

Martian Politics and the Hard-Boiled Anti-Hero: Richard Morgan's *Thin Air*

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Richard K. Morgan (London, 1965) is the acclaimed author of the Takeshi Kovacs science fiction trilogy (*Altered Carbon* (2002), *Broken Angels* (2003), *Woken Furies* (2005) and

of the fantasy trilogy *A Land Fit For Heroes* (*The Steel Remains* (2008), *The Cold Commands* (2011) and *The Dark Defiles* (2014)). His other novels are *Market Forces* (2004) and *Black Man* (2007), known as *Thirteen* or *Th1rte3n* in the United States. He has also written the scripts for the graphic novels *Black Widow: Homecoming* (2005) and *Black Widow: The Things They Say About Her* (2006), and for the videogames *Crysis 2* (2011), *Syndicate* (2012) and *A Land Fit For Heroes* (2015).

This interview was carried out on occasion of the publication of *Thin Air* (see the review in this issue) in October 2018, a novel that takes place on Mars and belongs to the same universe as *Black Man*.

How much planning (and daydreaming) goes into a novel like *Thin Air*?

Oh, LOTS!! I've had the very vague bases for this one in the back of my head since 2007 at least! There's an off-hand reference in *Black Man/Thirteen*¹ to a character on Mars, a hibernoid PI who's hard as nails, and that really was the initial template for Hakan Veil. Of course, both the character and the

¹ See "Richard K. Morgan's *Black Man/Thirteen*: A Conversation" (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/132013>) and Sara Martín, "The Anti-patriarchal Male Monster as Limited (Anti)Hero in Richard Morgan's *Black Man*", *Science Fiction Studies*, #131, 44.1 (March 2017): 84-103, <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/>.



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scenario have evolved a hell of a lot since then, but I think you could safely say I've been daydreaming this book — working title *Hardboiled On Mars*, let's call it — for at least that long!

What was your inspiration for your vision of Mars? Any favourite Mars fiction?

Not really. I still, to my shame, have not got around to reading Kim Stanley Robinson's magisterial Mars trilogy, something I really wanted to do before writing *Thin Air*, but simply couldn't, in the chaos of early fatherhood, make time for. I recall a rather striking segment of Margaret F McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* being set on Mars, some parts of Hannu Rajaniemi's *Quantum Thief*, but the last full Mars novel I read was probably Heinlein's *Red Planet* and that was forty odd years ago! And oddly enough, even there, Mars was serving as a crucible for science fictional politics, so I kind of feel I'm following in a grand tradition! ☺

Interestingly, I think it was Rajaniemi's visions in particular that gave me a feeling of license. Over the years since and even during the writing of *Black Man/Thirteen*, I'd done a fair bit of hard research into the how, why and wherefore of Mars colonisation, and you can see some of the fruits of that in the book, for example, with the use of the Darian calendar.² But after reading Hannu, what I realised was that there's no good hard SF reason

² "Darian Calendar," *Wikipedia*: "The Darian calendar is a proposed system of time-keeping designed to serve the needs of any possible future human settlers on the planet Mars. It was created by aerospace engineer, political scientist, and space jurist Thomas Gangale in 1985 and named by him after his son Darius. It was first published in June 1986". From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darian_calendar

you can't just go out and totally push the envelope to get the Mars you want, to tell the story that suits you, basically to have some fun. So that was what I did!

Beyond that, I suspect that my more general inspirations will be pretty crystal clear to anyone reading the text — the names of the streets and plazas in the colony, the quote from Robert Zubrin's *The Case for Mars*³ at the start of the book and its juxtaposition with the Stannard⁴ quote, the general feel of the culture that's evolved in the Gash⁵ and the subtext in Veil's narrative voice. You know me by now ☺ It's very much a *revisionist* Mars colony novel.

How do the chronologies of *Black Man* and *Thin Air* fit? *Black Man* takes place in 2107 but is this long before *Thin Air*? Is the date 300 YC (Years of Colonization) correct for *Thin Air*?

As always, I try to keep these things vague, as much as anything to leave myself room for later manoeuvre! You're correct about the YC nomenclature, of course, but what that actually means is up for grabs. Do the dates run — retrospectively — from the Luthra touchdown? From the inauguration of the original under-glass colony mentioned in the first chapter? Or from some other momentous marker in the history of the Gash?

³ "*The Case for Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must* is a nonfiction science book by Robert Zubrin, first published in 1996, and revised and updated in 2011. The book details Zubrin's Mars Direct plan to make the first human landing on Mars". From *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Case_for_Mars

⁴ *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (1992) by US historian David Stannard describes the conquest of the West and the extermination of the Native American population as the biggest genocide ever committed in human History.

⁵ Valles Marineris, the largest canyon system on Mars, looks like a gigantic gash, hence 'the Gash'.



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Suffice it to say that well over a century has passed since the events of *Black Man*, but that's all I can say with certainty.

The colonization of Mars is run by COLIN (Colonial Initiative). Hak Veil describes them as predators not in the style of hyenas but rather of the crown of thorns starfish, which slowly traps and then dissolves its victims. COLIN runs, or sponsors, all aspects of 'the human footprint anywhere in the solar system'. 'Their capital flow', Veil explains, 'is the lifeblood of the expansion, their co-option of antique legal structure back on Earth is the overarching framework that holds it all up'. Is corporate intervention at this large scale the only way to carry out space exploration and the eventual colonization of Mars?

Well, it's certainly not the *only* way to do it — the Chinese colony in Hellas hints at some (not necessarily very laudable) alternatives — but it does seem to be the most likely model at the moment; neoliberalism has set loose a vast capital investment potential that certainly accommodates the necessary scale and ambition, but it is, of course, utterly rapacious, anti-humane and self-interested at the same time. In many ways, this novel is lamenting that fact, and the death of the old NASA vision neoliberalism has helped to bury. I really miss Carl Sagan and his civilised humanistic universalism!

The novel is called *Thin Air* partly because this refers to how the 'terraform eco-magic' has failed to generated atmospheric conditions beyond 'four percent Earth sea level standard'. Why this pessimism? Can you also tell a little

about the 'lamina' and about the role of nanotech in developing Mars?

There is a central conceit that I keep — not consciously, I swear! — returning to in my work. It takes different metaphorical guises, but at root it's always the same sense of something grand and worthwhile being abandoned by vicious and stupid men in favour of short-term profit and tribal hegemony. You see it in the regressive politics of the Protectorate in the Kovacs novels, the way both the Yhelteth Empire and the — so-called — Free Cities fail their duty as civilisations in *A Land Fit for Heroes*. So also with *Thin Air* — the landscape is littered with the markers of a retreat from the grand scheme of terraforming and building a home for humanity on Mars, in favour of an ultra-profitable corporate stasis and an ongoing lie of highly emotive intangibles sold to the general populace in lieu of actual progress. Take a look around you — remind you of anything?

As to the lamina, they are the highest expression — quite literally! — of a molecular membrane tech which has transformed everything about the way people live on Mars (and, of course, elsewhere). It's been clear to me for quite some time that the really exciting technological changes we're going to see in the future are a lot less to do with devices and machines, and far more about *stuff* — new hi-tech materials, post-organic transformatives, self-governing iterative processes and so forth. The conceit in *Thin Air* is that Mars has been a fantastic incubator for all these technologies because there is so much untenanted real estate to carry out the testing in — things that would be outright illegal on Earth because of the knock-on effects for the environment and local human population can be done with impunity on Mars because so little of the planet is in use



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as living space, and the broader Martian environment is either dead or so close to dead no-one cares.

Hak Veil's critique of the Martian High Frontier Myth is constant through *Thin Air*. I assume this is your own point of view, too. Quoting the words of former Governor General Kathleen Okombi, 'the forces unleashed on a frontier — any frontier — are anything but noble'. Is *Thin Air*, then, a sort of anti-western?

I suppose you could call it my *Blood Meridian*,⁶ yeah ☺.

I mean, Veil has his own personal reasons for his sour outlook on Mars, and there's no agenda of mine there outside of good solid characterisation. And, in all fairness, this malcontent sourness does get a fair dose of pushback from other characters. But at the same time, Veil's attitude does, of course, position him ideally to penetrate the mythic lies that sustain the colony. Again, returning to that Zubrin quote at the front of the book, I was genuinely shocked to find that there are a considerable cohort of people out there who seem to think the American frontier was some kind of apogee for civilizational drive and achievement. That idea, and the idea that you could — or even should! — somehow transfer that cultural matrix to Mars in the twenty first century was so monstrous I just had to track it and shoot it down!

***Thin Air* presents the inhabitants of Mars as High Frontier Humanity. The idea of the codeflies biting everyone to update the modifications is quite fun!**

⁶ *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is a Western by American author Cormac McCarthy, also author of the post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006).

Veil names as updates 'Fresh gas exchange turbos for your lungs; melatonin re-up version 8.11.4; booster patches for the latest — and shakiest — osteopenia inhibitors; corneal armouring 9.1'. How deeply modified are humans on Mars? They're not quite post-human, are they?

That depends very much on your standpoint, I think. You could argue that a lot of us are *already* post-human to the extent that we use prosthetics and medical tech, both external and internal, that prolongs or otherwise improves our lives. And these 'mods' — if we can call them that — are getting smarter, cooler, better fitting and less obtrusive with every passing year. In *Thin Air*, this medical augmentation has become almost wholly invisible, reduced to the nano- and cellular levels. Looking at a Mars human, you probably wouldn't *see* anything very odd, except perhaps a slightly excessive leanness; but what's going on inside that body has become the equivalent of the tech in your phone, eternally provisional, subject to constant upgrade and change.

Are the Google glasses the inspiration for the lenses everyone wears on Mars? The idea that they also work as lie detector by reading facial expression, or gestalt, is very clever. Do you think Google will ever incorporate this feature...? And more seriously, Veil also points out that the lenses are used because the alternative, wetware, is too expensive and too problematic for the immune system. Care to comment?

Google Glass certainly forms part of the conceptual matrix that led me to opt for headgear lenses as the platform for this world's ICT, sure. But, really, it's just been a question of the obvious staring you in the



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face, and a lot of time spent in southern Europe. When you hit the streets of, for example, Málaga or Cádiz, what you see is *everyone* wearing shades. They're as common as shoes. No-one looks odd wearing them, in fact mostly people look kind of stylish with it. And that's when it hits you — this is how it's going to be. High-style shades are going to be the iPhones of the future. And once you accept that basic premise, then you also know that they'll come loaded with every app you can think of — polygraphing tech, variable polarising glass, AR, VR, recording and playback options, the possible list just goes on.

Of course, this kind of field-of-vision tech has been kicking around in cyberpunk for a long time — think of Molly's mirror-shade lens implants in *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Neuromancer* — but I think the beat cyberpunk missed (or perhaps chose, stylistically, to ignore) was the human discomfort with bodily mutilation and physical intrusion; outside of a fringe of piercing and tattoo enthusiasts and their equivalents in the wearable tech field, most of us aren't going to be keen on sticking racks of hardware inside ourselves any time soon, especially, yes, given the possible immune system issues, and most important of all *if there is a simpler viable alternative*. And, of course, the shades are exactly that — easy on, easy off, replace or repair at need with no bodily complications; they make perfect sense!

The slogan 'Mars is open for business' appears frequently in your novel. Without risking spoilers, the plot deals with a situation that compromises the reputation of Marstech, the 'myth' that sustains Martian economy. This is based on the idea that Mars thrives (or survives) because its technological exports to Earth are prestige, quality products. Why did

you specifically focus on skincare products for the plot?

I think it's more that I don't really believe in single major villains, to be honest — they feel like too much of a busted paradigm to be very artistically useful anymore.

Well, they are the obvious analogue — even today, the complete bullshit branding of the female cosmetics industry is a wonder to behold; getting people to pay insane prices for little pots of prestige brand goop on the basis of misleading feelgood advertising and 'sciency' sounding marketing copy. Seven signs of fucking ageing indeed! I think we often underestimate how powerful and pervasive branding is, and the massive impact it has at an economic level, and increasingly in politics as well. I just extrapolated some of those trends with my own brand of excoriating cynical rage jammed on full.

Cradle City Mayor Raquel Allauca explains to Veil that the Martian power system is 'like Russian dolls', there is always someone more powerful behind each single powerful person. Is this the reason why you don't have in *Thin Air* a single, major villain?

No, I think it's more that I don't really believe in single major villains, to be honest —



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they feel like too much of a busted paradigm to be very artistically useful anymore. Any honest examination of a bad situation will show a plethora of culpable individuals, of course, but it's their relative levels of culpability and the interrelations between them that make things interesting. One big bad guy whose defeat and death suddenly resets everything to copacetic norms is just, dunno, *Marvelesque*; dull.

Business and political interests are contested in *Thin Air* by the late Enrique Sacran's followers, led by his daughter Martina Sacran. The Sacranites defend Mutualist political theory and Tech Socialism but Veil thinks theirs is a failed struggle, as people are more interested in the High Frontier Myth and the 'exceptionalism' of belonging in Mars. Does this political disaffection reflect what you think of current politics?

Well, you have to remember that Veil is not me! He's way more pissed off and disenchanted than I try to be, and such politics as he possesses may not necessarily line up well with my own — admittedly iconoclastic — left liberal bent. That said, I do think that one of the clearest current trends in our political landscape is the way that cheap feel-good myth is being used by those in power to justify economic — and in some cases political — brutality, above all to the very people suffering most under that brutality; and worse still is the way wilful ignorance on the part of those people just reinforces the dynamic. It's a feedback loop of terrifying force, and there doesn't seem any immediately powerful way for the progressive left to take it down. In fact, the standard response of the Left under pressure from neoliberalism seems to have

been to abandon pragmatic progressive politics, to retreat instead into the arms of ivory tower doctrinal purity and to thus alienate exactly the constituency they claim to represent. So, while the Sacranites probably have some good policy ideas and points to make, their political DNA makes them almost incapable of getting out there and carrying the fight in any realistic popular form. They're simply not sexy enough by comparison. It's no coincidence that when Veil goes to see them, it's in an ageing mothballed and cobwebbed research facility serving as a sad little self-referential teaching retreat!

The Chinese triad and the mafia of the 'familias andinas' also have a strong presence on Mars. At one point, Veil stresses that 'The *familias andinas* are Valley democracy's biggest fans' because 'they can buy it and sell it and subvert it at every turn'. Isn't this a very negative view of democracy?

Depends very much on the democracy in question! Obviously a robust and healthy democracy wouldn't permit that kind of corruption very easily. But that's not the kind of democracy the Valley has! And increasingly, it's the other, corrupt, lip-service type of democracy that I see in the ascendant right here and now on this planet too. In fact, under current conditions 'democracy' — like almost everything else — seems in danger of becoming nothing more than another brand, an empty word to justify whatever oligarchic excesses the powers-that-be desire. That's the problem with treating complex and serious social, political and economic issues at the level of cheap feelgood myth. The fallout from which is, of course, one of the major themes of the book.



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A key point in the plot is the lottery that allows every year fifty Mars residents to return to Earth. There's talk in the novel about how this is no longer so interesting for Martian-born humans, which is why in the last 39 years the prize has been a return ticket. As Nina Ucharima, a native Martian, angrily tells Veil, Mars may be a shit-hole as he thinks, 'But it's ours. We belong to it, like we're never going to belong back on Rock Three'. Yet, the Frockers, the independentist movement, are presented negatively as the 'Lunatic fringe of the Mars First Movement'. I find this ambiguous: does Veil, and do you, support the idea of Martian independence?

Again, it's important to separate out my opinions from Veil's, and also to recognise that anyway these latter are in flux, that Veil changes to some extent — or, maybe better put, is changed — over the course of the novel. My own views on independence are pretty straightforward: I think places should belong to the people who live in them and decisions affecting those people and places should be taken locally as far as that's humanly possible. This applies equally to Scots, Catalans and Martians! But, that said, independence campaigners come in all shapes and sizes from educated civic nationalists to fuckwit stupid ethnic supremacists and everything in-between. I'll leave you to work out my feelings on those variants! More importantly, these days the very concept of independence is a much-vexed one. What, in this world of globally intermeshed commerce and cultural exchange, does independence actually mean; how useful is it, and in what doses? These are complex issues and deserving of complex political outlook. You might well find smart, decent people in the Mars First movement with

cogent political and economic opinions on why Mars should secede from Earth; you won't find so many of those among the Frockers, because they're basically the book's equivalent of today's ethno-thugs. I think as much as anything, I was driven here once again by a stubborn contrarian/revisionist streak — SF has a tradition of plucky Mars rebellions of one sort or another against an oppressive Earth; I wanted to pull that trope apart and demand a more complicated vision.

Veil is a 'hib', or hibernoid, a heavily modified man who spends four months every year in a coma. According to his back story, his mother signed up the Local Special Indenture Programme, in Western Australia, in the second trimester of pregnancy. Here's one question that is not 100% clear to me: which ethnic group is Hak? Can we assume he is Australian aboriginal because of the area where he was born?

I have deliberately left Veil's ethnic origins vague in this one, because to be honest his class origins are far more important — he's a product of common poverty dynamics that are similar the world over. In this day and age, he'd certainly have a higher statistical chance of coming from an ethnic minority background than not (tho' it's also worth noting that these days the poor white demographic is fairly steeply on the rise everywhere you look). But in the world of the book, who knows? What exactly will constitute an ethnic minority three hundred years from now, in Australia or anywhere else? To what extent, with increasing global population flows, will ethnicity even be an issue any longer? For what it's worth, I personally imagined Veil as coming from Pacific islander and /or Maori stock — I'm a big fan of the



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movie *Once Were Warriors*, so the image in my head was based roughly off Temuera Morrison as Jake. But that's just me — if you want to imagine some Australian aboriginal blood in the mix, sure, no reason why not!

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Hak spent them all his childhood and boyhood years being trained and bodily enhanced practically as property of Blond Vaisitus TransSolar Enforcement and Security Logistics, a concern attached to COLIN. How intensively has he been modified? When a character calls him a 'hard man', he replies he is rather 'hard wired'...

Again, this is something I've left open, particularly since in this future a lot of people are modified in various ways. At base level, Veil has similar genetic modification to Carl Marsalis in *Black Man/Thirteen* — he has been tweaked in the womb to suit specific utility concerns. But beyond that, he's undergone a whole regime of biochemical, surgical and psychological interventions too. In *Black Man/Thirteen*, I posited the idea that despite

the genetic programming, human variants would break and break through their designed parameters, because humans are simply too complex to tweak at such a simplistic level. But I think we can say that the science has come on a bit since Carl's day, and the labs of Veil's era are getting pretty damned good at hitting their target accurately. Part of that will involve a slower, more nuanced approach to the product — think single malt whisky versus moonshine. It's not so much how *intensively* Veil's been modified, it's how lovingly and with what attention to detail.

Hibernoids were created to cope 'with the constant cryocaping' but they're also cyborg soldiers nicknamed 'overriders'. To what extent is Hak as the Sacranite Rivero tells him 'Corporate utility given flesh (...)'— a commodity algorithm masquerading as a man'?

Well, that's a clearly intended insult, and from a politicised character whose judgement we aren't necessarily intended to buy into. On the other hand, the implication in the book is that the Overriders are pretty damned good at their job, so maybe Rivero has a point! I think it's going to be up to the reader to decide which of Veil's actions are being decided by his programming and which by something more personal — or if there even exists any kind of clear divide between those two areas of motivation!

Hak's nervous system was connected to the AI OSIRIS (Onboard Situational Insight and Resource Interface Support), a 'crisis management system', when he was 8 and 'she' has been his constant companion since then. Two questions: why is OSIRIS gendered 'fe-



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male' even though the Egyptian God is a male? And, is OSIRIS connected in any way to the AI Jane in Orson Scott Card's Ender series?

I haven't read the Ender books (or indeed anything Card has written since his early short stories in *Omni* — a conscious choice on my part due to his unforgivably obnoxious views), so there's no connection there, no. But the female gendering is an obvious extrapolation from current trends. We seem to like female voices in service roles — perhaps because they facilitate levels of engagement that more male-sounding vocals would fail at? perhaps because of the universality and power of motherhood in upbringing? — and early stage AI shows all the signs of running with that preference. Of course, OSIRIS is neither male nor female, it's a machine optimising human-style performance, and we know that owners can option various different voices for the system. In Veil's case, being male, straight and highly sexed, he has chosen a deeply sexualised female voice to be his constant companion — you can read into that whatever you like! But there's no reason other recipients of the system might not have optioned a commanding alpha male voice instead, or indeed any other variation on the gender spectrum.

When Blond Vaisutis dismisses Veil, after 20 years in their employ, he takes up a job with Indenture Compliance on Mars, where he has lived for 14 years, correct? This job consists of hunting down rogue 'qualpros' or qualified professionals who crack under pressure. Can you tell us a bit more about the 'qualpros'?

Yeah, actually Indenture Compliance will

hunt down anyone who breaks their contractual terms if the price is right. It's a bounty hunter service for pissed off corporate employers. Targets would include ordinary Martian citizens at any level, whether grunt labour or higher value employees. But obviously, as a bounty-based system, they'd far rather be chasing the high value guys rather than the grunts — unless somebody corporate is wanting to make an example of some poor grunt in particular, that is, and willing to pay appropriately. But highest of all high value will be the qualpros — qualified professionals shipped in from Earth on incredibly high paying salaries for three or five year stints. If *those* guys go walkabout, you are losing seriously expensive productivity for every week they're gone, and bringing them back into the fold will be a well-rewarded priority gig. The implication in the book is that there's quite a high incidence of Earth qualpros cracking and going walkabout because, basically, living on a totally alien world generates massive levels of stress and strain, both psychological and physiological, and not everybody can cope with it. I think that's an aspect of planetary colonisation which hasn't really been explored much in SF — the idea that, quite apart from any physical rigours colonists would face, abstraction from all of the norms of the world we evolved on may also trigger some very deep-rooted mental health issues, with all of the social and logistical fallout that implies.

When Veil meets a Fleet enforcer he is chasing, he notes that this man lacks the 'machine-eyed dead-soul threat' these combat specialists usually display. He describes the ones he has encountered so far as 'Dead eyed, incurious, functional at seemingly inhuman levels



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and depths' to the point that he wonders whether 'some military lab somewhere really did hit the future warrior jackpot and come up with something truly post-human'. Do you see the 'truly post-human' as inhuman? To what extent is Veil himself post-human?

Well, there's intended to be a certain amount of irony hanging around in that comment, since, from what we've seen, Veil himself appears to have his own fair share of 'functional[ity] at seemingly inhuman levels and depths'. Perhaps he's just desperately trying to make a differentiation between himself and some Other he can feel better than! But speaking more directly to the point, I submit that 'truly post-human' would by definition *have* to be inhuman; you're talking, after all, about going beyond the parameters we take for granted as human. For example, I wouldn't call someone post-human just because they've been gene tweaked to avoid suffering from MS or sickle cell anemia. Nor for tweaks to make them smarter or stronger. But there must come a point at which you're changing the gene code so much that what comes out at the other end really is a different species.

One of the most interesting secondary characters is the 'seasoned long range code warrior' Hannu Holsmtrom, a cyborg who looks 'like a mechanised incarnation of some ancient goat deity out of legend'. Veil notes that he might be illegal on Earth but that, despite whatever damage he may cause, on Mars he is free to hack into corporate resources within certain limits because 'you get a kind of monkey-curious *laissez faire* that's far less interested in enforcing protocols and far more into watching to

see what happens in the raw hinterlands beyond regulation'. Could you comment on this?

The general implication in the novel is that Mars has a long history of permissive deregulation. The lack of dense human population or important biosphere has allowed a no-holds-barred industrial exploitation of the environment with large scale gains for the people and corporate bodies that dabbled in it. And now there are a lot more humans on Mars, well, who gives a shit about them, right? The same ruthless corporate interests and men of power bring the deregulating scythe to anything that might restrict the upward arc of exploitation and profit. Unfortunately, this reflects a bizarre and frankly dangerous emerging political outlook on the right wing in America and latterly in the UK too — the idea that regulation (and the governmental power that enforces it) is somehow wrong, tyrannical, a brake on human ingenuity, industry and progress, and needs to be stripped back wherever possible (and fuck any actual humans who get in the way). Maybe there's an element of that old American frontier nostalgia in this as well. You could, it is true, get away with a hell of a lot of unregulated behaviour out there — snake oil salesmanship, suborning and corruption of local officials, land grabs, monopoly, abuse of workforce, minor league genocide — all so long as you had a Winchester and a Colt 45 and maybe a similarly armed pack of thugs to back you up.

Veil comments that, although it is not habitual, there are women hibernoids. The cast of characters also includes Lieutenant Chakana of Bradbury PD, a tough woman who could have made a great hero. When are we going to get a



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Morgan novel with a female protagonist? And since this is a question about the women, can you tell us a bit more about Ari without spoiling the plot?

Well, you *could* argue that the last four Morgan novels all had a female protagonist, in fact — Sevgi Ertekin shares pretty much equal pov screen time with Carl Marsalis for most of *Black Man/Thirteen*, and Archeth is one of three more or less evenly covered protagonists in *The Land Fit for Heroes* trilogy.

I know, I know, that's not the same thing as an exclusive first person female lead, and the truth is I don't have any ready answer for why I've never opted for that. Tentatively, I think it might be because I have a predilection for blunt, fucked up heroes comfortable and competent with physical violence that is at best a double edged sword — and that dynamic has never seemed to me a very good fit for a woman. Sure, there are some really fucked up women around, but in my experience that fucked-upness doesn't seem to habitually correlate with shows of violent strength and self-determination, it's more likely to involve self-harm and abandonment of any smart decision-making. The bad choices these women make more often than not end up harming them more than anyone else (though, of course, children can sometimes come into the equation too, and be harmed terribly). Conversely there are some very strong women out there, but that strength seems more related to thoughtful, intelligent behaviour (perhaps involving violence, sure, but in a careful, calibrated form).

Nikki Chakana's a good case in point here — she has many of the hallmarks of a corrupted *noir* protagonist, but it's still all governed by a shrewd, pragmatic intelligence. Most of the violence she implies is carried out, albeit on her orders, by other people.

She's just not one for the grand destructive (and self-destructive) Spartans-at-the-Hot-Gates gestures. As to Ari, well, as you point out, I can't say much here, but suffice it to say that like most of my secondary characters, she started out a fairly straightforward sketch and rapidly assumed more complex and important proportions, both for Veil and the world of the book in general.

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At the heart of my writing is a core critique of that blunt heroic violence we all thrill to, and the less often examined truth of the damage it does, and I think that particular dynamic is pretty exclusively male-led (though certainly also indulged by female bystanders). Routing the same critique through



Martian Politics and the Hard-Boiled Anti-Hero: Richard Morgan's *Thin Air*

a female protagonist feels like it would end up either ringing false or playing out in an unhelpfully circuitous way. This is not to say I won't ever get around to writing a straight up single lead female protagonist at some point — just that right now it doesn't serve my purposes well!

Finally, a lesser matter but a quite interesting one. In *Thin Air* new myths are being built based on the superstitions imported by 'the Andean grunt labour that formed so much of COLIN's early spearhead efforts on Mars', since 'it's like we need our monsters and our hero saviours a lot more when we're under alien skies'. At the same time, the SETI experience on Mars leads to disappointment: four alien signals are found but 'too far off to do anything about or even ascertain whether the civilisations that had sent them still existed'. Why did you decide to eliminate the possibility or inter-species contact?

Well, the first thing to say is that it's not fully eliminated. Those signals need not be the only traces of alien civilisation out there — or indeed even closer to home. But the important point is that people have stopped looking. Once again, grand aspirational vision gives way to a more prosaic close focus

on profit margins and cultural navel gazing. We grasp at the ineffable mystery and scope of the universe and then fail when it makes demands our violent ape impulses can't be bothered with. I think it always struck me that even back in the white heat of enthusiasm for SETI when it started, no-one seemed to be asking the obvious question: okay, we find signs of intelligent life in the universe — *then what?* Then what indeed? The distances to even relatively local alien civilisations was always likely to be way beyond any distance we could hope to travel any time soon, and you don't have to get very far away in interstellar space before the question arises of whether whatever civilisation sent out that signal even exists anymore. People get bored easily when there isn't a big, visible pay-off to something like this — some blips on a radio telescope graph and a researcher explaining how the signal decodes just isn't going to cut it; I can already see the social media response — yawn, whatever; man that guy's shirt is sexist! Some jokes, some memes, and then — absent any physical, photographable evidence or occurrence — the whole thing's going to be dead in the water. As with everything else on Mars in this novel, it's the broader vision that fails, and in its place, myopic venal violent ape tendency is willingly given free rein.