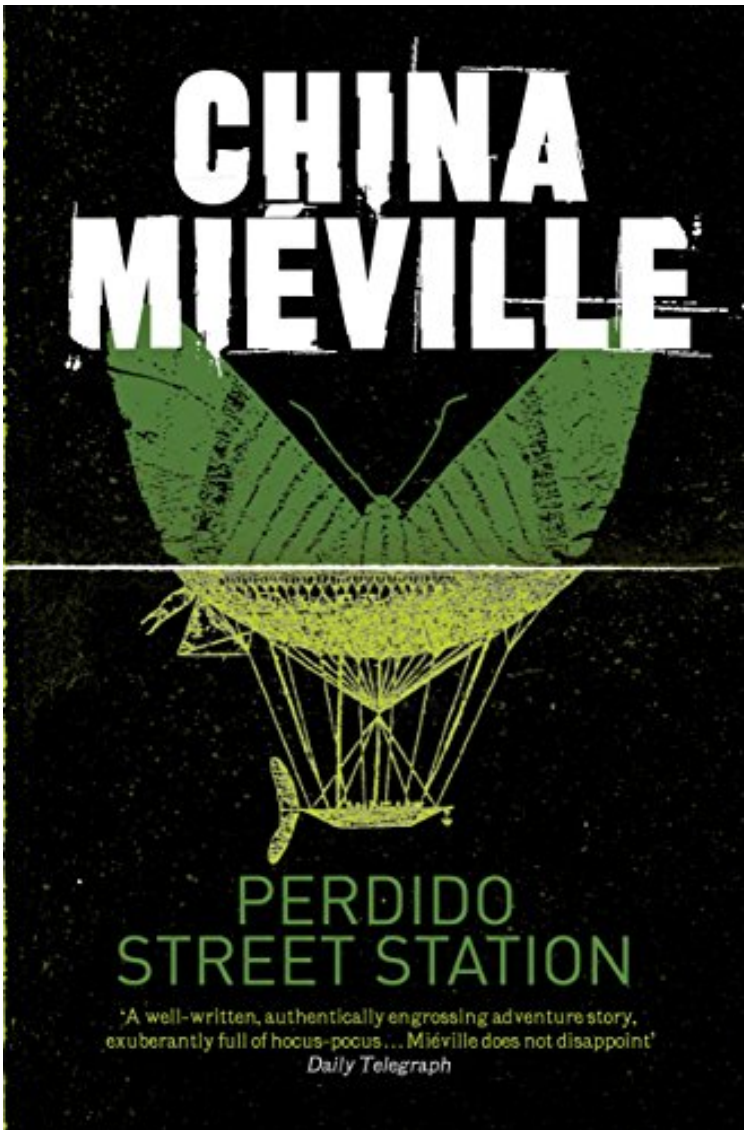


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Perdido Street Station



Par China Miville
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWinner of the August Derleth award, Perdido Street Station is an imaginative fantasy thriller, and the first of China Miville's novels set in the world of Bas-Lag. The metropolis of New Crobuzon sprawls at the centre of its own bewildering world. Humans and mutants and arcane races throng the gloom beneath its chimneys, where the rivers are sluggish with unnatural effluent, and factories and foundries pound into the night. For more than a thousand years, the parliament and its brutal militia have ruled over a vast array of workers and artists, spies, magicians, junkies and whores. Now a stranger has come, with a pocketful of gold and an impossible demand, and inadvertently something unthinkable is released. Soon the city is gripped by an alien terror - and the fate of millions depends on a clutch of outcasts on the run from lawmakers and crime-lords alike. The urban nightscape becomes a hunting ground as battles rage in the

shadows of bizarre buildings. And a reckoning is due at the city's heart, in the vast edifice of Perdido Street Station. It is too late to escape.

Chapter One

A window burst open high above the market. A basket flew from it and arced towards the oblivious crowd. It spasmed in mid-air, then spun and continued earthwards at a slower, uneven pace. Dancing precariously as it descended, its wire-mesh caught and skittered on the buildings roughhides. It scabbled at the wall, sending paint and concrete dust plummeting before it. The sun shone through uneven cloud-cover with a bright grey light. Below the basket the stalls and barrows lay like untidy spillage. The city reeked. But today was market day down in Aspic Hole, and the pungent slick of dung-smell and rot that rolled over New Crobuzon was, in these streets, for these hours, improved with paprika and fresh tomato, hot oil and fish and cinnamon, cured meat, banana and onion. The food stalls stretched the noisy length of Shadrach Street. Books and manuscripts and pictures filled up Selchit Pass, an avenue of desultory banyans and crumbling concrete a little way to the east. There were earthenware products spilling down the road to Barrackham in the south; engine parts to the west; toys down one side street; clothes between two more; and countless other goods filling all the alleys. The rows of merchandise converged crookedly on Aspic Hole like spokes on a broken wheel. In the Hole itself all distinctions broke down. In the shadow of old walls and unsafe towers were a pile of gears, a ramshackle table of broken crockery and crude clay ornaments, a case of mouldering textbooks. Antiques, sex, flea-powder. Between the stalls stomped hissing constructs. Beggars argued in the bowels of deserted buildings. Members of strange races bought peculiar things. Aspic Bazaar, a blaring mess of goods, grease and tallymen.

Mercantile law ruled: let the buyer beware. The costermonger below the descending basket looked up into flat sunlight and a shower of brick particles. He wiped his eye. He plucked the frayed thing from the air above his head, pulling at the cord which bore it until it went slack in his hand. Inside the basket was a brass shekel and a note in careful, ornamented italics. The food-vendor scratched his nose as he scanned the paper. He rummaged in the piles of produce before him, placed eggs and fruit and root vegetables into the container, checking against the list. He stopped and read one item again, then smiled lasciviously and cut a slice of pork. When he was done he put the shekel in his pocket and felt for change, hesitating as he calculated his delivery cost, eventually depositing four stivers in with the food. He wiped his hands against his trousers and thought for a minute, then scribbled something on the list with a stub of charcoal and tossed it after the coins. He tugged three times at the rope and the basket began a bobbing journey into the air. It rose above the lower roofs of surrounding buildings, buoyed upwards by noise. It startled the roosting jackdaws in the deserted storey and inscribed the wall with another scrawled trail among many, before it disappeared again into the window from which it had emerged.

Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin had just realized that he was dreaming. He had been aghast to find himself employed once again at the university, parading in front of a huge blackboard covered in vague representations of levers and forces and stress. Introductory Material Science. Isaac had been staring anxiously at the class when that unctuous bastard Vermishank had looked in. I can't teach this class, whispered Isaac loudly. The markets too loud. He gestured at the window. It's all right. Vermishank was soothing and loathsome. It's time for breakfast, he said. That'll take your mind off the noise. And hearing that absurdity Isaac shed sleep with immense relief. The raucous profanity of the bazaar and the smell of cooking came with him into the day. He lay hugely in the bed without opening his eyes. He heard Lin walk across the room and felt the slight listing of the floorboards. The garret was filled with pungent smoke. Isaac salivated. Lin clapped twice. She knew when Isaac woke. Probably because he closed his mouth, he thought, and sniggered without opening his eyes. Still sleeping, shush, poor little Isaac ever so tired, he whimpered, and snuggled down like a child. Lin clapped again, once, derisory, and walked away. He groaned and rolled over. Termagant! he moaned after her. Shrew! Harridan! All right, all right, you win, you, you . . .

uh . . . virago, you spit-fire . . . He rubbed his head and sat up, grinned sheepishly. Lin made an obscene gesture at him without turning around. She stood with her back to him, nude at the stove, dancing back as hot drops of oil leapt from the pan. The covers slipped from the slope of Isaac's belly. He was a dirigible, huge and taut and strong. Grey hair burst from him abundantly. Lin was hairless. Her muscles were tight under her red skin, each distinct. She was like an anatomical atlas. Isaac studied her in cheerful lust. His arse itched. He scratched under the blanket, rooting as shameless as a dog. Something burst under his nail, and he withdrew his hand to examine it. A tiny half-crushed grub waved helplessly on the end of his finger. It was a refflick, a harmless little khepri parasite. The thing must have been rather bewildered by my juices, Isaac thought, and flicked his finger clean. Refflick, Lin, he said. Bath time. Lin stamped in irritation. New Crobuzon was a huge plague pit, a moribund city. Parasites, infection and rumour were uncontainable. A monthly chymical dip was a necessary prophylactic for the khepri, if they wanted to avoid itches and sores. Lin slid the contents of the

pan onto a plate and set it down, across from her own breakfast. She sat and gestured for Isaac to join her. He rose from the bed and stumbled across the room. He eased himself onto the small chair, wary of splinters. Isaac and Lin sat naked on either side of the bare wooden table. Isaac was conscious of their pose, seeing them as a third person might. It would make a beautiful, strange print, he thought. An attic room, dust-motes in the light from the small window, books and paper and paints neatly stacked by cheap wooden furniture. A dark-skinned man, big and nude and detumescing, gripping a knife and fork, unnaturally still, sitting opposite a khepri, her slight woman's body in shadow, her chitinous head in silhouette. They ignored their food and stared at each other for a moment. Lin signed at him: Good morning, lover. Then she began to eat, still looking at him. It was when she ate that Lin was most alien, and their shared meals were a challenge and an affirmation. As he watched her, Isaac felt the familiar trill of emotion: disgust immediately stamped out, pride at the stamping out, guilty desire. Light glinted in Lin's compound eyes. Her head legs quivered. She picked up half a tomato and gripped it with her mandibles. She lowered her hands while her inner mouth parts picked at the food her outer jaw held steady. Isaac watched the huge iridescent scarab that was his lover's head devour her breakfast. He watched her swallow, saw her throat bob where the pale insectile underbelly segued smoothly into her human neck . . . not that she would have accepted that description. Humans have khepri bodies, legs, hands; and the heads of shaved gibbons, she had once told him. He smiled and dangled his fried pork in front of him, curled his tongue around it, wiped his greasy fingers on the table. He smiled at her. She undulated her head legs at him and signed, My monster. I am a pervert, thought Isaac, and so is she. Breakfast conversation was generally one-sided: Lin could sign with her hands while she ate, but Isaac's attempts to talk and eat simultaneously made for incomprehensible noises and food debris on the table. Instead they read; Lin an artist's newsletter, Isaac whatever came to hand. Here reached out between mouthfuls and grabbed books and papers, and found himself reading Lin's shopping list. The item a handful of pork slices was ringed and underneath her exquisite calligraphy was a scrawled question in much cruder script: Got company??? Nice bit of pork goes down a treat!!! Isaac waved the paper at Lin. What's this filthy arse on about? he yelled, spraying food. His outrage was amused but genuine. Lin read it and shrugged. Knows I don't eat meat. Knows I've got a guest for breakfast. Wordplay on pork. Yes, thanks, lover, I got that bit. How does he know you're a vegetarian? Do you two often engage in this witty banter? Lin stared at him for a moment without responding. Knows because I don't buy meat. She shook her head at the stupid question. Don't worry: only ever banter on paper. Doesn't know I'm bug. Her deliberate use of the slur annoyed Isaac. Dammit, I wasn't insinuating anything . . . Lin's hand waggled, the equivalent of a raised eyebrow. Isaac howled in irritation. Godshit, Lin! Not everything I say is about fear of discovery! Isaac and Lin had been lovers nearly two years. They had always tried not to think too hard about the rules of their relationship, but the longer they were together the more this strategy of avoidance became impossible. Questions as yet unasked demanded attention. Innocent remarks and askance looks from others, a moment of contact too long in public, a note from a grocer everything was a reminder that they were, in some contexts, living a secret. Everything was made fraught. They had never said, We are lovers, so they had never had to say, We will not disclose our relationship to all, we will hide from some. But it had been clear for months and months that this was the case. Lin had begun to hint, with snide and acid remarks, that Isaac's refusal to declare himself her lover was at best cowardly, at worst bigoted. This insensitivity annoyed him. He had, after all, made the nature of his relationship clear with his close friends, as Lin had with hers. And it was all far, far easier for her. She was an artist. Her circle were the libertines, the patrons and the hangers-on, bohemians and parasites, poets and pamphleteers and fashionable junkies. They delighted in the scandalous and the outré. In the tea-houses and bars of Salacus Fields, Lin's escapades broadly hinted at, never denied, never made explicit would be the subject of louché discussion and innuendo. Her love-life was an avant-garde transgression, an art-happening, like Concrete Music had been last season, or Snot Art! the year before that. And yes, Isaac could play that game. He was known in that world, from long before his days with Lin. He was, after all, the scientist-outcast, the disreputable thinker who walked out of a lucrative teaching post to engage in experiments too outrageous and brilliant for the tiny minds who ran the university. What did he care for convention? He would sleep with whomever and whatever he liked, surely! That was his persona in Salacus Fields, where his relationship with Lin was an open secret, where he enjoyed being more or less open, where he would put his arm around her in the bars and whisper to her as she sucked sugar-coffee from a sponge. That was his story, and it was at least half true. He had walked out of the university ten years ago. But only because he realized to his misery that he was a terrible teacher. He had looked out at the quizzical faces, listened to the frantic scrawling of the panicking students, and realized that with a mind that ran and tripped

and hurled itself down the corridors of theory in anarchic fashion, he could learn himself, in haphazard lurches, but he could not impart the understanding he so loved. He had hung his head in shame and fled. In another twist to the myth, his Head of Department, the ageless and loathsome Vermishank, was not a plodding epigone but an exceptional bio-thaumaturge, who had nixed Isaac's research less because it was unorthodox than because it was going nowhere. Isaac could be brilliant, but he was undisciplined. Vermishank had played him like a fish, making him beg for work as a freelance researcher on terrible pay, but with limited access to the university laboratories. And it was this, his work, which kept Isaac circumspect about his lover. From the Trade Paperback edition. *Revue de presse* "[A] phantasmagoric masterpiece . . . The book left me breathless with admiration." --BRIAN STABLEFORD "China Miville's cool style has conjured up a triumphantly macabre technoslip metropolis with a unique atmosphere of horror and fascination." --PETER HAMILTON "It is the best steampunk novel since Gibson and Sterling's." --JOHN CLUTE From the Trade Paperback edition.