

## Review of Iain M. Banks's book *Against a Dark Background*

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It was a very ordinary tragedy, she supposed, but no less a cause for regret because it was so common. Like a hint, a foretaste of grief, it was an original, even unique experience for everyone it affected, no matter how often it had happened in the past to others.

This book has an odd mix of absurdist world-building and grim, serious themes. Sometimes the tone just feels off. It also feels very long, though *perhaps it's necessary to spend so much time with the characters so that you can feel suitably devastated when Banks kills most of them off*. But overall I liked it. Not as much as the Culture novels, but enough to be a little sad that there aren't any other books set in this universe.

It's a plot-driven novel more than a concept-driven one, but there were a few memorable ideas:

- The "Lazy Guns" which *destroy targets by unique, inexplicable, and often comical means, and whose origin and purpose sadly remain mysterious ("a Lazy Gun was light but heavy, and weighed exactly three times as much turned upside down as it did the right way up...")*
- The "sial races" where *criminals' brains are implanted to animals for the races*
- The charming image of androids, *who are themselves mostly relics, patiently restoring a former human city by hand for their own use*
- The star system's unusual *position, situated "a million light-years" from any other star*