



Pavane

Keith Roberts

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In the year 1588, Queen Elizabeth was assassinated. That single tragedy set off a whole series of events, resulting in the Spanish Armada's defeat of England and subsequent demise of Protestantism. Now it's the 20th century, and the Church of Rome reigns supreme. People live a pastoral existence of guilds and farming, with technology held back to the level of the steam locomotive and primitive radio. Still, science cannot be held back forever...a revolution is building.

Pavane Details

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Author : Keith Roberts

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From Reader Review Pavane for online ebook

Joseph Delaney says

I first read this about twenty years ago. I enjoyed it even more at this second reading. It is an alternative history that really does build a convincing world. A great story full of adventures and conflict.

Jon says

Pavane is an alternate history story. One of those “What If” novels that speculate what the world would be like if past events took a decidedly different turn. The novel is set in England during the late 20th Century and a brief prologue sets up the premise: in 1588, Queen Elizabeth is assassinated; the Spanish Armada defeats the British, and the course of history for Europe and the New World changes. The Protestant religion is crushed and the Catholic Church of the Spanish Inquisition becomes the dominant religion for most of the world.

Roberts does a good job in creating his fun house mirror vision of the 20th Century. It’s a technologically backwards, pastoral world where the Industrial Revolution never happened and the Church rules all aspects of society. By far, the biggest impact of the Church is it’s suppression of scientific advance. Robert’s England of the 20th Century is technologically comparable to the 1800’s. It’s a world of steam engines and feudalism, where heresy is punishable by death and the Inquisition still breaks bodies in order to save souls. The church “held the land by the throat, choking their breath in the grip of her brocade fist.” It’s a pessimistic view of religion and someone who is Catholic might take exception to his depiction of their faith becoming Talibanesque in it’s oppression.

The book is a “fix-up” meaning it is a collection of loosely connected short stories that were originally published separately. While some of the stories are stronger than others, the overall quality of the collection is high and Roberts is a sensitive, lyrical writer who excels at descriptive passages. There isn’t a central character to the stories, but many of them feature members of the same family. A Pavane is a slow processional dance from the 16th Century and it serves as a central metaphor to the novel. There is a strong sense that each of the characters in the novel is playing a part in history as the story unfolds:

“It’s like a ... dance somehow, a minuet or a pavane. Something stately and pointless, with all the steps set out. With a beginning, and an end”

The book isn’t without flaws. A fantasy element crops up from time to time that I could have done without and while the tone of the stories is largely melancholy, an uplifting Coda is tacked on to the end novel that feels out of place. Still, the book is a good example of the genre and Roberts is a fine writer.

Beth says

This is Keith Roberts’s second and best known book, an elegantly written and captivating fix-up novel set in an alternate England (mostly in Dorset). The chapters are organized as six measures of a dance.

The premise is that the assassination of Queen Elizabeth incited a civil war between Catholics and Protestants in England, and Philip II sent another armada force to take England and put himself on the throne. England fell under the rule of the Catholic Church, and the feudal system and the Inquisition survived into the twentieth century. Technological development stagnated after reaching the level of the steam locomotive and the primitive radio, but when the story opens in 1968, a revolution is building. This probably sounds like a dystopian tale, but it's more ambiguous than that. I can't really elaborate without revealing too much, though...

To some the years that passed were years of fulfillment, of the final flowering of God's Design; to others they were a new Dark Age, haunted by things dead and others best forgotten; bears and catamounts, dire wolves and Fairies...

The rage of nations was like the anger of the sea, not to be contained with straws...

"It's like a ... dance somehow, a minuet or a pavane. Something stately and pointless, with all its steps set out. With a beginning, and an end..." she tucked her legs under her, as she sat beside the fire. "Sir John," she said, "sometimes I think life's all a mass of significance, all sorts of strands and threads woven like a tapestry or a brocade. So if you pulled one out and broke it, the pattern would alter right back through the cloth. Then I think... it's all totally pointless, it would make just as much sense backwards as forwards..."

(view spoiler)

Stuart says

Pavane: Six glimpses of an alternate England dominated by the Church

Pavane (1968), by Keith Roberts, is a book I've long wanted to read, a collection of loosely-linked stories set in an alternate England where Queen Elizabeth was assassinated and Philip II won the throne of England. Because of this, the Protestant Reformation never happened and Europe fell under the control of the Roman Catholic Church. The stories begin in 1968 (when the book was published), but this England does not resemble our world much because the Church is opposed to most forms of technology, so English society still resembles medieval times, with castles, small villages, monasteries, steam-powered engines that do not run on tracks, and semaphores (telegraphs) are the only form of long-distance communications. Everywhere the power of the Pope extends, and the Inquisition is still active in crushing dissent and heresy. It is a dark and superstitious world, and Roberts takes an unusual decision by dropping in unexpected glimpses of fairies, the 'Old Ones', that flit through the stories but are always keeping out of reach.

The book is structured after the Pavane, a classical Spanish dance with six "measures" and a coda. The

stories are self-contained, but some characters appear in latter stories as older or because their children are featured. I listened to the audiobook narrated by Steven Crossley, and he adroitly captures the classical English imagery of Roberts' carefully-crafted world. There's no question we are in England, but one that has been held back in feudal conditions, with little intellectual or political freedom.

While I enjoyed the first two stories, "The Lady Margaret" and "The Signaller", I found the following stories harder to identify as the characters and events did not grab my attention. Roberts writing is exquisite, and the rhythms of his language are enchanting, but for some reason I found it difficult to get caught up in the narrative. This is probably due to the fact that this is not a proper novel, but a series of stories, so they fail to build up narrative momentum as they progress. Instead, we are given brief glimpses of this fascinating alternate world that left me wanting more. In addition, the coda tries to frame the stories with a broader historical perspective, revealing how the world has since then changed dramatically due to the events of the last stories, but doing this in a dozen pages rather than with a proper story is somewhat abrupt.

Pavane was selected in David Pringle's Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels and Anthony Burgess' Ninety-Nine Novels: The Best in English since 1939, and it is frequently mentioned with other well-regarded alternate history novels such L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941), Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). However, the book (and the author) remains fairly obscure in the genre, and I wonder if this can be attributed to these reasons: 1) It is set in England, and the descriptive details are probably more resonant for English readers than American readers. 2) It is not a full novel, but rather a series of loosely-connected stories. 3) It focuses more on setting and imagery than characters, and is somewhat dark and ambiguous in tone. Nonetheless, I think such skillful writing and meticulous world-building are deserving of a bigger readership.

Scott says

Pavane is alt-history as it should be done. Convincing, engrossing, and as exactingly built as the finest steam engine.

I was recommended this book after reading Martin Amis' *The Alteration*, a very solid alt-history novel set in a modern Britain still under Catholic rule, in a world where Martin Luther became Pope instead of setting off the Protestant revolution.

Pavane is built around a similar setting- via the murder of Elizabeth I. Catholicism defeated the Protestant revolution and in the Twentieth Century the Vatican is still the undisputed spiritual head of Europe and the New World.

Both novels are great reads, but to my reader's eye *Pavane* is the better and more fully rounded work. Keith Roberts' novel goes in quite a different direction than *The Alteration*. While the *the Alteration*'s strength is its sly humor, *Pavane*'s is its incredibly convincing setting, demonstrated across several different narratives that show us life under the heavy hand of the Catholic Church.

Roberts goes in for exhaustive detail at times, but done in a way that engrosses rather than bores, painting a detailed and fascinating picture of a world stymied by religion and its attendant power structures, a Britain where a popish 'Petroleum Veto' has gimped the adoption of combustion engines, where steam power is still used widely and electricity distrusted. The great mass of people exist at the bottom of a highly stratified society based on class, trade and guild membership – the societal structure of the Middle Ages lives on

mostly unchanged.

We see life through the eyes of a steam train driver, from the perspective of a boy who joins the semaphore guild (electronic communications being banned or unknown), as brother in a religious craftsman order called to work for the inquisition, from the perspective of a wealthy commoner being pursued by a nobleman and from the vantage point of a noblewoman.

As the narratives progress we see subtle shifts that occur in society that are slowly building towards a shift in the centuries-old power structure. The stories that Roberts tells are masterful, and totally sucked me in. I was travelling through a new country by train, and I barely looked up from this book the whole trip, my entire attention focused on where he would take me next with his masterclass-level worldbuilding and his engaging plot.

The only let down in this very, very good novel is the coda at the end of the book, which wraps everything up a little too neatly and somewhat excuses the centuries long bloody tyranny of the church. To me this felt forced, as though Roberts decided he had beaten too hard on Roman Catholicism and needed to back off a little, a backdown that lessens the impact of his excellent novel somewhat.

Thanks to 4triplezed and Janice for their recommendation of this book.

Nancy Oakes says

An absolutely stunning book that I read straight through without putting down. Oh well, so the laundry gets done tomorrow. This one I VERY highly recommend, and I know I'll read it again. If you like alternative/alternate history, this is a must-read. The writing is superb.

brief peek:

A Pavane is a dance "something stately and pointless, with all its steps set out. With a beginning and an end..." (247. It was a courtly dance, moving very slow, where the dancers threaded in and out. The notion of a pavane serves as a symbol for the passing of time/history; the structure of the book also reflects a slow, graceful movement toward the end.

Set in Britain, the story opens in 1968. The premise of Britain's history is that someone assassinated Queen Elizabeth, the Catholics in England turned against "their countrymen" in a civil war. Word spread; Philip II sent another armada force to take England and put himself on the throne. England became a Catholic country, under the strong rule of the Pope. The situation is the same in 1968; technological development is pretty much non-existent except for steam power, and it is heresy to develop any further technologies. The feudal system is alive and well, as is the workings of the Inquisition. The working classes are not allowed to travel much; this is a privilege for the wealthier.

The first story is "The Lady Margaret," in which the reader meets the Strange family. They are hauliers of goods, building a great deal of wealth. Next up: The Signaller, focuses on one member of the Signallers' Guild, Rafe Bigland. Rafe's story is featured to showcase the importance of the guild and to show its growth as an entity that often works outside of the papal purview. In the third story, is something very different ("Brother John), " about a monk who is called upon to draw what he sees while attending a session of the

inner workings of the Inquisition, and rebels, going on to preach a different (heretical, of course) kind of thinking and earning the enmity of the Church. Next, the Strange Family again, now another generation, in which the family marries into the Lord of Purbeck's family through the daughter. This sets the stage for what will come later. Fifth, what might be my favorite story of the entire book, *The White Boat*, is an incredibly haunting look at what freedom means to a young girl in a situation where she has none, and because of her situation in life, will never know. It also reveals that the land is not so technologically void after all, but that's all I will say about that one. Sixth, back to the Strange family, who are by now well ensconced in their own desmene as Purbecks. The Lady Eleanor sets in motion a great change; a revolution that leads ultimately to the last chapter of this book, *The Coda*. Do NOT miss this part...it is a bit of a twist ending.

This book is so well written that I could not stop reading it, and after you've read it through once, things sort of begin to come together for you. This book would make an INCREDIBLE movie if someone did it right and didn't screw it up. It is an absolutely wonderful book and should not be missed.

read: January 2006

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

Pavane, by Keith Roberts, is a beautiful collection of six connected stories written in an alternate England where Queen Elizabeth was assassinated and Philip II won the throne of England. The Protestant Reformation never occurred and Europe, as well as the New World, fell under the control of the Pope. Now it's 1968 and because the Roman Catholic Church has held back technological advances from the people, the English still live in a feudal society complete with candlelight, castles, moats, monasteries, and much superstition, though the Church has allowed some steam-powered vehicles and the use of semaphore telegraph lines for communication. The Church has electricity, people know they have been repressed, and there are rumors of revolution.

The title *Pavane* comes from the Spanish-style dance which has six steps and a coda. Likewise, after the short prologue, the book contains six stories and a coda. The stories span a couple of generations and occur in chronological order:

“The Lady Margaret” — Here we meet Jesse Strange who carries freight on his steam engine, which is named “The Lady Margaret” after the barmaid he’s secretly in love with. On one of his business trips, during which he stops to see Margaret, he meets an old friend from college. On his way home, he’s attacked by bandits. Jesse, a competent and hard-working man, is the patriarch of the characters we’ll meet in the last two stories.

“The Signaller” — Rafe, who is fascinated by the semaphore telegraph stations that span the country, has his wildest dreams fulfilled when he earns a spot as an apprentice in the Guild of Signallers. In this story we learn that the faeries are still active in England — the Roman Catholic Church has not been able to eradicate them.

“The White Boat” — Fourteen-year-old Becky wants to be free and she thinks that the mysterious white boat she occasionally notices on the sea may be her ticket to a better life... until the Church notices it, too.

“Brother John” — The monk Brother John is commissioned by the Inquisition to use his artistic talents to document tortures and confessions.

“Lords and Ladies” — Jesse Strange, now a rich man, lies dying. As the priest intones last rites, Jesse’s niece Margaret remembers her recent humiliating experience with a young local lord and wonders if the faeries would treat her better than the priest’s god does.

“Corfe Gate” — Lady Eleanor, daughter of Margaret in the previous story, defies the Church. Lord Henry, who represents the Pope in England, is sent to bring her down. With the help of Sir John, her seneschal, Eleanor prepares to stand firm. During her struggle, she suggests that history is like the pavane.

In the Coda, Sir John’s son visits Corfe Gate decades later and reads a letter from his father who explains what happened after Eleanor’s revolt. Sir John’s justification of the Church’s actions seems odd and tacked-on. Or perhaps Keith Roberts was going for an A Canticle for Leibowitz-type feel. Either way, it leaves the reader scratching his head and wishing Roberts had just stopped after the last story.

Overall, Pavane is a beautifully written book with well-developed characters, skillful use of language, and vivid imagery — dark brooding castles, hulking gothic churches, powerful steam engines, lines of clacking semaphores, horrid tortures at the hands of the Inquisition. These images will stay with me.

I listened to the audio version of Pavane which was produced by Neil Gaiman Presents. Gaiman introduces the book and explains why he loves it and chose to add it to his audio line. The narration by Steven Crossley was excellent; I recommend this version.

4triplezed says

I am an admirer of the music of Ed Kuepper. From his early days in seminal punk rock band The Saints, followed by the amazingly underappreciated Laughing Clowns, through to film score and solo recordings, I seem to have been along for the musical ride, be that live or via studio recordings. He recently released his 50th album Lost Cities. This release was the first new material for 8 years and for me personally it was worth the wait. The opening track is called Pavane, a word I did not know. I initially just thought it a lovely dreamy atmospheric song based on a dance as per a wiki search. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavane> No I was wrong! Ed Kuepper played a live gig that I attended recently and I was surprised to hear him tell his audience that the song was about a very “poetical” book he had read called Pavane by Keith Roberts. Well that blew away what I had thought the song was about. With that I had to read this book.

To give Ed Kuepper his due his use of the word “Poetical” was a good choice. I have now finished the book and have to admit that there is certain descriptive feel about Keith Roberts writing and poetical is certainly a very fair description, lyrical would also be a good descriptive I might add. For a novel that is alternate history supposedly in the Sci Fi genre I have come out the end of the book feeling that the writing itself is beyond the sci fi fantasy pulp that is the vast majority of that genre.

The book itself gets its title, in my opinion, from a beautiful philosophical conversation in the final chapter, or Measure as the author calls them, between two of the characters. “It’s like a . . . dance somehow, a minuet or a Pavane, somewhat stately somewhat pointless, with all its steps set out.” So I suppose that we are reading an alternative history that is “somewhat stately”, yes it is, and “somewhat pointless” and indeed that it is, it never happened.

The six Measures themselves are captivating. There is a loose thread that (eventually) joins them together in the excellent final Measure, Corfes Gate. These alternate England Measures covers all social classes, peasant through to aristocracy. There is a feudal system that supports the suppression of technology, an England as a poor nation with class suppression from an authoritarian Catholic Church. The author also delves into the pagan past of what once was. The superstitions of the rural peoples is there in the background with some beautifully written prose about the Old Ones. All a delight to read.

Most of the events take place in Dorset. Having had the pleasure of a visit to Dorset I was heading to the maps to check out the places mentioned. Lulworth Cove is a fond memory, as was a night in Lyme. No Regis tacked on in this alternate history. Dorset is a truly beautiful part of the world and at times the author gave the county a certain poetical atmosphere that was a delight to read. The author also used Romanised place names at times and had me looking up the modern equivalent.

This is a fine read, very good indeed but for one flaw. The final part of the book is a Coda that to me just feels tacked on for the sake of it. It lacks the spirit of the Measures and almost killed my own personal thoughts as to what the future of this alternate England was. Almost but not quite. I will reread this book one day. Thanks Ed Kuepper for bringing this to my attention.

Lanie says

Classic 70s alternate history.

400 years ago a single bullet killed a single woman. After that everything was similar but different to how it would have been.

This is slow, thoughtful, idealistic and beautiful after the fashion of 70s literary SF. The story is made up of 6 sequential short stories, each building a part of this alternate world, each introducing a well drawn sympathetic character, each ending in a vague, almost tentative resolution.

The book uses the motif of the dance, the Pavane of the title, to introduce a parade of dancers. These step forward, pose, glance coyly but meaningfully at each other, and then step back to let another take their place. Because of this I never felt more than a transient connection with the characters. They were beautifully and poignantly drawn, but gone like mayflies, subsumed in the great dance of time.

After a while I decided that the main character was not a person. It was England. A mythic England that never has and never will exist, which the author explores as though he were tracing the hills and valleys of his lover's body.

This book is a love song to a landscape, the litany of place-names like a poem, the stones of Avebury, the cliffs that overlook the channel, the ancient, haunted road that leads from Londinium to Aqua Sulis

That kind of stuff.

Adam says

Queen Elizabeth is assassinated, the Spanish armada invades England, and Catholics rule Europe, keeping sciences at a relative standstill. Set in a 20th century England of this time line ruled by superstition, wild animals, bandits, smugglers, and inquisitions. Technology is frozen at steam trains, telegraphs (semaphore being the main communication device), a mix of medieval and 18th century weaponry, some cars, and simple radios. Rather than dwell on the “what if” of this scenario Roberts divides this book into six stories that explores the desires, loneliness, petty lives, pointless deaths, incoherent rage, and revolutions of his characters. You could dwell for weeks in the nooks and crannies of this book; it’s a whole breathing world in there. Comparable to Dick’s *Man in High Castle* but more successful in only that PKD’s pulpy prose never fully articulates his ideas and themes.

Elizabeth says

I don't understand.

This book's premise is that Elizabeth I died early and therefore the Elizabethan age never happened and the history of the world changed dramatically. Okay! Except....later a character references a "minor Elizabethan" poet, and nylons appear in a world that has very little post-Renaissance technological progress, and I still don't understand what the hell the locos are (road trains? except...without an internal combustion engine?), and THEN SUDDENLY THERE ARE FAIRIES and the Church has actually been a power for good all this time and omg wtf I quit.

Also the languages don't work. Elizabeth's early death would not make Norman French the language of the English nobility again, okay?

Chris says

One of the best known of John Dowland's collection of airs called *Lachrime* ('Tears') is the heart-rending 'Flow My Teares' from his *Second Booke of Songs or Ayres* of 1600. It is in the form of a pavane, a slow and stately dance of the period, the sections structured here as AABBC (where C is the coda or tailpiece and A and B contrasting melodies). Whether Keith Roberts intended it so or not, it's possible to use Dowland's words as a counterpoint to Roberts' narrative, and that's what I intend to do. But first, the Prologue...

Pavane is a classic alternate history novel, a what-if story in a genre sometimes called Uchronia, the temporal counterpart to Utopia. *Pavane*'s history diverges from history as we know it in 1588 not with the defeat of the Spanish Armada but with the premature death of Elizabeth I. Half the world is thus brought under the sway of the Catholic Church, with subsequent delays in technological innovation and doctrinal issues set in amber. By 1968, in the region we ourselves call Hardy's Wessex, the seemingly insignificant grains of sand that are individual lives are beginning to trickle down a slope, leading inevitably — but not instantaneously — via calamitous change to an uncertain future.

That change we view through four or five generations of a family called, perhaps significantly, Strange. The

novel consists of six vignettes, here called ‘measures’ (a Renaissance musical term for the sections of a dance composition), rounded off by a coda. Slow-moving and stately, they build up a picture of a 20th-century English backwater that will cause rather more than ripples in the world order.

“The Lady Margaret”

*Flow, my teares, fall from your springs!
Exilde for ever, let me mourne
Where night’s black bird hir sad infamy sings,
There let mee live forlorne.*

After the death and funeral of Eli Strange, Jesse Strange has inherited the traction engine haulage business that dominates Dorset. His engine of choice is the Lady Margaret, named after the woman he has worshipped from afar. Will he gain her affection or will he have to mourn what may never be? And what of his former schoolfriend, Col, who hitches a ride with him on the return journey to Dorchester — is there infamy afoot in that dangerous night journey?

There are loving evocations of the processes of maintaining and driving these magnificent machines, one of the few technologies allowed in Catholic Europe, descriptions which must come from Roberts’ own love of steam technology. The slow lumbering engine crisscrossing a Dorset of dispersed settlements and sparse populations decides the pace of this and, indirectly, subsequent measures of Pavane.

“The Signaller”

*Downe vaine lights, shine you no more!
No nights are dark enough for those
That in dispaire their lost fortuns deplore.
Light doth but shame disclose.*

The next measure concerns Rafe Bigland, a lad from Avebury who is fascinated by the semaphore messages sent out by the giant signal stations that dot the land. He progresses through the strict education of the Guild of Signallers, a group as powerful and as secretive as the Knights Templar were in medieval Europe, eventually taking sole responsibility for a remote Dorset station. That remoteness however creates challenges, from predators such as wild cats (maybe lynxes), bleak winter weather, dark nights and the mysterious folk known as the People of the Heath. In this story we meet for the first time the sign that marks their presence, a strange device within a circle that, like a Rorschach blot, can mean anything; to me, for example, it looked at first sight like one of those cheap wraparound card designs that becomes a winged fairy on top of a Christmas tree. This story is almost as powerful as Jesse Strange’s tale, with an unexpected ending that intrigues and hints that there is more to this invented world than at first appears.

“The White Boat” and “Brother John”

*Never may my woes be relieved,
Since pitie is fled,
And teares, and sighes, and grones my wearie dayes
Of all joys have deprived.*

‘The White Boat’ was not originally included in the novel but, far from being superfluous, the tale adds immeasurably to the sense of dangerous undercurrents threatening the status quo. The craft of the title appears from time to time off the coast, and oddball Becky, who collects lobsters from pots, becomes fascinated with it. What are they about? What is their purpose? Physically abused at home by her father, ruthlessly interrogated by the priest, what she finds aboard the Boat is something that challenges the

hegemony of the Church and its ban on innovative technologies. The following story is even more chilling. A classic study called *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (I read the revised version of 1970) was subtitled ‘Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages’ and discussed how individuals often initiated, wittingly or unwittingly, movements that the Church could not and would not tolerate. Brother John belongs to an order named after the Dark Age saint Adhelm, a learned individual who founded churches such as the still extant 7th-century Wiltshire church of St Lawrence in Bradford-on-Avon. John’s talents at sketching and lithographing cause him to be sent to portray the activities of the Court of Spiritual Welfare in Dover. His experiences as court artist for the Inquisition and its vile practices however mark him indelibly; and the mystical anarchism that he develops leads to his being spontaneously followed by the common people of the West Country, with all ending inconsequentially on the Dorset coast. Will the woes of the common people never be relieved? Has ‘pitie’ fled?

“Lords and Ladies” and “Corfe Gate”
From the highest spire of contentment
My fortune is throwne,
And feare and griefe and paine for my deserts
Are my hopes since hope is gone.

After the tales of Rafe, Becky and Brother John, with the only common denominator being Dorset, we return to the Strange family. Jesse, the haulier of the first story, is now on his deathbed after building his traction engine empire to dominate the West Country haulage business. His niece Margaret, whom he has spoiled and humoured, sits listening to the priest exorcising the body wracked by cancer; she drifts into reveries of her life so far: his indulgence, her waywardness, her abduction and wooing by the local lord Robert of Purbeck, her encounter with one of the Old Ones who tells her not to despise the Church “for she has a wisdom beyond your understanding”, and not to despise the Church’s mummeries for “they have a purpose that will be fulfilled”. In second of two directly linked tales we meet her daughter, Eleanor, who is also the daughter of Lord Robert. Lady Eleanor, with the sympathetic help of the Seneschal John Faulkner, initiates the Revolt of the Castles — she is not her mother’s daughter (or her grandmother’s granddaughter) for nothing when it comes to defying authority and flying in the face of apparent reasons.

Pavane really picks up with these two tales, developing links between two families and the wider world that was hinted at in the previous stories. It’s very easy to sympathise with these two strong women, Margaret and Eleanor, themselves both no doubt a conscious harking back to English queens of the Middle Ages blessed with powerful personalities such as Margaret of Anjou and Eleanor of Aquitaine. You want to cheer for them as they confront overwhelming odds and despair for them when things unravel.

Brooding over all is Corfe Castle, no ruin but a mighty and near impregnable fastness, almost — one might say — “the highest spire of contentment” in an increasingly bleak and threatening world. This alternate history is a marvellous melding of medieval, Renaissance, Victorian and modern ways of thinking, living and technology; and behind it all are mysteries — the roles of the Signallers, their relationship to the Fairies or People of the Heath, the genetic heritage of Eleanor and John Faulkner, the visions of the Old Ones. Even a close reading reveals little that’s definitive.

“Coda”
Harke you shadowes that in darknesse dwell,
Learne to contemne light
Happie, happie they that in hell
Feele not the worlds despise.

‘Corfe Gate’ leaves many questions unanswered, not least of which is ‘What exactly has been achieved by the actions of the Strange dynasty?’ The epilogue gives some answers, though not all is revealed. It is some years after the Revolt of the Castles, and what Oliver Cromwell achieved in our own 17th century — the slighting of medieval fortifications — has been matched in *Pavane*‘s 20th-century world. Does the holding back of change and innovation, as the Catholic Church did, only delay the inevitable? Or does the Church consciously manage the pace of that change and innovation so that the world can adjust in its own time? In other words, does controlled evolution, strictly enforced, avoid the pains of violent revolution? Or does the medicine either kill or permanently damage the patient? I can’t help feeling that the author’s reported innate conservatism caused him to mistrust anarchy of any kind, and that leads to an uncomfortable balance between optimism (at signs of change and when battles are won) and pessimism (when wars are apparently lost and absolutism triumphs).

A few more motifs continue to lodge in my mind. For example, many of the ‘measures’ begin or end with a birth or a death, whether onstage or offstage. While this effectively counteracts the happily-ever-after expectations of many novels it does emphasise the bigger picture where *Pavane*‘s timeline is concerned. There are also the reminders of light in the darkness, whether from traction engines travelling across the Dorset countryside at dead of night, the torches on the signalling towers for winter messages, the lights on the White Boat anchored offshore, Brother John working at his lithography at all hours or the glow-worms that individuals spot in the ditches surrounding Corfe Castle. Roberts also creates a disconnect between our world and his by using older or alternate forms of placenames, as for example Latin names for Roman foundations (Londinium, Durnovaria, Sorviiodunum) or unfamiliar spellings (Wey Mouth, Bourne Mouth or Corvesgeat).

Pavane feels a much richer novel than I remember from when I read it in the early 70s, but then I’m a lot older and hopefully a lot wiser. It’s not perfect, though. I can’t quite picture how people are dressed — there are references to Tudor clothing such as breeches and the like but also shortish dresses and even nylons — but maybe that’s part of Roberts’ determination to create an unstable atmosphere. Nor can I work out the nature of the relationship between humans, fairies, the Old Ones, the Will and the God of the Church, but maybe that’s deliberately meant to be allusive. The effect is to suggest more than just alternate history: this is an alternate or parallel world, similar to but different from our own.

All I know is that in the Renaissance the slow and stately pavane was always paired with a faster and livelier galliard; and whether Roberts intended this novel to have such a sequel to correspond with a galliard, or whether his Coda is meant to have the only acknowledgement that controlled turmoil did eventually occur and a final balance achieved, is mere speculation. But what is not in doubt is that *Pavane* remains a real *tour de force*.

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-stately>

Mona says

Review of *Pavane*

Beautifully Written Fantasy Stories which Left Me a Bit Cold

It seems like today's steampunk movement (including writers like China Mieville) owes a lot to Keith Roberts. I was surprised to find out that many steampunkers actually know about "Pavane", since Roberts, a British writer who died in 2000, was hardly a household word.

Roberts' book, "Pavane", published in 1968, is a group of loosely connected sf/fantasy stories/novellas that take place in Britain mostly around 1968 (although one occurs about twenty years later). The setting is an alternate historical timeline. The Pope and the Catholic Church hold sway over all of Europe (including Britain). This includes all the atrocities of the Inquisition. The feudal system is still in place. There are bans on electricity, petroleum products, and other technical innovation and there are no railroads. There are trains, however, they are pulled by steam engines and run on the roads. There is a mechanical semaphore system in place to send messages. It's run by highly trained members of a specialized guild. Motor cars do exist (presumably steam run) but few can afford them. Many Britons are squirming under the harsh rule of the Catholic Church. Many languages other than English are spoken in Britain, including Norman, Gaelic, Celtic, etc. The "Old Ones" (presumably fairies or elves) make frequent (although secretive) appearances to humans. The Church, of course hates the Old Ones, along with any so-called heretics, witches, blasphemers rebels, etc. The rural areas of the country are quite deserted, populated with wild animals such as catamounts. Horses are still the major means of transportation for most. There are boats, but they are old fashioned sailboats or rowboats.

The pavane was a stately old dance. Accordingly, the book is divided into six "measures" (stories) and a coda (a finally story which takes place in the late 1980's).

The stories are uneven, some being much better than others.

The first "measure", "The Lady Margaret" is one of my favorites. Jesse Strange, a lonely haulier (a guy who hauls goods on one of the steam trains mentioned above), courts a woman and runs into an old college buddy. These events occur shortly after the death of Jesse's father, Eli. This one has a surprise ending that's quite unexpected. The title is the name of Jesse's steam engine and also the name of the woman he loves

The second "measure" is called "The Signaller". I liked this one a lot also. A young working class boy has always wanted to be a semaphore operator. He gets his wish, and goes to the guild's two year college to train. After an easy year in a wealthy household, he is assigned to a remote posting.

In "The White Boat", the third "measure", an unhappy teenage girl from a fisherman's family is obsessed with a mysterious white sailing ship that appears and disappears at intervals.

In the fourth measure, "Brother John", a monk by that name who is an artist, witnesses the tortures of the Inquisition. As a result, he becomes disgusted with the ruling Catholic Church (view spoiler)

In the fifth measure "Lords and Ladies", a young woman attends the deathbed of Jesse Strange from the first story, her uncle. She recalls a dalliance with an aristocrat who didn't love her. My attention wandered a bit during this tale.

The sixth measure, "The Corfe Gate" was probably my least favorite of all. In part, this might have been because the narrator didn't read it very well. His version of the main character, Eleanor, sounded petulant and foolish. Eleanor, the daughter of the woman from the previous story, is an aristocrat. She defies the Church's emissaries who make unreasonable demands on her and her people. She is backed by a loyal seneschal.

"The Coda" is set in the late 1980's and involves the son of the seneschal from the previous tale. My mind

was wandering during this one also.

The stories are beautifully written. The world building is impeccable. But...something was missing. Some of the stories left me cold. I wasn't always able to connect to the characters or care about them.

I wasn't wild about Steven Crossley's style of reading the audio. He was adequate for some of the stories, but I didn't care for the way he voiced Eleanor, the main character in "The Corfe Gate".

John says

Seminal alternative history. Consists of several related short stories set in a radically different 20th Century England (and world) under the thumb of the all powerful Roman Catholic Church. The setup was good, as was the first story, but my attention wavered from there. The stories were rather uneven, and in the midst of the interesting allohistorical details, Roberts keeps weaving "the faeries" and "the old ones" into the tales. To an extent, this is understandable given the poor education and heavy superstition of the inhabitants of his darkened world lit only by lamplight (electricity is forbidden by order of the church). However, Roberts more than once tries to take it further, to a metaphysical level, almost flirting with fantasy a la "The Mists of Avalon." By the last story, during which the several tangled skeins of the meta-plot are finally woven together in what should have been a rousing climax, I found myself instead waiting for the end to present itself. Rather than thrilling to the courage of those few Englishmen who finally stand up against the church and exploring the consequences of those actions, I'm left in a long drag of what my college English teacher referred to as "falling action." The coda helps a bit, but "tells more than shows."

Roberts' world is terrifically original, but some of the characters (like the stories) never really caught my attention or imagination, let alone my empathy. Neil Gaiman did the introduction for the edition I read, so maybe I expected a little more. Perhaps Roberts, like Philip K. Dick, was an incredible idea man, but fell short occasionally in the execution. I cannot deny, however, that at the time of its publishing, "Pavane" was undoubtedly a ground breaker. For that fact and for its ingeniously invented world, it's worth a read. If you plan on reading it for the former, check out Ward Moore's "Bring The Jubilee" published the previous decade.

Scott Danielson says

How to describe *Pavane*? Two things are simple to say: first, it's a fix-up novel, or a mosaic. A collection of stories set in the same universe that are brought together and presented as a novel.

Second, it's an alternate history. In 1588, says the prologue, Queen Elizabeth I was assassinated, which set into motion a series of events that prevented the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church (the political, militant Catholic Church) ended up controlling half the world. These stories take place over a few generations in the late 20th century.

The things that are more difficult to convey about the book are how beautifully it's written and how vivid and moving the stories are.

Also difficult are my mixed feelings about the presentation of the Catholic Church, which is not really the

Catholic Church at all. The world is very different under its stifling power, the most obvious thing being that the Church has prevented the use of many technological advances. The Pope issues papal bulls with titles like "Petroleum Veto" that forbid the use of internal combustion engines. The remnant of the Inquisition (called the Court of Spiritual Welfare) is present, too.

Yet the 20th century feudal world presented is a fascinating setting, and the stories are very moving, like I said. And then there's The Coda - the last short story in the book - which is thought provoking.

This is a book that I'm not likely to forget.

Neil Gaiman Presents did an audio version of this over on Audible. Stephen Crossley narrates. I listened to a couple of stories and it was excellent. I also enjoyed Gaiman's introduction.

Added: I would compare Keith Roberts (this book, anyway) to Gene Wolfe, Jack Vance, Tim Powers.

Chris says

It is Anno Domini 1968. Over a hundred years earlier, in 1588, Queen Elizabeth was assassinated. The Spanish Armada's decisive victory brought most of Europe under the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran rebels in the low countries crushed underfoot. The heavy hand of the church rests over Angle Land, and while its power lies secure in Londinium there is unrest brewing in the countryside—brigands roaming the moors, threat of rebels and heretics, superstitious rumors of faeries and the old gods rising within the uneducated peasants. Technology has stagnated, with discoveries like electric power outlawed by the Church, leaving the book effectively proto-steampunk. Roberts' novel consists of six measures, each a distinct story-fragment; together they describe and illuminate the world, focusing on themes of loss, religion, government, and power.

On top of six loosely linked but interwoven narratives is a coda, acting as capstone to the “novel.” If we can call it that—*Pavane* works more as a kaleidoscopic vision of a dark, regressive alternate future. As the twentieth-century progresses, the Church maintains a firm grip on Western society, limiting technological and scientific development. Instead of a global international power, England (“Angle Land”) becomes the same type of far-flung backwater as in Roman times, a land under serfdom that sparks little Papal interest compared to China or the New World. Roberts never reveals all of this world’s secrets and does not go overboard explaining the complexities or full history, leaving the reader to savor every morsel and ponder its significance. Even the elements of religion and superstition have an air of mystery about them—several events are implied to be fantastical/metaphysical, but may be simply unexplained everyday phenomenon.

Pavane takes its name from the processional dance from Renaissance-era Europe, and much like that dance the novel is complex, obscure, and stately, a slow but calculated read with a dark and mysterious undertone. The writing is plain astounding, and Roberts’ knack for lyrical storytelling is on full display; the characters and setting spring to life from his pages, remaining plausible despite the many differences in this world’s alternate twentieth century. It remains a classic of science fiction, though an obscure one due to its cerebral material and the fact Roberts never reached the same success as other authors from the same period. On the bright side, it has continually been reprinted and is very easy to find. If you are a SF reader who enjoys the more cerebral, thought-provoking type of SF that came out in the 1970s, I’d recommend that you do find it. Read it, grasp at its brilliance, and be ready to come back again to revisit and ponder the deeper meaning.

Full review, and other SF books reviews, found [here](#).

Randolph says

An exquisitely crafted alternate history of England. A set of six linked stories set up as a dance, or pavane, if you will. Not anything really profound but a delight in itself as a work of fiction. Deliciously written and craftily plotted to a most satisfying ending.

I'm not a big alternate history fan but throughly enjoyed this.

Roberts takes some pretty mighty swings at the Romish church and his main message may be how religion keeps progressive humanity back with a superstitious spear of fear and intimidation.

Manny says

Some random highlights from this rather fine parallel world novel:

- Semaphore stations can operate in full duplex mode, carrying messages simultaneously in both directions.
- When issuing an ultimatum, it's unwise to stand directly in front of a loaded cannon.
- Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.

Simon says

A group of somewhat vaguely connected stories set in contemporary Dorset, only not as we know it because England is a mere vassal state of Rome (along with the rest of the world). Dominated and repressed by the Catholic church, many freedoms restricted, scientific progress retarded, linguistically and culturally more fragmented, people go on living their everyday lives although some dream of freedom...

With a dense rich prose, alluding to supernatural themes, this reads more like fantasy than SF. Although this is very much in the "alternate history" sub-genre of SF and a variety of technological differences are explored. With the use of petroleum prohibited, steam driven trucks dominate the haulage industry. The use of electricity is also suppressed leading to a network of semaphore stations around the world that facilitate communication. Although the focus of the stories are very much on the trials and tribulations of the characters that inhabit them.

The stories are of varying interest and are primarily setting the scene for the concluding story in which events that shape the future of the England (and the world) unfold. Although the coda at the end is interesting as it reveals something that flips your preconceptions on their head, causing you to consider what has happened in a different light.

Overall I found the stories too meandering and fragmented to be able to enjoy the book as much as I would have liked and was left somewhat disappointed and underwhelmed. Keith Roberts was a good writer with one of the best prose styles I've seen in science fiction but I didn't quite engage with what the author was trying to do here. Or maybe it was the way he was trying to do it?

Jos says

Pavane is one of the earlier alternate reality books. The premise: Elisabeth I. has been murdered, the Spanish Armada won. The industrial age with the dominance of England never occurred. The Catholic Church defeated all reformation attempts and is hindering progress by declaring most technological innovations to be heretic. Electricity, the combustion engine, radio communication- heresy! It's the twentieth century, England stands firm to the Catholic Church and is ruled by the king and the aristocracy.

Based on this premise, Roberts develops his alternative reality in short stories that are linked by persons or themes. In the resulting world, steam-powered trucks transport goods, often subjected to brigand attacks. Semaphores are used to transmit information, their operators being organized in the most prestigious guild and guarding the secrets of decoding. The inquisition is alive and kicking, the church still requiring tributes. But unrest is growing, an end is in sight. An ancient celtic cult with the sign of the cancer plays a mysterious role.

Short stories:

The Lady Margaret: The rise of a lonely steam haulier. Failing in his love for the girl that inspired naming his steam engine "Lady Margaret", he's remorselessly compensating this failure with entrepreneurial assertiveness, not sparing the life of a former friend who has turned brigand.

The Signaller: A young boy is accepted as apprentice semaphore operator. On his deputation to a remote semaphore for the winter he faces his fate. The semaphore guild and the mystic cancer cult are introduced.

The White Boat: Not included in all editions as it bears no consequences for the whole and doesn't take up any of the central topics. A short excursion into the life of a common maid and her short adventure accompanying smugglers.

Brother John: The highlight of the collection. The press is a domain of the church. Even advertisements for beer or other products are commissioned to a monastery operating the printing press. Brother John is an adept in a cloister who's preparing the layouts. Due to his industrial arts, he's entrusted with a special mission. The inquisition needs drawings of their workings. Too much for poor John. He loses all his faith in the church and becomes a rebellious priest, gathering lots of followers before turning martyr.

Lords and Ladies: A tale from the death bed of the haulier from the first story. His niece Margaret (the daughter of his love Margaret who married his brother, bore him a daughter and ran away) is reflecting about her life, with visions of an alternate reality. Together with the White Boat the weakest story.

Corfe Gate: Finally, rebellion is coming. The already known Margaret married above her stratum and, after the death of her husband, becomes the Lady of Corfe Gate. When the catholic church requests an excessive additional tribute which would lead to the starvation of many of her subordinates, she refuses to obey. After a few twists, times are changing. It becomes obvious that the semaphore operators and the members of the

cancer cult know more.

Coda: The rebellion was successful. Industrialization catches up rapidly when the inventions guarded in the vaults of the Vatican are set free. The son of Lady Margaret's seneschal visits the place where it all began, the ruins of Corfe Gate. There, he reads through the letters of his father revealing the hidden secret. (view spoiler)

The stories are best on a macro-level. The implications of holding back known technology, the concept of semaphore communication with the related guild and the operators, the role of the Catholic Church and the inquisition as its outgrowth. The small personal stories are less interesting. The Coda ends with an exceptionally strong knack which might be too whimsical for the reader. More fantasy than science fiction.
