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All Wound Up: Review of Bacigalupi's "The Windup Girl"

Aug 9, 2010 [William Doherty](#)

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Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Windup Girl" - *Night Shade Books*

Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Windup Girl" takes place in a dystopian future Bangkok which strives for survival from the aftereffects of environmental disaster.

Gene-Splicing Gone Haywire

In his first novel, Paolo Bacigalupi has created a prophetic dystopian world where corporate gene-splicing technology has gone haywire, wreaking havoc on food supplies and spreading bioengineered creatures and plagues worldwide. Environmental changes are drastic enough to require the erection of dykes and continuous operation of pumps to keep the rising ocean from

consuming the city.

Expats on the Prowl in Bangkok

In a clever play on the Japanese "salaryman," Anderson Lake is a "Calorie Man" who at first appears to be the novel's protagonist. He does business under a new world order dominated by the necessity to control and modify genetic stock to provide food and energy, while outpacing blights and disease.

Expat Anderson has taken over operations of a failing "kink-spring" factory from his predecessor. His ulterior motive is to gain access for the corporation AgriGen to a hidden Thai seed bank used for developing resistant strains of plants, such as the ngaw, a tasty GMO rambutan fruit which appears one day in Bangkok vegetable stalls. His rampant pursuit of personal and corporate gain will have consequences he cannot predict.

Yellow Card Refugee

Bacigalupi tells the tale from the point of view of Anderson and other well-developed characters, such as Tan Hock Seng, assistant manager of the factory and "yellow card" refugee from ethnic cleansing in nearby Malaya. Hock Seng rails internally against the "foreign devil" who runs the factory and seeks to defraud Anderson at every turn. He watched as the Green Headbands raped and killed members of his family before he escaped to Thailand. Should similar circumstances develop in Thailand, he believes he has taken the necessary precautions, but little does he suspect the course events will follow.

The lead characters of the novel each face down ghosts from their past through present action in a way appropriate to the religious conventions of the cultures from which they originate.

The Windup Girl

It is not until well into the novel that we discover the true protagonist, a "windup girl" named Emiko. Emiko, who is a genetically engineered companion for a Japanese businessman, finds herself abandoned in Bangkok after his departure. She survives by working in a nightclub where she is abused for the entertainment of the club's wealthy and sadistic patrons. Her quest for personal freedom accidentally embroils the whole nation.

Political Intrigue and Economic Struggle

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"The Windup Girl" skillfully combines political intrigue with the struggle for economic ascendancy among local and foreign power structures. Captain Jaidee Rojjanasukchai of the Environment Ministry orders his white shirt brigade to seize and destroy illegally imported materials from foreign corporate concerns. His activities are unpopular among powerful people, especially those at the Trade Ministry, who eventually manage to save face by stripping him of his rank. Inspired after his death by Jaidee's selfless pursuit of the cause, Jaidee's assistant Lieutenant Kanya Chirathivat undergoes a significant transformation through the course of the novel, culminating in an important decision she must make at a crucial juncture.

"Wind Up" With a Sequel?

Published in September 2009, "The Windup Girl" has already won a [Nebula Award](#) and a [John W. Campbell Memorial Award](#). [Time Magazine](#) named the novel one of the top 10 fiction books of 2009.

One could claim that "The Windup Girl" does for gene-splicing technology what Neal Stephenson's "Diamond Age" did for nanotechnology; that is, to envision a future world in which the new technology is taken to its every logical consequence, no small feat of research and imagination.

Bacigalupi gives us a compelling first novel that holds out the promise of one or more sequels to "wind up" some tantalizing loose ends.

Further information about "The Windup Girl" is available from publisher [Night Shade Books](#).

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Paolo Bacigalupi's
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