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# Pavane

Keith Roberts, 1968

Christopher Priest explores a feudal Britain in this alternative history

Although it was written more than 40 years ago, Keith Roberts's novel *Pavane* remains one of the finest science fantasy novels of all time. More than that, it's a novel capable of being judged by the highest standards, in-genre or outside. You can say of many novels that they are well written, well told, unusual in subject matter, deeply serious, highly entertaining, a feat of sustained imagination, original, moving, gripping, and so on – it is vanishingly rare to find all such qualities in one place.

*Pavane* first appeared in 1966 as a series of five long short stories in *Impulse* magazine. They produced a flood of letters from its readers, who wanted to know more about not only the author (who was then almost unknown) but also about the Dorset landscape and people described in the stories. Odd and intriguing clues were scattered about: it was obviously fiction, but what were the facts behind the stories? A modern reader feels the same intrigue.

A book version came along about two years after the stories appeared. More recent editions have included a sixth story, "The White Boat", which Roberts wrote a little later.

The novel opens with a brief historical note: "On a warm July evening of the year 1588, in the royal palace of Greenwich, London, a woman lay dying." The woman is Queen Elizabeth I, and her assassination opens the way to a successful invasion by the Spanish, and Britain falling under the rule of the Pope.

Thus the scene is set for an alternative history scenario. By 1968, when the novel proper begins, England is a feudal place of wild heaths and thriving forests, towns with Latinate names, medieval castles, rural communities and craft industries. Taxes are raised as tributes and tithes. The repressive rule of the church in Rome means that most modern technology doesn't exist, or knowledge of it has been suppressed because it's deemed heretical. There are no telephones, radio, TV, aircraft – a handful of cars owned by the wealthy chug along on under-powered two-stroke engines, using sails if there's a following



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wind. Goods are transported in huge road-trains hauled by steam traction engines. There's no broadband – messages are sent by clacking vanes on semaphore towers.

The first story, "The Lady Margaret", sets the tone of the book: it's a detailed, authentic-seeming description of a young haulier taking his road-train across Dorset on a delivery trip. Almost nothing happens: he sets out from Durnovaria (Dorchester) late on a cold winter's afternoon, he delivers goods to a depot in Poole, he calls in to see a girlfriend in Swanage on the way home. He picks up a new load. While crossing the heaths he suffers a violent attack by a gang of

*routiers* – during this he contributes to the death of his best friend.

By the time you've finished the opening story, Roberts's simple but magnificent prose has built up a compelling picture of what it feels like to live and work in this society. The story is full of allusions and references, some of them mysterious (at first), but most of them deftly sketching in the extraordinarily rich details of the world. You learn what it's like to fire up a traction engine; you feel the wintry cold of the footplate, the dark mysteries of the heaths, the sensual smells and sights of the towns. You believe in the characters and start to care about them.

Five more episodes remain, and the world of *Pavane* continues to unfold like the stately dance its name implies. You realise that the story of this humdrum but beautiful traction engine is where the society itself starts to change: heresies are about to break out; the repression from Rome will self-destruct. Marvellous scenes and revelations are to come, and it's not for me to spoil them for you here.

The novel seems to be at first, and of course it is, an alternative history. But later it changes, becomes something more. The end is oblique: we follow the events clearly enough, but the consequences of those events indicate more of a parallel history, a statement about our own modern world.

*Pavane* is the sort of novel that readers are always instinctively searching for, and which many writers would give the good part of an arm to be able to write. Keith Roberts never wrote a better novel than this, but then few other writers have come close to it either. **SFX**

*Christopher Priest has written the introduction to a new Penguin Classics edition of The Invisible Man, released in November (RRP £7.99).*

## Like This? Try These!

**The Chalk Giants** by Keith Roberts (1974)

Another of Roberts's Dorset novels, this post-apocalyptic book has an episodic structure similar to *Pavane's*, but its range is wider and its scope longer.



**The Separation** by Christopher Priest (2002)

Like *Pavane*, Priest's novel is an alternative history, which turns on the prospect of a "separate peace" between Britain and Germany in 1941.



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>> "The first measure blew me away, can't wait to read on..."  
**DocSavage**

>> "What happens in a world where an unchecked Catholic Empire suppresses technological revolution? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! THAT'S WHAT! Sorry to shout but 48 pages about some bloke on the back of a traction engine is not my idea of a good time."  
**Shoesworth**

>> "I found this easier to admire than enjoy, I must admit, though the lyricism of the writing really lifts it and makes it a fully convincing and fleshed out 'alternative' world. On the whole, I think John Whitbourn's *A Dangerous Energy* is better if this is the kind of writing/ thinking you enjoy. That one's got real balls."  
**Lear**

>> "My favourite alternative history novel. While most of these take as their starting point a historical conflict going in a radically different direction (for example, 'what if the Nazis had won World War II?'), *Pavane's* world diverges from ours in that Elizabeth I was assassinated in this alternative history. What follows is a succession of vignettes that paint a vivid picture of Britain under the rule of the Catholic Church. The characters seem to act out pre-ordained roles in the drama (the 'Pavane' of the title) and in some cases, notably Lady Eleanor's, they are aware that they are doing so."  
**blessedRthegeek**

## Get Reading!

>> In *SFX165* we'll be gathering round the fire as *Doctor Who* scriptwriter Paul Cornell reads MR James's *Collected Ghost Stories*.  
**NEXT ISSUE:** Scarlett Thomas jacks into '80s cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer*.