Teafortwo. A bibliophile and natural scholar, Isaac is aware of how little he knows about biology, much less biological flight. Ivan stops at the Moon's Daughters pub to have a pint of ale and say hello to Red Kate, the proprietress. Isaac spies his friend, Gedrecsechet (Ged), vodyanoi or head librarian at the New Crobuzon Palgolak Library, a rich resource that equals the university library. Isaac asks Ged what he knows about the Garuda Bird-people. "Completely egalitarian and individualistic," Ged replies. The next day, Sunday, he meets Lin at the Clock and Cocker for supper and finds her surrounded by the usual gaggle of artists, musicians and critics, celebrating her new commission. Isaac arrives and joins the conversation, telling about his gold-based commission for the garuda Yagharek.

Lin and Isaac go to the fair with two friends and encounter "a moving stew of human and vodyanoi, cactus, khepri and other, rarer, breeds: hotchi and strider and stiltspear and races the names of which Isaac did not know." When they stumble upon the Circus of Weird, Isaac is intrigued that he might learn something about flight. Instead, he discovers a poor, wretched mafadet, a huge reptilian with thick fur like a lion. The crowd torments the mafadet; Lin goes back to the entrance to wait for Isaac and their friend, Derkhan. They encounter a Remade garuda with "wings torn from some buzzard or vulture" attached to and rotting on his back, as a special feature of the Circus of Weird. They grab Lin and exit the fair, repulsed and depressed.

When word gets around New Crobuzon that Isaac is looking for winged creatures to study, there is a wholesale attack on birds, insects, maggots and caterpillars as people try to gather them for sale. There is a temporary disruption in the biosphere because of the onslaught; an atmosphere of frantic opportunism arises. A parliament clerk receives a box of caterpillar grubs for a mysterious agency simply called Research and Development; he pilfers one of the insects then forwards the parcel to Dr. Magesta Barbile, who takes the box inside a dark, locked cage and puts the grubs in a food slot. She hears something in the darkness stir and races out to put a sign on the door warning of a biohazard danger. Lin begins her life-sized portrait of Mr. Motley, who jabbars on about drugs, art and love out of one of his multiple mouths. At the end of her patience, Lin realizes that she really wants to see Isaac, and beats a hasty, but polite, retreat after her day's work

Isaac returns to his laboratory at the university to confront two co-workers, Lublamai and David, who are irritated about the collection of bird droppings on the floor and the pigeon mounted on a cross in the writhing agonies of death. There is a brightly colored grub of unknown species that refuses to eat. Isaac agrees to clean the place and pay extra rent. David walks over to the pigeon and euthanizes it by wringing its neck. Lin



arrives at the laboratory and she and Isaac leave for an evening of frolic. Meanwhile, Derkhan the art critic, takes a carriage to the depraved, pustulous Dog Fenn district to rendezvous with her lover, Benjamin, a butcher who slaughters pigs in an underground abattoir. Lin and Isaac take a carriage to Spatters, the district where most of the garuda live, in hopes of recruiting them to help him in his flight studies. Their leader, however, barks at Isaac that none will help, even for money, and tells him to "fuck off."

Despondent at having alienated the garuda population of Spatters, Isaac realizes his approach to flight is wrong; it should be metaphysical rather than mechanical. He gathers all his captured laboratory animals, drags their cages to the open window and sets them free. After a moment's hesitation, there is a rush of wings as moths, horseflies, falcons, batkin, parakeets, aspises, magpies, beetles, "creatures of the upper air, little water-top skimmers" and assorted other creatures fly away. Yagharek arrives at the laboratory to ask Isaac whether he has forgotten about their project.

No, Isaac says, but tells him that his research now is directed toward finding a way to use "crisis energy" of atomic particles as manifested in the watercraft culptures of the vodyanoi. Somewhat reassured, Yagharek flies off into the night. Isaac is visited in the middle of the night by his junky friend Gazid, who claims he needs to collect a debt from Lin, who is not there. When Gazid draws close to the still-captive grub, the insect waves its head excitedly. Gazid tells Isaac it's because of the dreamshit he carries; feeding a pellet of the stuff to the grub causes a frenzy of body writhing and jaw movement. Isaac unwittingly ingests some dreamshit in the mustard on his sandwich and goes into a psychedelic trip that lasts until morning, when he notices the grub has trebled in size overnight.

Isaac visits his despised department head at the university, Montague Vermishank, to ask whether any creature had ever been restored to flight. Yes, Vermishank answers, it was done once with a horrendous amount of work by using huge mechanical wings. This confirms his resolve to continue in the same direction of research, toward harnessing crisis energy. Lin arrives and they depart for a night of frolic.

Physiognomies of Flight, Part II Analysis

In a bit of foreshadowing, Isaac buys an unknown insect larva sold by a government clerk who has stolen it from a box shipped to Parliament. Isaac takes the slug to his laboratory and places it among his already-huge menagerie of flying insects and animals while he researches crisis energy as a possible way to provide powered flight for Yagharek. Neither is aware that the shipment of grubs is for a scientist, Dr. Magesta Barbile, who is engaged in research on slake moths, predatory mutants which grow large and have a taste for human brains as a way to extract their dreams. The moths' excrement is known in the underworld as dreamshit, and is a highly-addictive hallucinatory drug.

The strange blindness of someone with a brilliant scientific mind is evident as Isaac adds the grub to his collection of specimens and forgets about it while he goes about his



research on crisis energy. Excitedly, Isaac formulates endless calculations that show how crisis energy, a latent power unknown to physicists but harnessed by Wyrmen in making water sculpture, can be tapped. Carried away with his ideas, Isaac has no time to see Lin or to notice the grub in its cage growing exponentially larger. As an allegory, this situation parallels nuclear physicists who worked on the atom bomb during World War II and the Cold War without taking full account of the ultimate moral implications of their work and its potential to cause harm to the human race.



Metamorphoses, Part III

Metamorphoses, Part III Summary

Chapters 17-27

Lin and Isaac struggle to maintain their relationship despite frequent periods of separation as she works on her sculpture of the dreamshit drug dealer, Mr. Motley. Isaac talks of crisis energy and Lin says little for fear that her employer might have ESP. When she finishes work each day, Lin often stops in Kinken, a slightly more upscale Khepri neighborhood than Creekside where she spent her earliest years. She delights in the Khepri energy in Kinken but feels grateful she was finally able to leave it, once she learned sign language. Meanwhile, Isaac is on the verge of a major scientific breakthrough using his water crisis energy to power wings of flight for the garuda Yagharek. When Yagharek visits one day, he asks Isaac why he doesn't use Torque energy to power his flight. Isaac responds by telling Yagharek about the hellish devastation in 1545 when Torque bombs were unleashed. Isaac shows Yagharek his plans for the crisis energy machine he plans to build.

Isaac tries to explain the workings of a crisis engine to Yagharek, who is more interested in the huge, caged larva that dangles in Isaac's laboratory. As the insect weaves itself into a chrysalis, both Isaac and Yagharek agree it will emerge as a flying creature of some sort. The repairman returns Isaac's servant robot, called a construct, and the machine gets right to work cleaning the laboratory. Its new circuitry enables it to work better and faster and even approximate thought. Having exploded a chunk of cheese in his crisis engine, Isaac leaves the lab early determined to find Lin and get drunk. Lublamai, his lab assistant, remains behind and Teafortwo, the flying wyrman handyman, arrives to pick up a grocery list. While they are talking, the creature in the chrysalis rips it open with black claws, drops down and expands to its full size, bigger than a man.

Hungry and determined to satisfy its instincts, the slake moth attacks Luclamai. Then it hurls itself into the sky, soaring over New Crobuzon like an eagle circling its prey. It swoops down on a prostitute and her customer in an alley and attacks them. Then it finds its way to an old building where three more slake moths are imprisoned. Excited citizens show up with flintlock pistols and enter the cage, whereupon the new moth kills them and frees his shackled brethren. All four escape into the night sky.

The next morning, Isaac returns to his laboratory to find Luclamai lying in a slobbery coma against the door. He is relieved to feel his warm body and to hear his irregular breathing. The New Crobuzon Militia come to the scene, write a crime report, and send it directly to the office of Mayor Bentham Rudgutter by means of a pneumatic tube. The mayor is being briefed by his assistant, MontJohn Rescue, about an imminent strike by the Vodyanoi dock workers. The mayor's secretary, Davinia, interrupts to tell him there is an urgent message of great importance.



A desperate Mayor Rudgutter meets with the ambassador of Hell and asks for assistance in apprehending the predatory moths; the hellion refuses. The only alternative, Rudgutter muses, is the Weaver, a huge, humorless unemployed arachnid known for its killing abilities. Isaac returns to the laboratory and encounters his friend, David, who originally sold him the moth pupa, and a stunned Teafortwo. Isaac tells David he does not hold him responsible. Yagharek shows up to demand that Isaac not divert his efforts from his flight project. He reassures the garuda that he will resume work once the moth dilemma is solved.

Lin spends some of her commission money on fine foods and new clothes for herself, then goes in search of Isaac. Meanwhile, the Vodyanoi dock workers' strike explodes over New Crobuzon like Fourth of July pyrotechnics.

Metamorphoses, Part III Analysis

Frankenstein-like, the moth pupa suddenly matures into a slake moth and breaks out of its cage, flying to meet its shackled siblings held in a building in New Crobuzon. Before it departs, the moth attacks Lublamai leaving the lab assistant in a bloody coma. Mayor Rudgutter makes a deal with the Weaver, a huge sentient spider, to help destroy the moths before they destroy New Crobuzon. Just as the moth larva incubated until it burst open, the plot potentials at this point are incubating before being released.

Isaac, still happily occupied with his crisis machine, has no clue about what has been unleashed from his lab. But the mayor, a pragmatic if vain and duplicitous politician, understands the danger and immediately tries to head it off. The mayor does not yet know the origin of the moth and is not yet joined in physical battle with Isaac and his compatriots. His motives at this point are largely fear-driven—fear for the residents and fear for his own power base if he's blamed for allowing the slake moth to get loose.



A Plague of Nightmares, Part IV

A Plague of Nightmares, Part IV Summary

Chapters 27-33

Derkhan Blueday, a member of one of the upper-crust families of New Crobuzon, meets with a "communicatrix" or psychic medium named Umma Balsum, to learn the whereabouts of Benjamin Flex. Through the medium, she contacts Benjamin and learns he'd been taken prisoner by Mayor Rudgutter's thugs because of his editorial support for the strikers, and is about to be tortured to death. Mayor Rudgutter and his cronies go far underground below Perdido Street Station to meet the Weaver, a huge spider with legs six feet in length, highly intelligent and focused on aesthetics. Rudgutter offers the Weaver a pair of scissors, knowing that the insect is fascinated with them and keeps a collection. In exchange for the scissors, Rudgutter asks the Weaver to help rid New Crobuzon of giant slake moths that are menacing residents. The Weaver agrees and retreats into the darkness again.

David Serachim makes his way through the pustulent prostitution area of town known as Spit Hearth to an assignation in Room 17 of a brothel serviced by a cadre of Remade whores. David meets two men in suits who years earlier had blackmailed him with photos of him with a young prostitute. In exchange for their silence, plus healthy payments from the men, David has become an informant. He tells the men about the Parliament clerk who stole the larva and sold it to Isaac—the same larva that matured into a slake moth and is carnivorously attacking people. Summer arrives in New Crobuzon like a sweaty curse; children and adults start losing their mental faculties as the great slake moths soar above, looking for flesh. The maimed, eyeless body of Benjamin Flex washes ashore.

Isaac, Derkhan, and Lemuel Pigeon seek out the scientist Magesta Barbile to find an answer to why the residents of New Crobuzon seem to be losing their minds. An extremely suspicious Dr. Barbile lets them into her flat and says a project she worked on with Benjamin Flex was suddenly cancelled by the government before it was finished. The project involved slake moths that escaped and are now menacing the city, Magesta explains. Isaac asks Barbile how to catch a slake moth and before she can answer, a moth is at her cracked window, compressing itself into a tiny ball and oozing through the window until its wings shatter the glass and it stands in the room, "as big as a bear." First the slake moth rips apart Barbile's assistant and casts his remains in the corner. Then it grabs Barbile and thrusts its long, feathery tongue obscenely down her throat and sucks her dry. Isaac, Lemuel and Derkhan barely make it out of the room and slam the door, running for their lives.

Mr. Motley keeps Lin waiting in the attic of his house until well into the night, when he appears with his cactacae bodyguard, a fierce plant-animal hybrid with massive arms and hands and spikes everywhere except on its forelimbs. He tells Lin he knows that



Isaac has taken his dreamshit and tried to compete with him, as the cactacae jumps on her and holds her on the floor. Isaac and Lemuel find Vermishank at the university and force him into a cab at knife-point. Isaac tells Vermishank he knows that the slake moths escaped from his project and demands to know how to capture or kill them. Vermishank tells Isaac slake moths are predatory hermaphrodites that feed on people's dreams and excrete dreamshit. He says they cannot be killed because they live on several planes. Vermishank plunges toward Isaac and sinks his fingers deep into his flesh. The cleaning construct carries a crumpled piece of paper that indicates Isaac is to be arrested later that day, Chainday. In the struggle that follows, Lemuel points a pistol at Vermishank and blows a hole in his head

Tipped off that Rudgutter has ordered the militia to arrest him at the laboratory, Isaac tries feverishly with Derkhan's help, to gather his equipment and flee. But the militia arrive before they can depart; they pour toxic lab chemicals out the window onto the soldiers. This initially repels the militia, but they regroup and start to enter the building. Just then, Isaac becomes aware of the Weaver's presence in the laboratory. The giant talking spider picks up Yagharek, Derkhan and Isaac in its chitinous grasp, then splatters recently-severed ears of militiamen around the room, and departs.

A Plague of Nightmares, Part IV Analysis

The level of tension in the narrative tightens in this section as fear spreads about the moths. Isaac, feeling responsible for the situation, turns all his efforts toward finding a way to kill the creatures. The atmosphere of danger is literally in the air, as the predatory thought waves of the moths set off an epidemic of nightmares in New Crobuzon. When Isaac and friends visit the government scientist who studies the creatures, they witness a slake moth attacking and killing her in a bizarre fashion. They barely escape with their lives, and go to Vermishank, Isaac's university boss, to confront him and demand an answer about how to stop the moths that have been one of his research projects. Somehow, a cleaning construct knows that Rudgutter has sent his militia to have him arrested and tips him off. After Lemuel kills Vermishank in a tussle, Isaac, Derkhan and Lemuel become fugitives. The apocalyptic battle of New Crobuzon is joined by the three-sided struggle between Mayor Rudgutter who wants to make an object lesson of Isaac, Mr. Motley who believes Isaac has cornered the market in illicit dreamshit, and Isaac and his cronies including Yagharek, Derkhan and Lemuel.



Councils, Part V

Councils, Part V Summary

Chapters 34-41

Mayor Rudgutter and his aides meet in an atmosphere of siege and crisis to discuss letters from residents alarmed at the appearance of the predatory slake moths and fearful of Isaac's work on the crisis energy machine. These fears and apprehensions cause an epidemic of nightmares, interrupted sleep and daytime accidents caused by drowsiness. Isaac and Derkhan awaken crammed into small spaces in the walls of the sewer system, in filthy water and breathing in the unhealthy fetid air of excrement. Their companions Yagharek and Lemuel are missing. Isaac and Derkhan are both missing their left ears; in Isaac's case, the ear is completely healed with skin but Derkhan's is still raw and bloody. They notice some kind of form crammed into a similar space on the opposite wall; Isaac approaches and finds that it's the cleaning construct he recently had repaired.

Yagharek and Lemuel follow the railroad tracks to the village of Murkside, where they discover a storm sewer and enter to hide from the militia. In the dank fetid sewer they soon encounter Isaac and Darkhan. Lemuel says he's leaving the hideout but Isaac points out that he will be discovered by the militia and he remains. Isaac maniacally explains to the group that the cleaning construct is an intelligent, sentient creature who wishes the slake moths to be exterminated. The construct, he says, is their ally. "Marvelous," Lemuel barks. "You've got a vacuum cleaner on your side!"

Isaac says he must find Lin and warn her of the militia danger. The four bed down for the night in a little shack near the railroad tracks. The next day, Isaac leaves to find Lin's tower where he enters her ninth-floor apartment. He finds the butchered body of Lucky Gazid leaning forward on the table in a pool of clotted blood. Then he finds a pair of crushed Khepri wings and a note from Motley threatening to pull out Lin's forelegs one by one and then decapitate her unless he returns the dreamshit and turns himself over to Motley. When the rest of the group arrives, Lemuel tells Isaac that Lin is undoubtedly dead and that he should not risk capture by Motley if he goes looking for her.

Derkhan and Isaac find a small shack beside the railroad and collapse with fatigue. Bodies appear everywhere as the militia roams the countryside. Isaac figures there is a power struggle between warring factions over control of the city. Lemuel returns to the group with news that he has "communicated" their dire situation to his colleagues. On a small piece of land at the confluence of two rivers called Little Strack, MontJohn Rescue, right-hand man for the mayor, gathers with a small group. They disrobe to reveal that each has a kind of parasitic creature wrapped around its neck that resembles a human hand and a reptilian tail inserted under the skin into their bodies. When the group convenes, these so-called handlers leave their hosts, hold hands to communicate, then return to their hosts who redress themselves. The group puts on



helmets with backward-facing mirrors, picks up flintlock pistols and prepares to carry out the mayor's marching orders.

The four fugitives tramp through an industrial garbage dump until they come upon a massive gathering of constructs in an open field. Isaac counts some 60 constructs, tended by about 30 humans. The garbage forms itself into some kind of creature that sits up, as the awestruck humans bow down in blind obeisance. The garbage construct sees the group of four and shouts a welcome to them. They are approached by a human who is nude and "horribly thin." As he approaches, they realize the top of his head has been sheared off and a metal implant affixed to his brain. An electrical cord of some kind runs from the top of his head into the body of the huge construct.

The naked man tells Isaac and his friends that he and the other constructs were fashioned from garbage such as broken down machines and computers, discarded limbs and industrial waste that acquired a consciousness as it rusted in the elements. The man says that he is, literally, the same huge construct that lurks ahead of them. "I am the Construct Council," it says. Several of the constructs grab Isaac, Derkhan and Yagherek in their arm clamps and start to carry them toward the main construct. Lemuel runs away in fear and Isaac screams at him, "Pigeon, you bastard!" Meanwhile, in New Crobuzon, a gory battle to the death ensues between the slake moths, the Weaver and the handliners in which brains are sucked dry by strange proboscises and heads are sliced off by sharp arachnid jaws.

The group is astonished to hear one of the constructs announce the imminent attack of a slake moth, the sickly, undernourished but still deadly outgrowth of Isaac's escaped pupa. The moth lands near the Construct Council and begins to flick its predatory tongue when it smells Derkhan and starts to approach. Suddenly an industrial crane holding a huge shipping crate turns and drops its freight directly atop the moth, crushing it and causing a slow, agonizing death. As Isaac, Derkhan and Yagherek stagger off, the Construct Council yells at Isaac to bring his crisis engine to him "for safekeeping." Isaac, Derkhan and Lemuel regroup at the hut after a day spent trying to enlist allies in the war against the moths. A couple of gangsters with flamethrowers on their heads are sent by Mr. Motley. Lemuel introduces three employees he's hired—two human and one Vodyanoi. They have armor and blunderbusses. Tansell, one of the humans, fashions a helmet for himself out of an old colander. Meanwhile, new constructs appear "with the form and size of chimpanzees." In the skies above, the slake moths engage in a primitive mating ritual, after which the female flies off to a secluded spot to make her nest.

Councils, Part V Analysis

Tired, dirty from traipsing through the sewers and frightened, Isaac and friends stumble upon yet another strange scene: industrial waste at a dump site forming itself into a humanoid shape, connected by cables to nude humans with the tops of their heads cut off. The Construct Council is a weird combination of half-dead living creatures and half-alive machinery. But just to prove that its heart is in the right place, the Construct



Council commandeers a huge crane, hoists a heavy shipping container into the air, and drops it strategically on a slake moth that has flown into the dump site.

In the freakish bioscape of this novel, both friends and enemies appear in the strangest places, which adds to the building narrative tension as the forces of good become aligned against the forces of evil in an inevitable Armageddon. This scenario is reminiscent of comic books wherein superheros line up against super villains in a tradition that dates to the earliest days of Superman, and perhaps even to the earliest example of English literature in Beowulf.



The Glasshouse, Part VI

The Glasshouse, Part VI Summary

Chapters 42-45

Isaac, Lemuel, Yagharek and Derkhan go to Riverskin to inspect the enormous Glasshouse that encompasses most of the district where Cactacae live, like an enormous sweaty greenhouse. They suspect the Glasshouse is where the slake moths hide during daylight hours, to rest for their nocturnal hunting sprees. Lemuel climbs up a very long ladder to the top of the glass dome, and what he finds there is indeed a large crack in the glass big enough to permit the predators to enter and leave. The others climb up and gaze at the bustling community below. As evening approaches, Yagharek lowers himself on a rope inside the dome followed by several monkey constructs.

As Yagharek and the constructs cling to the inside of the glass dome, they are joined by Isaac and Derkhan who had to take the sewer route to get inside because of their size. The Cactacae town closes down shortly after sunset and the streets are barren. Around 11 p.m., Yagharek sees one of the moths start to emerge from a house they use for a roost. One by one, two moths move up the inside of the dome slug-like. One of the three moths immediately takes wing, passes through a crevice, and disappears into the night. As the other two moths move upwards and get closer to where Yagharek is perched, a posse of Cactacae below turn on a powerful searchlight in the crest of the dome, trying to aim it at one of the moths. A pulse of light within its beam intended to kill the moth goes out, but the moth is unscathed. Eventually the two moths fly through the crack and into the night. Yagharek and the others are perplexed about where the fourth moth could be. They also realize that the Cactacae do not know the moths sleep in their houses and think them occasional intruders.

Accompanied by three monkey constructs, Isaac and Shadrach, one of his companions, steal undetected into the house from which Yagharek saw the months emerge, and carefully make their way upstairs until they reach a small room that reeks of rotting flesh. Isaac and Shadrach wear special helmets to squelch their thought waves, which is how the moths detect a potential meal. Inside is a slake moth, lying "languorously" on the floor, having eaten a few of the local Cactacae. The moth pulls out a large blob of dreamshit and inserts a needle from its abdomen containing slake moth eggs. Isaac and Shadrach approach the dreamshit ball while the moth is distracted; Isaac plunges a knife deep into the globe and lets the gooey mass with eggs pour out. A monkey construct shoots flames at the eggs and destroys them. Another climbs on the moth's back and shoots flames at the huge creature.

The moth turns and senses Shadrach but not Isaac, throws Shadrack against the wall and inserts its tongue into his stomach to suck out all his juices. Isaac flees and encounters the Weaver waiting in the wings. As Isaac escapes, he sees the Weaver locked in mortal combat with all the slake moths who return to their nest when they



sense their eggs are destroyed. Cactacae police, armed with powerful weapons, chase after Isaac, Lemuel and Yagharek as they flee.

One stabs Lemuel in the lower back, causing him a slow, agonizing, screaming death. "He was helping you," Isaac screams impotently as the survivors escape through the sewers. Derkhan goes to the local charity hospital and bluffs her way into the critical ward with gold coins and cash in her pockets and a hidden pistol. She finds a patient, Andrej Shelbornek, whose chart says he is expected to live only six days. and tells the nurse she wants to take him for an experimental treatment. The nurse balks, but takes the gold when Derkhan tells her to use it to buy some pain medications for other dying patients. When Isaac and Yagharek return to the shack, they are met at the door by Derkhan, who tells Isaac, "Found someone, Zaac."

The Glasshouse, Part VI Analysis

The Glasshouse provides a change of pace in this supercharged narrative. Atop the gigantic structure that encloses the mutant Cactacae community, one can gaze downward and watch the world in microcosm. Although this may be stimulating, danger is never far off as the nesting place of the slake moths is discovered by an eagle-eyed Yagharek. The Cactacae stupidly believe that the slake moths are not their problem and have no idea that the predators actually live in their neighborhood. They believe Isaac, Lemuel and Yagharek, since they are intruders, are the problem and go after them as mortal foes. Allegorically, this can be read as a statement about human prejudice that refuses to see a present evil but instead focuses on a perceived threat from an outsider. Xenophobia of this type is universal geographically and historically, and may be man's evolutionary stumbling block. Futurists, humanitarians and peace-makers dream of a time when humans can modulate their inherited fear of strangers, but this particular weakness is seen in clear outline in this section.



Crisis, Part VII

Crisis, Part VII Summary

Chapters 46-51

A nude Isaac is roused from sleep beside the Canker River by Yagharek. He slips into the fetid water and finds a small boat, where he paddles to the center of the water to meet the Weaver. With only his head protruding from the river, the Weaver tells Isaac he was unsuccessful in killing the moths. Isaac returns to the Construct Council to retrieve his crisis engine. The construct suggests that Isaac wire him to the machine, turn on his crisis engine, and let him attack the slake moths. Isaac agrees and gives him a list of materials needed for the job. He says they must connect all the wiring and have the machine ready by 6 p.m. at Perdido Street Station, the focal point of all transportation and communication in New Crobuzon.

Meanwhile Derkhan goes to the local charity hospital with a handful of gold coins and a pistol. She bluffs her way into the terminal ward, and checks patient charts to find someone who is expected to die within a few days—65-year-old Andrej Shelbornek. She aims the pistol at the nurse and offers her the gold to buy medications for the other dying patients. Derkhan says she wants to take Shelbornek for an experimental treatment, and takes him to the railroad shack. When Isaac and Yagharek arrive, she tells Isaac she has someone for him. Isaac unpacks his sack and gets to work reassembling his crisis engine.

With a well-placed thrust of his elbow, Yagharek knocks out Andrej; then he and Isaac drag the poor dying man to the riverside. Derkhan and the construct avatar tug an enormous cable from the Construct Council into the river, where its end is inserted at a 90-degree angle into the riverbed by aquatic Vodyanoi. Volunteers arrive by the carload and help carry the cable through every niche of the city, even the sewers, and into Perdido Street Station. They prod Andrej onto a flat surface near the end of the cable and Isaac gets his crisis machine humming. Then they attach a helmet to Andrej's head and wire him to the crisis machine, then wait for the Weaver to arrive.

The Weaver arrives and Isaac coaxes him into wearing one of the helmets so that his dreams and those of Andrej move along the circuits and combine with informational discharges from the Construct Council. Andrej's input is superseded by that from the Council. Andrej begins to squirm with all the input from the Weaver and the Council. The powerful dream energy from this connection surges through the sky and the four airborne slake moths turn hungrily in the direction of the station. But before the moths arrive, the outpost is stormed by militiamen. As Derkhan and Isaac shoot their flintlock pistols at the militia, a shadowy figure in a dark cape fires on the soldiers with an automatic pistol, driving them back from the platform where Andrej writhes. It's a human Remade with a huge mantis claw replacing his right arm known as Jack Half-a-Prayer.



Three moths, one at a time, descend on Andrej and try to suck out his powerful dream material; they become sated but continue to feed until, one at a time, their bodies explode and they die. A bullet fired by the militia kills Andrej and the crisis machine shuts down. The fourth moth arrives and, smelling the carnage of its siblings below, flees in terror.

Chapter 51 begins with a strange sentence fragment, either the result of sloppy editing or writing (or both): "As the battered militia gathered themselves and began to peer, once more, over the edge of the roof at Isaac's and Derkhan's and Yagharek's feet."

Jack Half-a-Prayer keeps the militia pinned down with random, deadly accurate, shots while metallic soldiers drop down onto the roof from overhead dirigibles. Isaac and Derkhan are picked up by the Weaver and carried away for protection. The fourth slake moth circles the city in fear, trying to find a safe place before it returns home. The Weaver releases Isaac and Derkhan in the house that serves as the nest for the moths. In a dark room he discovers Lin, still alive, but missing her wings, her carapace damaged and battered, her whole body covered with bruises and scars. She signs to him and he grabs her, trying to explain why he gave up looking for her. Derkhan and Yagharek join them, just as Motley bursts through the door. Derkhan fires two shots into him, but he remains unscathed.

The slake moth returns and takes Lin as its prey, while Motley and his band of Remades stand ready with flamethrowers, pistols and swords behind Mayor Rudgutter. As the moth begins to suck Lin's brain, Yagharek throws a kerosene lantern on its back, burning its carapace. He then lashes his mighty whip around the moth's head, preventing it from swallowing. Isaac quickly pulls Lin out, while flames and bullets tear the moth apart.

Crisis, Part VII Analysis

In this section, Derkhan bribes and threatens a nurse in order to get a dying patient from a charity hospital to use for "bait" to kill slake moths. It's all part of Isaac's plan to wire up his crisis machine to the heads of the Weaver, the dying patient Andrej, and to the Construct Council to generate exceptionally strong dream waves to attract and kill the moths. The plan works and the moths are ultimately dispatched. The reader may have lingering questions about the allegorical meaning of snatching a dying man from his hospital bed and using him in a wild experiment. This scene reverberates with the often-heard complaint about the risky nature of medical "practice" and is an eerie commentary on how society treats its aged and dying populations. The question of exigency is also raised: do the ends justify the means when the ends involve human sacrifice? Even if the ends prevent the further killing of innocents?



Judgment, Part VIII

Judgment, Part VIII Summary

Chapter 52

Isaac holds Lin until she falls asleep, then hears someone rapping on the door. Clutching his pistol, he opens the door to discover another Cymek Garuda, like Yagharek. She implores him not to give Yagharek new wings because he is guilty of raping her. Isaac considers her request and decides to cancel his contract with Yagharek. Isaac, Lin and Derkhan leave the building and leave New Crobuzon, walking southwards along the railroad tracks to an unknown destination and new lives.

Judgment, Part VIII Analysis

After all the huffing and puffing, flame-throwing, shooting and torture, the resolution of this hyper-developed novel is sweet indeed. The good guys win and get away with their lives and the bad guys are wiped out or permanently out of commission. Perhaps the best result of all this is that the fevered citizens of New Crobuzon can be restored to peaceful sleep, at last.



Characters

Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin

Isaac, the lead character, is a research biologist who passionately collects a myriad of winged creatures, both animals and insects, for his study of flight. As a pure homo sapiens, Isaac is somewhat unique in the strange world of New Crobuzon, populated by all manner of life forms, many of them apparent genetic flukes that combine structures and traits of different species. Isaac is obsessed with his work and determined to understand everything about flight so he can restore it to those who have lost it and give it to those who want it. Isaac is described as a "big, dark-skinned man" and "a dirigible." Although a brilliant scientist, at home Isaac is a coarse, vulgar man of base appetites and pleasures.

Lin

Lin is an insectoid artist who makes paintings by ingesting wild "color berries" of different hues, and collecting the fluid that is then excreted behind her "chitinous" head to use as paint. Since Lin has no fleshy mouth, she communicates with Isaac, her lover, by sign language using her forearms. Isaac speaks directly to her in English. Lin is a khepri, one of the various fantastic semi-human creatures that appear in this novel. Besides an insectoid carapace, Lin has "bulging, mirrored eyes" that present a million tiny images, all connected by her brain into a coherent whole. She is hairless with "red, tight" skin. Isaac and Lin have been together for two years but have tried to keep their relationship a secret to avoid shame and public censure.

Yagharek

Yagharek is the avian-human Garuda creature who comes to Isaac for help to restore his wings and his flight. Although the reason for his missing wings is never made explicit, Yagharek makes oblique reference to his "crime" with the implication that removal of his wings was his punishment. Yagharek has a birdlike beak but manages to speak from deep in his throat. He removes a wood and leather set of artificial wings from his back, kept draped in clothing to mitigate his shame. His deformed spine is covered with lesions from rubbing against the apparatus. Yagharek gives Isaac a pouch of gold coins in advance for his scientific work to figure out how to replace his wings.

Mr. Motley

Mr. Motley is the insect-human creature who deals in dreamshit, the New Crobuzon equivalent of LSD combined with heroin. He has multiple mouths and is capable of speaking out of several at the same time. Mr. Motley hires Lin to create a sculpture of himself and offers her a large sum of money. Although she is repulsed by Mr. Motley,



she tries to maintain her composure and complete the project because she and Isaac need the money. Eventually, the slimy drug lord has Lin executed because he believes she is involved with a plot to take away his customers.

Montague Vermishank

Montague Vermishank is the titular head of the university sciences department that subsidizes Isaac's research. He is a thoroughgoing bureaucrat without loyalties to anyone but himself, and Isaac eventually comes to despise the man he thought at first was his advocate. Isaac and Vermishank eventually come to blows and Isaac all but strangles him to death.

The Remade

The Rermade are a species of third-class citizens cobbled together by New Crobuzon physicians with various body parts encased in a metal covering, somewhat like a jousting knight in armor or a humanized robot. Somewhat like Frankenstein monsters, they are strong, clumsy and dim-witted although they are useful to humans and other higher species as servants and soldiers.

Xenians

Xenian is a generic term that refers to any sort of cross-breed. An example is Lin, Isaac's girlfriend, who is part human and part insect. Xenians combine human and animal or insect traits and features. Lin, for example, has the head of an insect and gossamer wings. Evidently, she also has a human body from the waist down, because she and Isaac spend a lot of time frolicking in bed.

Wyrmen

Wyrmen are strange, secretive creatures who seem to possess some special insight into the cryptic levels of nature and physics. Their primary purpose is to make water sculptures by means of harnessing crisis energy in the water molecules. Isaac gets an idea for a crisis engine after seeing their water sculpture. He hopes to use it to power a set of prosthetic wings for the Garuda named Yagharek. Instead, the crisis energy machine comes into immediate demand in an effort to fight off flesh-eating slake moths.

Khepri

Khepri is the term used to designate the specific subspecies of insectoid humans represented by Lin. This is comparable to an alligator being a subspecies of reptile.



Thus, Lin is a Xenian as well as a Khepri. There is a shabby Khepri settlement in New Crobuzon from which Lin extricated herself through her talents as an artist and her determination.

Mafadet

The mafadet is a rare, living legend in the animal world of New Crobuzon. It has a dun colored lion-like body, with enormous tufts of fur around its shoulders, a reptilian neck and snake's head from which a forked tongue flicks in and out.

Garuda

A Garuda is a type of Xenian representing a human-avian hybrid. Garudas are wise and good-hearted, and their ability to fly is the pride of their species. The sad, unfortunate Yagharek is a Garuda who comes to Isaac for help in restoring his ability to fly so he can remove the false wings he hides under a cape.

Mayor Bentham Rudgutter

The mayor of New Crobuzon is a small-time paranoiac dictator who broaches no opposition and who uses his militia to wipe out those brazen enough to defy him. He is a duplicitous, conniving politician who deploys the militia somewhat like the late Haitian dictator Francois (Pappa Doc) Duvalier, to spy on his subjects, terrorize them with voodoo, and to execute his enemies in bizarre, shocking ways. The polarities of this narrative are joined when Rudgutter goes after Isaac and his friends with a vengeance.

Cactacae

Cactacae are plant-animal hybrids that walk and talk like humans. They are covered with spines, like cactus plants, except for the palms of their hands. They are useful primarily as servants in New Crobuzon.



Objects/Places

New Crobuzon

New Crobuzon, "a huge plague pit" within the rib bones of some ancient and extinct creature—a "great carcass"—is the center of action and focus of the lives of the central characters. This nightmarish metropolis is inhabited by countless creatures who bear silent witness to a major genetic drift in the stream of evolution. The air and the earth above and below New Crobuzon teem and ooze with the struggle for survival. Thirty-story buildings mark the skyline "like fat fingers, like fists, like the stumps of limbs waving frantically above the swells of the lower houses. It is altogether a creepy place inhabited by creepy creatures.

Runagate Rampant

Runagate Rampant is a counter-establishment newspaper edited by Benjamin Flex, whose printing press is destroyed by the militia when it puts down a dock strike by the Vodyanoi. Flex, because he supports the strikers, becomes an enemy of Mayor Ruddgutter and a target for his militia.

Crisis Machine

The crisis machine is a device invented by Isaac as a means of powering the wings he is under contract to build for Yagharek. The machine uses a hitherto-unknown force called crisis energy Isaac discovers when observing water sculpture created by an inscrutable species of Wyrmen. The machine is threatened with destruction when Mayor Ruddgutter sends his militia to capture Isaac and his friends. Isaac throws the machine in a sack and carries it with him when he runs off to hide in the sewers.

Construct Council

The Construct Council is a collection of half-headed humans and constructs self-engineered from industrial waste. The humans are connected to the main construct by wires attached deep inside their severed skulls. Although hideous to Isaac's eyes, the Construct Council aligns with him and his compatriots in the looming war with the predatory and frightening slake moths.

Parliament

Parliament is the legislative center for New Crobuzon that houses the offices of Mayor Rudgutter. It is also the locale for a shipment of slake moth larvae that arrive in the mail, from which a clerk purloins one specimen to sell to Isaac. The scientist buys it and adds



it to his collection of insects and animals in his laboratory, unaware that it will grow into a predatory slake moth and join a group of other moths held captive in the bell tower of a building downtown.

Slake Moths

Slake moths are multi-dimensional, predatory creatures that feed primarily on humans. They begin to menace New Crobuzon when a pupa in Isaac's lab matures into a moth, takes flight out of the window and frees other moths being held captive. They feed with long antennae that they insert into a person's stomach and suck them dry, somewhat like a spider killing its prey.

Creekside

Creekside is a poor ghetto Khepri neighborhood where the artist Lin was raised until her upwardly-mobile family could afford to move to the more upscale Kinkin district. She revisits both places while working on a sculpture for Mr. Motley, and is revitalized by the strong Khepri culture.

Glasshouse

The Glasshouse is an enormous glass enclosure over the Riverskin neighborhood where Cactacae live in huge numbers. The Glasshouse creates a warm, damp environment like a greenhouse that is comfortable for the cactus-human hybrids. The Glasshouse becomes important when Yagharek, working with Isaac, discovers the nesting place of the slake moths within its glass enclosure.

Griss Twist

Griss Twist is the locale for the industrial dump site where Isaac and his companions discover the Construct Council, an enormous human-like formation of old computers, discarded engines, wires and other discarded pieces and parts. The Construct Council consists of the central construct which has formed itself from these materials, and humans with half their heads sliced off so they can be wired into the Council to serve as avatars. The Construct Council causes a huge shipping crate to drop from a crane and crush one of the slake moths.

Sewer System

The sewers of New Crobuzon provide a hiding place as well as a hidden route of transit around the city for Isaac, Derkhan, Yagharek and Lemuel once the violence escalates because of an invasion of slake moths, a turf war between the mayor and a drug lord

and a dock workers strike that turns violent. In the sewers, "the walls were slick with organic slime and mold. The air stank richly of rot and shit."



Themes

Evolutionary Changes

Hybridization, cross-pollination and mutancy appear everywhere in this book. The reader is confronted by insect-human hybrids, avian-human and inhuman-human creatures in a higgledy-piggeldy hodgepodge that seemingly upends the laws of evolution. Perhaps this is a sign of the author's own inner struggle to find an identity for himself as a product of several cultures, or at least a reflection of his fervid search for a consistent worldview and narrative voice. Communication between these odd creatures, and their motivation, can become obscure as they move, sometimes compulsively, sometimes morosely, through their lives and through the polysaturated thicket of the novel's dense texture. The endless complications of identity and motivation either enrich the action or, depending on the reader's viewpoint, betray an author who is prone to substitute outlandish, freakish imagery for real character development.

Unity from Diversity

Just like human society, New Crobuzon is a complex web of different creatures with sometimes-conflicting interests. Isaac's need to experiment and explore brings him into direct conflict with his boss, Vermishank, with the result that Vermishank is murdered. Because Lin, the insect-human artist, needs money to survive she signs a contract with a repulsive, slug-like drug lord called Mr. Motley. The Weaver, a gigantic spider that talks in code, has a fascination with shiny new scissors and Mayor Rudgutter uses that predilection to engage the Weaver in combat with the invasion of slake moths. When these predatory creatures start swarming above New Crobuzon, differences of race or species become secondary to the struggle for survival. In addition to the humans, hybrids and mutants who band together to face this menace, a community of sentient "constructs" made of discarded industrial waste also joins the battle against the slake moths. The obvious parallel is the United States in both world wars, when it fought alongside other nations to put down fascism. American troops in both wars came from every ethnic, religious, social and educational class to join in a common effort for the survival of all.

Importance of Science

Isaac is in many ways the quintessential pure scientist, driven by intellectual curiosity and obsessed with his work nearly to the point of madness. Once he is aware that something called crisis energy is possible, he feverishly sets about finding a way to harness it as a source of power for replacement wings to restore flight to Yagharek. Isaac's scientific curiosity blinds him to the potential dangers of his research. Although his motives as a research scientist are pure, his work quickly brings him in contact with the forces of evil through unintended consequences. Besides his crisis energy machine,



Isaac unwittingly plants the seeds of disaster when he buys an unknown insect larva that hatches into a giant predatory slake moth.

If it's scientific curiosity that has unleashed the forces of destruction on New Crobuzon, it's weird science that delivers it from peril as Isaac rigs up his crisis energy machine and uses it to kill slake moths. Not surprisingly, this may serve as a metaphor for modern society's reliance on science for answers to everything.



Style

Point of View

The point of view throughout this novel is that of the omniscient author/narrator which enables him to both describe and deride his characters. The reader must rely on the author to pick his or her way through this dark mosaic, but the author's point of view about all the proceedings is rather mordant. One way of reading this novel is on the level of allegory wherein characters and events are meant to be remotely symbolic of their counterparts in the world. Other works of a similar allegorical point of view include George Orwell's "Animal Farm" and Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels."

Is New Crobuzon an allegorical post-apocalyptic community of mutants and hybrids because of the unleashing of Torque bombs in 1545? It is well-established that nuclear explosions and unprotected exposure to atomic energy can modify the human DNA. Perhaps New Crobuzon is a glimpse into the future, disguised as the past, after the planet has been forever altered by nuclear war. In that case, the menagerie of creatures with human-like traits fused with strange animal and/or mechanical bodies makes sense as a type of allegorical exaggeration.

Some of the characters are stand-ins for existing human stereotypes: Mayor Rudgutter for the corrupt machine politician, Mr. Motley the cold and calculating drug lord, Lin the sensitive and emotionally fragile artist, Vermishank the slimy and unpredictable bureaucrat, and of course Isaac for the madcap scientist who will pursue his ideas into the gates of insanity. On the level of allegory, there is a kind of justice within this novel. In the end, the evil are punished and the good allowed to survive—sometimes.

Setting

The primary setting for this fantasy novel is New Crobuzon, a strange dystopia of falling down buildings, broken down creatures and strange time warps. Isaac the scientist develops a crisis machine from the most arcane reaches of experimental physics to restore flight to Yagharek the Garuda, while the militia uses ancient blunderbusses to maintain law and order in this medieval-modern metropolis. New Crobuzon is a place where the ordinary laws of nature are suspended and practically anything seems possible. This sense of the unexpected does provide some drama to help propel the action through an endless series of dilemmas.

New Crobuzon, like any large human city, is segregated into neighborhoods according to race (species) and those from the ghetto strive to better themselves and to rise in society. However the atmosphere of corruption and fear that pervades New Crobuzon is so stifling that the road to improvement or advancement is practically invisible. Those with ambition, values and ideals get beaten down or murdered when they clash with the existing retrograde power structure. A newspaper editor is killed and his presses



destroyed when he supports a dock workers' strike. The insect-human artist Lin is tortured to death because she is suspected of involvement in a plot to take business away from a drug lord. The scientist Isaac must flee for his life with his newly-invented crisis machine when he, too, is suspected.

The nearly-hopeless setting provides a gloomy, gothic world against which the characters struggle for their lives and dignity.

Language and Meaning

Mieville writes like the surrealist novelist Franz Kafka on Bazedrine. The overall effect of reading his prose is somewhat like being locked inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art and forced to look at the grotesque paintings of Francis Bacon mounted on solid red walls. His bizarre characters, settings and situations are interlaced with equally strange coinages, such as "chymistry," "xentropological," "aerostat," and "handler." In general, the prose seems over-written and over-earnest in the author's pursuit of originality. At certain points, the reader may wonder if this verbal necromancy is written by Mieville for his own enchantment or for the elucidation of the reader. Such overblown prose is like a parody of itself, at a dangerous junction of fantasy and gibberish. The author demands more than a willing suspension of disbelief by the reader; one must be willing to accept fantasy on the truly fantastic level of language run amok.

However, the author's deadpan juxtaposition of unlikely creatures and even unlikelier settings against the everyday speech of those characters makes for some comic absurdity, as when Lin, the insect-woman, fixes breakfast for herself and Isaac watches "the huge, iridescent scarab that is his lover's head devour her breakfast" while telling him that she is a vegetarian. Characters in this novel don't speak; they hiss. The author evidently has a phobia against any form of the verb "say," with the result that his characters all hiss at one another like serpents. This is a tiresome literary conceit that quickly loses its punch through repetition until it becomes practically meaningless. The author's obsessive use of the exclamatory "jabbers!" comes out of the mouths of several characters repeatedly, so that as a character-building device it, too, is ineffective.

Structure

The structure of the novel follows the conventional problem-struggle-crisis-resolution form. There are any number of problems for the characters, primarily Isaac, the scientist, which when viewed in the aggregate serve to provide some narrative drive as they struggle toward resolution. The problem for the reader is deciding upon which of these struggles to focus in a search for an overarching theme or unity to the work. There are wings to be reattached, slake moths to slay, giant spiders to be seduced, and criminal drug lords to be thwarted. In the face of this tapestry of adrenaline, the reader can become estranged from these concerns as the characters race about in search of...what? Survival? Peace of mind? A good and just world? The author never really makes clear the locus for the fears, shock and outrage that he seeks to evoke in his

readers. The structure and rhythm of this book brings to mind the madcap, frantic antics in a Marx Brothers movie, but without the one-liners and comedic pathos.

Devoid of such common novelistic devices as the flashback, flashforward, stream of consciousness and interior monologue, it's hard to get inside the heads or souls of the characters and really understand their true natures. In order to get a glimpse of this all-important view into the characters, reader insight is provided solely by the author in a kind of voice-over tone that seems manipulative rather than empathic. The reader must understand the characters more through their actions than their thoughts or feelings.



Quotes

"New Crobuzon was a huge plaque pit, a moribific city. Parasites, infection and rumor were uncontainable. A monthly chymical dip was a necessary prophylactic for the Khepri, if they wanted to avoid itches and sores." (Commissions, p. 9)

"This [New Crobuzon] was a community used to xenians. She [Lin] could taste the cosmopolitan nature of this neighborhood, the minute secretions of a variety of races, only some of which she recognized. There was the musk of more Khepri, the dank odor of Vodyanoi, even, from somewhere, the delicious taste of Cactacae." (Commissions, p. 17)

"New Crobuzon was a city unconvinced by gravity. Aerostats oozed from cloud to cloud above it like slugs on cabbages. Militia-pods streaked through the heart of the city to its outlands, the cables that held them twanging and vibrating like guitar strings hundreds of feet in the air. Wyrmen clawed their way above the city leaving trails of defecation and profanity. Pigeons shared the air with jackdaws and hawks and sparrows and escaped parakeets." (Physiognomies of Flight, p. 55)

"Lin would glance down and grab a handful of the colorberries arrayed on her pallet before her. She would take them in subtle combinations and quickly eat them, a careful cocktail of redberries and cyanberries, say, yellowberries and purpleberries and blackberries. The vivid juice would be spat through her headguts, down peculiar intestinal byways and into an adjunct of her main thoracic sac, and within four or five minutes she could push the mixed color into the diluted khepri-spit. She would smear the liquid froth into careful position, slopping astonishing tones in suggestive patches and scabs, where it coagulated quickly into shape." (Physiognomies of Flight, p. 96)

"Arguments broke out with bizarre ease. Fights were common. The nocturnal misery reached out and took victims from the waking world. The nightmares were splitting the membrane of sleep. They were spilling into the everyday, haunting the sunlit realm, drying conversations in the throat and stealing friends away." (Councils, p.357)

"There was nothing at all. Lin's room was almost bare. His [Isaac's] head ached with the weight of disturbed sleep. He could feel the mass of New Crobuzon's dream-torture. His own dreams bickered and brooded just below his skull, ready to attack him should he succumb to sleep." (Councils, p. 378)

"The body of the creature was a tangled, welded lump of congealed circuitry and engineering. All kinds of engines were embedded in that huge trunk. A massive proliferation of wires and tubes of metal and thick rubber spewed from valves and outputs in its body and limbs, snaking off in all directions in the wasteland. The creature reached up with an arm powered by a massive steamhammer piston. Those lights, those eyes, swiveled from the air and looked down on the constructs and the humans below. The lights were streetlamp bulbs powered by huge cylinders of gas visible in the construct's skull." (Councils, p. 392)



"The Remade had heads of molded steel. They even sported implacable faces of molded steel. Heavy industrial brows and inset eyes of stone or opaque glass, thin noses and pursed lips and cheekbones glinting darkly like polished pewter. The faces had been designed for aesthetic effect. Embedded behind the splendid metal face was a much less perfect human one. This was the only organic feature retained. Jutting out from the back end of those immobile metal features were mirrors, like a sweep of hair held in front of the Remades' real, human eyes." (Councils, p. 426)

"Then, as Isaac watched, a piece of the slake moth abdomen unfolded. A long organic syringe emerged, a tapering segmented extrusion that bent backwards from the slake moth's tail on some chitinous hinge. It was nearly as long as Isaac's arm. As he watched, his mouth slack with revulsion and horror, the slake moth prodded it against the ball of raw dreamshit, paused a moment, then plunged it deep into the center of the sticky mass." (The Glasshouse, p. 480)

"A great sinuous circuit was constructed through the city. It wound through more than two miles of textures: its matte-black rubber skin slid under fecal slime; across moss and rotting paper; through scrubby undergrowth, patches of brick-strewn grassland, disturbing the trails of feral cats and street children, plotting the ruts in the skin of architecture, littered with granulated clots of damp brickdust." (Crisis, p. 538)



Topics for Discussion

If *Perdido Street Station* is an allegory, what connections between the novel and real life can you make? How do the characters and situations seem to parallel the everyday world of human society?

Is Isaac at the center of this entire narrative because of his purchase of the slake moth larva and his creation of the crisis energy machine?

How does the cleaning construct know that Isaac has been betrayed?

What are colorberries and how are they used?

Why do Isaac and Lin try to hide their relationship?

Is evil in this novel manifested only by humans, or by other creatures as well? Are insects, such as slake moths, capable of evil?

Why do militiamen carry blunderbuss rifles and flintlock pistols?

Does it seem credible that Isaac and others would spend so much time in the sewers without becoming ill?

How did Yagharek lose his wings and how does he hope to get them replaced?

What is Vermishank's motive in betraying Isaac and his work on the crisis machine?