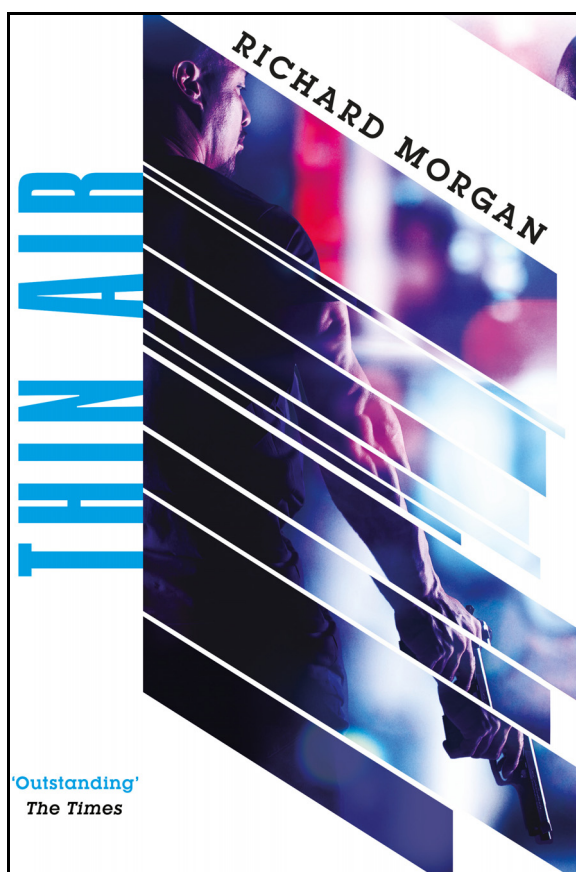


# The Tainted Atmosphere of Martian Politics

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Richard K. Morgan  
*Thin Air*  
London: Gollancz, 2018  
538 pp.

*Thin Air* is the ninth novel published by Richard K. Morgan (London, 1965), the acclaimed author of the Takeshi Kovacs science-fiction trilogy: *Altered Carbon* (2002) — winner of the Philip K. Dick Award and adapted as a popular Netflix series (2017-)—, *Broken Angels* (2003) and *Woken Furies* (2005). Morgan's most recent work to date, before this new novel, includes the volumes in the fantasy trilogy *A Land Fit For Heroes: The Steel Remains* (2008), *The Cold Commands* (2011) and *The Dark Defiles* (2014). He is also the author of *Market Forces* (2004) and of *Black Man* (2007), a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award known for politically correct reasons as *Thirteen* or *Th1rte3n* in the United States.

Although set in the same universe as *Black Man*, *Thin Air* is not directly connected to the plot of this other science fiction novel, except for a mention in passing of a secondary character, a hibernoid private investigator active on Mars, that haunted Morgan's imagination for years. Fully fleshed for *Thin Air*, Hakan 'Hak' Veil is one of Morgan's characteristic hard-boiled heroes, a heavily modified combat specialist now in his forties, surviving as well as he can on Mars after being expelled by the company that practically owned him from birth, Blond Vaisitus TransSolar Enforcement and Security Legis-

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tics. This is one of COLIN's (Colonial Initiative) many branches, the corporation running from the 22<sup>nd</sup> century onwards all planetary exploration.

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Set approximately three hundred years into the colonization of Mars, and about one century after *Black Man*, *Thin Air* depicts the human presence on the red planet as just a partially successful project if not a downright failure. Nanotechnology has worked wonders but these are not enough to result in the total terraforming of Mars, a situation which limits human habitation mostly to the specific environment of Valles Marineris (the Gash) and some outlying territories. The popular myth of the High Frontier gives a brittle co-

hesion to Mars, as do the prestige Marstech products exported to Earth. Yet, in this anti-Western Morgan stresses that, like all the frontiers connected to human colonization, Mars might become a wild territory open to harsh human exploitation, as it is in his novel.

*Thin Air* presents itself modestly in the guise of a hard-boiler thriller, closer as science fiction to Robert Heinlein's *Red Planet* (1949) than to Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars/Green Mars/Blue Mars* trilogy (1992-96)—at least, Morgan claims to have read the former but not the latter. The fast-moving, well-planned plot of the case that Veil investigates relies, however, on meticulous world-building—particularly rich in political issues—which the reader should not undervalue as mere background to the abundant action. Attached to Bradbury Police Department by Lieutenant Nikka Chakana through an association that can well be described as blackmail, Veil realizes that the disappearance of Mars-born grunt Pablo Torres (or Pavel, as he prefers) is not, as Hak initially believes, a minor incident but the tip of an iceberg amassing multiple layers of economic corruption and political infighting, both local and Earth-connected. The background of the Torres case is COLIN's second attempt at auditing Mars' Government, a process viewed by native human Martians as proof of Earth's demeaning interference and correctly read by Veil as the seed for political upheaval, either pro-independence or quite the opposite.

The network of villainy that Veil exposes in the course of his violent, bloody investigation revolves, then, around the major issue of whether the colonization of Mars will inevitably reproduce the same legal and illegal power hierarchies present on Earth. Morgan's

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work is characterized by his political pessimism and *Thin Air* is a clear example. The heavily opinionated Veil need not represent at all the author's views and he is, anyway, transformed in many senses as his search for the missing Torres progresses. Yet, this new novel repeats a pattern deeply rooted in Morgan's mind and work: namely, that all major human projects are bound to be spoiled by a combination of plain greed and sheer stupidity, both individual and corporate.

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At a time when the colonization of Mars is beginning to abandon the territory of the fantastic to become a feasible project—hopefully in the following decades rather than centuries—listening to the arguments advanced by science fiction writers in their work is advisable. Morgan claims to have been influenced by Hannu Rajaniemi's novel *The Quantum Thief* (2010) and, above all, by Robert Zubrin's non-fiction volume *The Case for Mars* (1996, updated 2011). Zubrin is also the author of the novel *First Landing* (2002), which shows that now, more than ever, a dialogue must be built between those who speculate on the fate of Martian colonization through fiction and through non-fiction, and also with the scientists and engineers that will actually carry out the next big adventure of humankind.