



Homunculus

James P. Blaylock

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In 1870s London, a city of contradictions and improbabilities, a dead man pilots an airship and living men are willing to risk all to steal a carp. Here, a night of bangers and ale at the local pub can result in an eternity at the Blood Pudding with the rest of the reanimated dead.

Homunculus Details

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Author : James P. Blaylock

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From Reader Review Homunculus for online ebook

Monique Snyman says

Homunculus by James P. Blaylock is a part of the “A Tale of Langdon St. Ives” series. Now, for some people who aren’t familiar with James P. Blaylock, let’s just say that he is often called a founding father of the steampunk genre. In other words, if you’re into steampunk, you need to at least get some Blaylock into your reading list. But I digress. The point is that Homunculus is a well written book that will give your imagination a great workout. Set in Victorian London, an alternative – steam powered – tale sets the scene. Our hero, Professor Langdon St. Ives, has a mission. Recover a wooden box containing a huge emerald that Jack Owlesby’s father left for him. However it’s easier said than done. Throw in a few mad-scientists, villains, a dirigible steered by a skeleton, a tiny little man in a jar who may be an alien, and reanimated corpses into the mix and you have a novel filled with sci-fi/steampunk that will have you laughing at inappropriate times, biting your nails as the story progress and turning the pages constantly.

Steampunk isn’t really my genre of choice, but I do enjoy dabbling in things that I don’t know and I was surprisingly pleased after I finished this book (lucky for me I had two other Langdon St. Ives books to read, so that rocked too). You see, what I prefer in books is originality to some degree, imaginative settings that’s creative and beautiful, and good writing. Throw those elements together and you have Homunculus, which will make you love the genre and the author (not to mention the characters). What’s more is that this particular book won the Philip K. Dick award back in the day (1986), which already tells you that it’s a really good novel and definitely worth a read.

I won’t say that steampunk is now my preferred genre, but I will keep on reading James P. Blaylock and try to keep my mind open when it comes to other steampunk authors.

(Originally reviewed on www.killeraphrodite.com)

Jonathan says

Anyone who regularly reads Steampunk novels will already be aware of James P. Blaylock’s status as one of the big three writers in the genre, along with K. W. Jeter and Tim Powers. Going back and rereading their work is always rewarding, but it becomes all the more interesting having read the work of contemporary steampunk authors. It’s easy to see how influenced they are by the greats; as the basic building blocks of a good steampunk story are still the same today.

Evident throughout the Langdon St. Ives series is the pulp like approach to adventure. There is never a dull moment as mad scientists, crazed villains and flawed heroes pit their wits against each other. We witness kidnappings, crazy machines, necromancy, fights and exciting chases, as action takes precedence over plot. This may sound like criticism, but it is not, in actual fact it is these elements that make the book such a welcome change and an enjoyable read, it’s just good wholesome fun.

I am often filled with a sense of nostalgia when reading steampunk, as it reminds me so much of the kind of books I read when I was a boy. I was an avid reader of gothic horror from the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson and of elaborate adventures from such writers as Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. G Wells, and H. Rider Haggard. Steampunk really does have a very similar feel to it.

My hope is that the entire Langdon St. Ives series will one day be available in the U. K., because it is slowly becoming a firm favourite of mine. I’m sure that steampunk fans will lap this up and find much enjoyment. It

seems that Blaylock's status is very well deserved and long may that continue.

Charlie says

The plot takes place in a strange magical steampunk Old London Town. The streets are walked by preachers and zombies and zombie preachers. The skies are ridden by a skeleton pirate in a gondola under an airship blessed by a (nearly) perpetual motion device. There are alarms and excursions to the countryside where a moon rocket launch goes a little awry. A strange small man with a lot of power is hidden in a box somewhere, so is an emerald, so is an aeration device for a moon rocket. Who has which box? Commence scuffles and misunderstandings.

There is a lovely tangle of interweaving plots and a wonderful atmosphere of confusion and ... well, plots. If it weren't for the dark streets and sewers, I would be reminded of a Gilbert and Sullivan show. I enjoyed it a lot.

I enjoyed this book a whole lot more than *Digging Leviathan*. I was given to understand that they were two in the same series and DL should be read first (it was written first), but really they are two in the same genre with relatively little linking them that would be affected by reading this one first. I think that is what I would recommend to other readers. I think that once this one has got you into the atmosphere of the stories, the other would be much easier to follow and enjoy.

Eric says

It was my turn to pick for book club, and wanting to pick something different, I thought of this steampunk classic that I had already loaded onto my Kindle but hadn't yet read. It was short at around 250 pages, it was available for \$2.79 on the Kindle, and it had won a Phillip K. Dick award for distinguished science fiction. So why then, out of seven people, did only two of us, myself included, manage to finish it?

Well for one, it had a hell of an in medias res opening. I mean the story really should have started fifteen years prior, and the prologue could have done more to set up the plot and expectations, and not just the tone and mood. That being said, about of the third of the way in, I started getting traction as to what on this alternate earth was going on and began appreciating the absolute lack of anything resembling an infodump anywhere in the entire novel. However, many of my fellow bookclubbers abandoned ship before this point, and I really can't blame them.

This read was not a typical 250 page breeze, which surprised me -- possibly because most steampunk novels I have read, such as *The Leviathan Trilogy* and *Boneshaker*, are aimed at a YA audience? This read much slower, nearly as slow as the ultimate grandfather to the steampunk genre, Jules Verne.

The shame of most of my book club not finishing it, though, is that this story picked up steam in a parabolic curve, exponentially becoming more fun and exciting and leading to a spirited, and appropriately ridiculous, climax, which served to tie up almost all of the loose ends, as well as shedding light on any remaining mysteries accumulated during the process of reading the novel.

There is humor to be found in here. Although it is not a comedy, there are enough hijinks, oddities and playfully macabre antics to keep things lively, as one may expect in a novel where an airship driven by a skeleton is in low orbit around the earth for years. There is also an interesting MacGuffin shell game, where instead of having just one macguffin -- the one containing the homunculus -- there are four, and they get swapped around to a dizzying point where even the reader cannot keep track of which is which. What is not in this novel, however, is enough characterization of its ensemble cast, not even of the nominal protagonist, Langdon St. Ives. And the antagonists are each more of a caricature than the next -- Narbondo, the mad scientist that reanimated corpses, is a hunchback, for example.

To sum it up, if you can get into this novel, which takes some good amount of patience, there is a worthy payoff. But this is not the novel I would go about gifting someone thinking of exploring the steampunk genre, at risk of turning them off to it completely, as I fear I may have done with my book club.

Neb says

I'm a huge fan of James Blaylock, so my reviews of his work are going to be very biased. "Homunculus" is a dizzy romp through a fictional late 19th century London populated by daffy gentleman Natural Philosophers, grizzled but upstanding inventors and adventurers, wicked and perverted mad-scientists, and the tout-hearted and unflappable women who support them (the good guys, not the creeps). The characters are pretty archetypal and typical of a story of this genre as, say, written by H. Rider Haggard or Jules Verne, which, for me, anyway, gives it a pleasantly nostalgic feeling. The prose, as usual, does not disappoint, and often makes me laugh out loud with its self-deprecating stylized "faux-Victorian" tone. Although I never feel like I'm totally "inside" any of the characters, and indeed would be hard-pressed to decided on who is the main protagonist, it's still an enjoyable read because the story carries me along quickly.

The sequel, "Lord Kelvin's Machine", is a bit darker and more introspective, and most definitely a hero tale concerning Langdon St. Ives and his struggles against the evil Dr. Narbondo. Also recommended.

I acquired a copy of the Babbage Press printing several years ago, as this book is hard to find and I decided I wanted to support the small printing house. It's a nice, if oddly-sized edition done in a set of Edwardian-looking typefaces with a smattering of appropriately off-beat etchings dotted throughout.

Jefferson says

Ghoulish, Picaresque, London Steampunk Farce

“Within the gondola, looking for all the world as if he were piloting the moon itself, was a rigid figure in a cocked hat, gripping the wheel, his legs planted widely as if set to counter an ocean swell. The wind tore at his tattered coat, whipping it out behind him and revealing the dark curve of a ribcage, empty of flesh, ivory moonlight glowing in the crescents of air between the bones. His wrists were manacled to the wheel, which itself was lashed to a strut between two glassless windows.”

That's the skeletal Dr. Birdlip (his eyes long since burned out by the sun or pecked out by seabirds) “piloting” his dirigible on its fixed and mysterious rounds. After fifteen years, the blimp may be about to land on Hampstead Heath in the London of 1875, an event of intense interest to two opposing groups. . .

First, the convivial members of the Trismegistus Club: scientist, inventor, and amateur detective Landon St. Ives, trying to put the finishing touches on his starship; his capable man Hasbro, reading the Peloponnesian Wars; ex-sea captain and current owner of the tobacco shop where the Club meets, Captain Powers, wearing a hollow ivory peg leg that doubles as both a flask for alcohol and a pipe (though he is loathe to smoke his leg in public); whimsical toymaker William Keeble, crafting eccentric "Keeble boxes" to hold oxygenators (for star craft), emeralds, and the like; efficient gentleman from Bohemia Theophilus Godal, adventuring and sleuthing, ever ready with a new disguise and never at a loss; a cloaked woman visiting the Captain after the other members have left; and ex-squid seller and current pea pot man Bill Kraken, alcoholic aficionado of metaphysics, dealing with his guilty past working for nefarious bosses.

Second, their villainous nemeses: hunchbacked Dr. Ignacio Narbondo, eater of live sparrows and reanimator of corpses of dubious vintage; "fat boy in curls" Willis Puel, pustulent student of alchemy and phrenology, resenting that a man of his genius should suffer from the boils on his face and the commands of Narbondo; Shiloh, aged and cracked counterfeiter and messiah with big plans for the blimp-heralding apocalypse, including the upgrade of his current converts from zombies to living humans and the revivification of his long deceased mother Joanna; Kelso Drake, millionaire owner of mills and brothels, using any underhanded means to get his hands on a Keeble perpetual motion engine.

And the homunculus? Shiloh believes that the imp is both his father and God, while the Club members figure he's a miniature alien of malign influence, now presumably being kept somewhere safe in a Keeble box (an imp in a bottle). St. Ives would like to find the homunculus' star craft to see how it works, said star craft being hidden in one of Drake's brothels.

The plot is full of memories and ambitions, triumphs and failures, breakthroughs and brainings. Blaylock puts his characters through strenuous and comical paces, as all of them, from the criminals to the Club members, are rather bumbling. Soon he has them juggling at least three different Keeble boxes, until it's hard for the players and the reader to tell which box is which, which may be the point. After all, the novel praises poetic impracticality (e.g., toymaker Keeble) and criticizes Benthamite utility (e.g., millionaire Drake): "Everything worth anything . . . was its own excuse."

Blaylock writes some spicy, funny, imaginative, and rich lines and passages.

--"His theories had declined from the scientific to the mystical and then into gibberish, and now he wrote papers still, sometimes in verse, from the confines of a comfortable, barred cellar in north Kent."

--"Darkened roof rafters angled sharply away overhead, stabilized by several great joists that spanned the twenty-foot width of the shop and provided avenues along which tramped any number of mice, hauling bits of debris and working among the timbers like elves. Hanging from the joists were no end of marvels: winged beasts, carved dinosaurs, papier-mache masks, odd paper kites and wooden rockets, the amazed and lopsided head of a rubber ape, an enormous glass orb filled with countless tiny carven people."

--"Even the farthest-fetched, vilest sort of religious cult could develop a sort of fallacious legitimacy through numbers."

--"Dogs are your man for tracking aliens of this sort."

If all that sounds appealing, it is--for the first half, when Blaylock writes some great descriptions and the characters are starting their picaresque paces, but as the second half progresses and the characters increasingly flail about (not unlike Narbondo's shambling zombies) without attaining their goals and the

writing increasingly turns arch, I began longing for Dr. Birdlip's dirigible to hurry up and land to get the climax over with, and I stopped caring about the characters and events, doubting that it would all add up to anything very meaningful.

Thus the potent potential meaning of a passage from a book by Bill Kraken's metaphysical hero Ashbless in which mankind forms two camps ready to do battle, "the poets or wits on the one side, and the men of action or half-wits on the other," becomes lost in the noise of the good guys and bad guys chasing after each other and their goals like half-witted poetic men of action. When St. Ives wonders "What. . . did it all mean?" I wonder what meaning can such a farrago of ghoulish slapstick farce have?

Audiobook reader Nigel Carrington does a fine job with the rich writing and absurd antics: his gentleman voice for Godal, nasty voice for Narbondo, alcoholic voice for Kraken, crazed voice for Shiloh, etc., are all great, though sometimes in the heat of the action his voices may slip.

Finally, although its many absurdities began to cloy and smother its potentially interesting philosophical elements, I'm glad to have listened to *Homunculus* (1986), and figure that fans of vintage steampunk set in London would probably enjoy it.

Simon Brading says

It was good, it was interesting, but there were just too many people running around doing too many different things for me to care to much about whether they succeeded or not, so I never really felt the pull to keep reading that books often have.

Christopher says

The first book I read by Blaylock was All The Bells on Earth.
All The Bells On Earth

That book immediately won me over. It was an exquisite example of what Dark Fiction (or Urban Fantasy, or the new Weird, or whatever you call the genre) can do. Unfortunately, since that book I just haven't found another Blaylock book as good.

This book wasn't bad, and I guess I judged it two ways.

If I judged it on its own, I probably would have given it a 2. It starts slow, I didn't really find myself enjoying it until about halfway into the book. The characters are easy to confuse. There's a good sized cast, and they all seem to fall within two groups. The good and the bad. Within those groups the characters are all but interchangeable.

The plot was tangled, but still felt arbitrary. In the end I don't feel like the characters really moved the book, rather they were caught up in it.

Where this book scores points is when judged within the steampunk genre. This was one of the early

cornerstones of that form. And in that respect it was a fun read. It did pick up in the second half. And if you like the general setting and style of steampunk stories you'll enjoy this one.

Kat Hooper says

3.5 stars

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

"Does the night seem uncommonly full of dead men and severed heads to you?"

Langdon St. Ives is a man of science and a member of the Royal Society. With the help of his dependable and discreet manservant, St. Ives prefers to spend his time secretly building a spaceship in his countryside silo. But currently he's in London to help his friend Jack Owlesby recover a wooden box containing the huge emerald Jack's father left him for an inheritance. Things get confusing when it's discovered that there are several of these boxes that all look the same and all contain something somebody wants. Soon St. Ives, Jack, and a host of other friends and enemies become embroiled in a madcap adventure featuring a toymaker and his lovely daughter, a captain with a smokable peg leg, the scientists of the Royal Society, an evil millionaire, a dirigible steered by a skeleton, a tiny little man in a jar who may be an alien, a cult evangelist who wants to bring his mother back to life, a love-spurned alchemist who keeps trying home remedies to cure his acne, and a lot of carp and zombies.

As you may have guessed, *Homunculus* is zany and completely over-the-top in the right kind of way. The villains are meant to be caricatures — one of them is hunchbacked and another sneakily lurches around England with his head wrapped in unraveling bandages. They do stupid things such as leaving the curtains open while animating corpses for the evangelist to claim as converts, and tip-toeing up dark staircases carrying bombs with lit fuses. Blaylock's bizarre but deadpan humor, in the absurdist British style (though Blaylock is American), was my favorite part of the novel. Even though *Homunculus* is packed with action and very funny when it's in its farcical mode, the pace sometimes lags and the shallow characters can't make up for it when that happens. Fortunately, that's not often. The final scene is a screwball melee as all the heroes and villains, and thousands of London's citizens, turn out to witness the story's climax.

I listened to Audible Frontiers' version of *Homunculus* which was narrated by Nigel Carrington who was a brilliant choice. There are a lot of similar characters in *Homunculus*, but Mr. Carrington made them distinguishable. He also hit exactly the right tone with the humor which ranged from deadpan to black comedy to zany farce. In fact, I would specifically recommend the audio version of *Homunculus* just because Nigel Carrington's performance was a large factor in my enjoyment of the book.

If you're in the mood for a surreal British comedy in the vein of *Monty Python* or *Fawlty Towers*, James P. Blaylock's *Homunculus* will fit the bill nicely. Published in 1986, this is one of the earlier steampunk novels. In fact, Blaylock, along with friends K.W. Jeter and Tim Powers, all of whom studied with Philip K. Dick, are considered fathers of modern steampunk, and it was Jeter who coined the term to describe their work.

Homunculus won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1986.

Cécile C. says

Fair warning: this book has one of the steepest in media res opening I ever got the chance to read. Meaning, I think I understood next to nothing for the first thirty pages or so, and it only started to slowly come together after a few chapters (since I tried to re-read the beginning after I had finished, I'll say that the problem did not only lay in my limited capacity to focus: the opening really tosses a huge number of minute details about events and people and things that the readers can't possibly make sense of, and it's quite hard to remember them all until the moment when they become significant).

Aside from that, it's a rather satisfying piece of steampunk: lots of adventure, complicated situations with an even more complicated resolution, a pinch of humour, some allusions to Tim Powers will make this book a very pleasant one for any steampunk fans. Of course, the fact that this book practically invented the genre means it won't sound extremely ground-breaking to modern readers (a bit ironical, I know, but that's the same sort of phenomenon that happened with The Lord of the Rings: it's been imitated so much it doesn't sound very surprising anymore today). It's also more impressive by the picaresque complexity of the adventure than by the characters or underlying message, but then, crafting a complicated adventure story takes good writing, too.

It may be a few pages before you really start enjoying this book, but there's a big chance you'll eventually will if you're a bit patient.

Velvetink says

Bizarre & I loved it.

*note to self. Copy from A. (different cover and edition) scan later.

Andrew says

This is a tricky one - If I rated this book just on how easy and enjoyable it was it would be a 2 BUT I know that is as much me as anything and I have read other James Blaylock books which I have really enjoyed so I am giving it a three star because to use that famous quote - its not you, its me!

So where did it all wrong - well its hard to put my finger on it, from protagonists I just could not associate with, I never really felt like rooting for the hero (or even who the hero was), to the style of writing which for me seemed to be back to front when describing things.

Now this might be down to the size of the cast - especially in the last chapters it seemed that literally every paragraph seemed to jump from one person to the next and that number of happenstances and accidental meetings meant that there world was incredibly small.

To the fact that I wasn't even sure of the style, was it supernatural, was it gothic was it steampunk, all of them or none of them.

I guess for me I struggled to connect to the book. Every time I picked the book up I had to stop and think

where I had left the story and the dialogue at times felt like I was reading film script rather than reading a story - where events would suddenly cut to the next day.

Now James Blaylock is an incredibly accomplished author and is a close working associate with Tim Powers in fact their joint creation William Ashbless is referenced many times (in fact his book saves someones life) I just felt like rather than the book letting me down I have let the book down - a very strange sensation and one I cannot explain. I will have to ponder this one further.

Eric says

This book had everything that intrigued me: multiple parties trying to find a mysterious airship, puzzle boxes containing weird artifacts and even the living dead. Unfortunately this book delivered on none of the promise. The characters heroes were hard to differentiate from one another, the villains were too numerous with shallow motives, and the central airship and it's mysterious passenger touchdown at the very end of the story barely long enough for a cup of tea. While the concept was good, the execution was not.

Tim says

Corpses are animated in 1870s London by a hunchbacked fiend. A man sees himself as a new messiah. A blimp piloted by a skeleton stays aloft for years. A space ship is invented, and possibly a perpetual motion machine. A tiny man said to be from another world is kept in a small box, the harnessing of his considerable powers a tug-of-war in a deadly-fun game between armchair adventurers/inventors and baddies and their weird science.

Yes, it's more James P. Blaylock fun. As usual, Blaylock, whose more typical venue for his inspired fantastical weirdness is modern-day coastal California, not Victorian England, is adept at throwing colorful elements together, and he writes well. But "Homunculus" doesn't mark the first time his plotting has been a little spotty. Still, this early Blaylock caper is a good ride.

As it might sound from the novel's description, Blaylock throws in a few too many elements in this one; the many members of the Trismegistus Club (good guys) and the competing (and sometimes cooperating) villains are either hard to keep straight initially or are just too plentiful, watering things down. He could have used another 50 pages to flesh things out. There is neither a central hero nor a main villain. And a few too many coincidences/conveniences and scenes with lazy plotting are flying about. One of our heroes often is able to monitor the hunchback's doings by watching from a next-door window — the villain doesn't cover his windows when he's doing his re-animation! This same villain captures a downtrodden man but leaves him in a laboratory, unfettered; the man escapes when the villain comes back and is preoccupied. And a space ship's hiding place is uncovered by an intruder because the ship is left undefended for hours while two men search for a prowler.

Oh, well. There's still plenty of fun, starting with some great names. Langdon St. Ives. Dr. Ignacio Narbondo (the hunchback), Birdlip, and my favorite, a villain with hideous acne named Willis Pule. Interestingly, one of the characters is called Captain Powers, an obvious shout-out to Blaylock's friend and sometimes collaborator, the excellent Tim Powers, whose writing sometimes mines similar veins to Blaylock's.

I can't speak for the book's availability outside the United States, but Americans are likely only to be able to find the Babbage Press edition. Be forewarned that the cover art on this small-press imprint (Blaylock's own? I'm not sure) is wretchedly simple and, inside, typos appear regularly, most notably misplaced or missing quotation marks and problems with periods. Readers also should note that Blaylock returned to the Narbondo/St. Ives rivalry with a sequel, "Lord Kelvin's Machine."

This is not absolutely prime Blaylock ("The Last Coin" probably is his best). And, sure, the plot sometimes lurches like one of the animated ghouls who are running all over hell, but a rollicking second half makes this a 3.5-star effort.

Mark says

A plethora of plots that drive you to ask that question that is on everyone's mind....."does the night seem uncommonly full of dead men and severed heads?". An entertaining journey up and under and all around. My second St. Ives adventure..... looking forward to the next.
