



# Cowl

*Neal Asher*

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In the far future, the Heliothane Dominion is triumphant in the solar system, after a bitter war with their Umbrathane progenitors. But some of the Umbrathane have escaped into the distant past, where they can position themselves to wreak havoc across time and undo their defeat. The most fanatical of them is the superhuman Cowl, more monstrous than any of the creatures outside his prehistoric redoubt.

Cowl sends his terrifying hyperdimensional pet, the torbeast, hunting through all the timelines for human specimens. It sheds its scales -- each one an organic time machine -- where its master orders. Anyone who picks one up is dragged back to the dawn of time, where Cowl awaits. Then the beast can feed, growing ever larger . . .

In our own near-future, Tack is one of U-gov's programmable killers. When a scale latches onto him, his doom seems inevitable, but the Heliothane have other ideas: they can use Tack against Cowl. Tack is no stranger to violence, but the Heliothane, hardened in their struggle for humanity's very existence, have much to teach him. He will need it all for his encounter with Cowl.

Once one of Tack's targets, Polly escaped with her life when a torbeast scale snatched her. Now, like Tack, she must learn fast as she is dragged back to Day Zero. To cheat death again, she will have to help him save the human race.

With *Cowl*, Neal Asher, acclaimed author of *Gridlinked* and *The Skinner*, has created his most powerful novel yet.

## Cowl Details

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Author : Neal Asher

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# From Reader Review Cowl for online ebook

## Michael Battaglia says

If you've ever read a time travel novel and thought "The convoluted plot is nice but what would really hit my sweet spot would be a plethora of angry characters, a less personable Darth Vader and enough extreme violence to make Quentin Tarantino think it's all a bit over the top" then the book for you may finally exist and Neal Asher has made it possible. You might be surprised that it doesn't exist already and maybe it did and I just missed it somewhere along the line (I've read a decent amount of time travel books but not enough to teach a course on them or anything) but if nothing else Asher gets credit for injecting a very high dose of caffeine (perhaps mixed in with something else) into the genre and not caring how it splatters all over the walls.

Most time travel type stories invariably focus on either causing some predetermined event to come about or preventing a temporal paradox from occurring and thus dooming everyone to a dystopian future where everyone has insect heads or takes pictures of themselves all the time but Asher takes a slightly different approach here and focuses mostly on the weapons and advanced science that would be required for people to make repeated attempts to kill each other across time and then proceeds to give them as many chances as he can to do just that. And honestly, on a gut action movie level, it's mostly entertaining.

It doesn't start out very promisingly, as we're treated to scenes of Polly, a girl of the streets going about girls of the streets in the future so often do, which is get addicted to drugs and then proceed to sell their bodies to anyone with lust in their hearts and a fistful of money. If that isn't enough, the kicker comes a few pages later when we find out she's about sixteen. Before long she's like most teenage prostitutes and involved in a scheme with a deceased friend's brother to barter a mysterious device that might be from the future. Of course it goes wrong, the government's programmed assassins show up, as does a weird time-beast and the device winds up attached to poor Polly, who is then subsequently sucked back in time.

Fortunately the book is not ten pages long and she survives, as does the programmed government assassin, Tack, who falls in with someone from a far future human race called the Heliothane, who are engaged in a war with the Umbrathane and are led by the aptly described Cowl, who is attempting to wipe out human history through the use of his "tors" (one of the scales that is now attached to Polly) and his monstrous tor-beast, which while it sounds like something Conan would have beheaded in about five seconds, turns out to be rather difficult to kill. Before long Polly is jumping back further and further in time, Tack has been reprogrammed to kill a different group of people who he hangs out with a Traveller and everyone gets involved in a far flung war that keeps telling us it has high stakes but seems to come down to "don't get killed".

The action movie comparison I made earlier is really quite appropriate here. We are very far away from the urbane explorations of HG Wells or even the poetic ruminations of Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder", from the get-go we're treated to scene after scene whose message boils down to "stuff just got real". He throws out futuristic concepts that seem only vaguely based in science and uses them in a constant game of oneupmanship that would make Doc Smith blush, as everyone is only a few seconds away from coming up with a more sciency violent concept or pulling out another rabbit from the Hat of Mysterious Science. The story barely stops to take a breath, which is good because the quieter moments tend to make the story drag somewhat as it gives you a chance to think about what everyone's motivations are and once you get beyond the aforementioned "don't get killed" it tends to get a bit murky.

Yeah, it's a bit shallow, despite the story seeming to think at times it's anything but. When the high octaneness of it throttles down slightly, you find it suffers a bit from having both too much and not enough going on. There are number of plots happening all at once but most of them seem to be occurring without any relation to each other, whether it's Tack and Traveller bonding throughout time, Polly bumbling her way through various historical eras or the remaining Heliiothane being mostly interchangeable (he gives us a traitor and then, as if playing with us, gives us a second traitor just to make it harder to identify who is who). Occasionally Cowl himself or his tor-beast shows up to make everyone's lives briefly miserable but neither has really enough presence to hold the book together. We're told in hushed tones how advanced and clever and evil Cowl is but when he's not around he barely seems to exert any influence on the atmosphere and when he shows up he's a generic heavy dressed all in black whose claim to fame is killing people in extraordinarily violent ways. But since most of the cast has that ability it turns out to not be that special.

The characters very rarely take hold and even when they start to the book shifts gears to someone else so none of it really has a chance to stick (which may be the biggest problem with the book, none of the concepts, torbeast included, has a scene long enough to really acquire any real weight). Polly doesn't have a heart of gold thankfully but her stone skipping through various eras mostly gives us a chance to enjoy the somewhat snarky dialogue between her and an involuntary computer implant and marvel at how Asher makes every single era of human history, even the parts without humans in it, feel exactly the same. Tack is a tough guy learning how to live beyond his programming while Traveller is your usual wizened soldier that would probably be played by John Hurt and while there's some spark to their conversations as they grow to have begrudging respect for each other, most of their dialogue is taken up with explaining what the heck is going on. And then Traveller becomes absent anyway.

As for the rest . . . they're present. Asher has one decent idea, in that as you slide down a probability curve you have to expend more and more energy to get back to the main timeline but he gets so caught up in making stuff explode and that the decapitations are suitably epic that instead of an escalating arms race to see who controls time we get people mostly beating each other up over and over again, and then retreating so they can plot how to do it all over again. The book itself even points out that the Heliiothane and the Umbrathane aren't that much different, except that one side has Cowl and there seems to be no better way to put it. A last ditch effort toward the end to imbue some character depth winds up being an improbable stab at romance between two people who have barely been in the same room for most of the novel, but at least it's a chance for some self-reflection in between all the talk about high level future science.

And yet, despite being unnecessarily convoluted, possessing few memorable characters, vague stakes and a villain whose menace rarely causes shivers in excess of the feeling of nearly missing the bus, Asher does his best to make it as entertaining as possible. He keeps the ideas coming in a rapid fire style and to some extent that alleviates the fact that we barely linger on anyone long enough to really get to know and care about any of them (most of them aren't all that likable anyway) and he manages to keep what amounts to a fairly thin and simple plot (i.e. a combination of "let's not mess up time" and "let's not get killed") going for far longer than the bones of it would dictate. A sense of wonder would help, a sense of humor would really help (apparently this is unlike Asher's other books in that respect and there's a couple good one-liners that suggests he was holding back for some reason) but if you're looking for all out science action that won't leave a residue (or much of anything at all) when it's done, this is as good a candidate as anything else. I didn't hate it and in fact enjoyed the breakneck pace of it, but it felt a little empty overall and there's a good chance that if I spot it filed away on my bookshelf in a few years I'm going to have to reread this review to remind myself that I even read it.

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## **Ethan says**

This is a fast-paced sci fi story with all sorts of interesting stuff crammed into it: time travel, dystopian future(s), super-evil bad guys and vaguely evil good guys. The plotting is good, though a bit convoluted at times, and I'm not entirely convinced it all hangs together.

The worst part about the book is the writing--there's an almost criminal amount of gerund/participle abuse, and some pretty wonky syntax besides. This hampered my enjoyment of the book, but I was able to ignore it most of the time. If I had been forced to edit this book, I probably would have carved my eyeballs out with a grapefruit spoon.

But, otherwise, good fun. Three and a half stars, recommended.

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## **Dave says**

The concept behind this book was really unique and involves time travel and human mutation. As a hard Sci-Fi book it was really solid. My only complaint was that Asher uses the word nightmare excessively. The book is overflowing with the phrase, "...she looked up and gazed into the nightmare" or subtle variations on that theme. It happened often enough to annoy be by about 1/3 of the way through the book, but not enough to ruin the book overall. Just seemed like lazy writing/poor editing.

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## **Dunkthebiscuit Kendrick says**

Revisiting an old favourite by a favourite author. Cowl is a time travel novel with the usual Asher twist (it's bloody, intelligent, often blackly humorous).

When teen prostitute Polly and brainwashed government hitman Tack get caught up by an organic time machine that will only travel backwards, to the point before complex life on Earth arose, they're due to be genetic samples for Cowl, a genetically modified future human. Things get a bit sticky and it doesn't work out as planned, things get blown up and shot up, people get chased by extinct animals and rampaging future humanity who are hopping backwards and forwards hoping to push their enemies down the entropy slope and trap them in time.

Asher is an excellent SciFi author, British with a sense of understated irony and black comedy which segues off into almost-splatterporn, then hard science, well researched extremely down to earth history, and a lot of big guns and big explosions. A huge amount of fun - one of the very few authors I buy in hard back, as I know I'll just keep reading them over and over again.

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## **Steven Stennett says**

Time travel one of the best things about science fiction.

The style of writing, dense for me, like the aroma of the dish being stronger than the taste.

There is nothing wrong with this presentation of a novel, being this way inclined.

Its just that everyone brain is wired differently, and I am more of a straight forward story reader.

This did not prevent me enjoying the book immensely. Skipping through time, to a western style show down, who ends up being the fastest draw!!!

Only the act of reading it, will enlighten you!

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### **Allan says**

Having been used to reading tales within Asher's polity Universe, this one is a bit of a change. The main theme is time travel and a war between 43rd-century humans, or what they've evolved or been engineered into, as it effects others down the time line.

The Cowl of the title is one super-engineered human who has travelled back to the beginnings to time and, from there, sends organic time machines out to collect and return with human gene samples from across time. Trouble is the samples are usually live people, which the uncaring Cowl disposes of once he's finished with them but when he "collects" a prostitute and a bio-engineered assassin from the 22nd century his plans go a little awry.

Cowl is good, hard science-fiction that tries a different tack on time travel and the probability of possible timelines. The trouble I had with it is that, of all of the characters, none of of them are in any way likeable and I never really cared who got killed by whom and eventually I didn't care why either.

Good sci-fi but not his best work, regardless of the critical acclaim it achieved.

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### **Paulo Goulart says**

Well, for an Engineer (at least for me), this book makes no sense. I did appreciate the idea and the characters, but the technical details were too much and made no sense...

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### **Geoff Lynas says**

Whatever incredible vision Neal had in his head when he wrote this, I can only guess at. I'm afraid there was a failure to communicate for me. Already rapidly forgetting what little did register. A bit of a struggle to get through all of the bibble-bobble SF, in the company of muted characters I didn't really care about, culminating in a very unsatisfying ending. Neal Asher is a much better storyteller than this book reveals. Better luck with the next.

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## David says

About the most gonzo, space operatic time-travel tale I have ever read. Awesome villains, dark heroes, crazy science. Sort of reminded me of Richard K. Morgan's novel, *Altered Carbon*, where he takes a killer high-science idea and then drives the story forward at a blistering pace with it, looking at it from a dozen different angles.

The killer idea this time is a unique theory on time travel that involves multiple time streams, quantum paradoxes, probability slopes, and takes place over a time span of hundreds of millions of years, from a post human society to before the Primordial Sea. It can be as confusing as heck at times, but it still feels like it hangs together even when I don't quite understand how.

And hey, it makes for some very trippy fight scenes by the end.

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## Sean Randall says

“Andrewsarchus. You've just evaded the largest carnivorous mammal ever to roam the Earth. Don't you feel privileged?”

Though Asher seems to have a thing for siblings, I enjoyed this work far more than the first book of the Owner series. Maybe because everything happens in one book here and I'll come to like Owner more later on, I don't know.

One thing that I also liked with this book vis-a-vis Owner was that you got to know the characters, together, before they go splitting off into their own parts. Because of that, you sort of care a little more about what happens to them and don't have that disparate sensation of them not mattering to each other.

The twists and turns of who's betraying whom and who's on what side are of course wild fun, the technology is different; positively organic, and the whole ethos of a time war, though not new, works well here. I felt the ending was a little limp, but then it's hard to tie everything up neatly when you've got so many different points in time and powered forces to put together into a cohesive whole.

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## Robert says

An amusing time-travel novel, based on the "many-worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics (an interpretation for which there is no evidence or requirement). Asher has the wit to steal Heinlein's answer to the question, "How come I end up in the same place on Earth when I time-travel, despite the Earth's orbit, rotation etc?" and modify it only slightly. It is also fun to get away from Asher's "Polity" setting in this novel: may his publishers allow him to do so more often!

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## Cesar Felipe says

Characters and plot matter in hard science fiction too, you know.

Although the take on time-travel is quite unique and highly technical, the story and its protagonists get buried inside the technical documentation of time-travel that ends up defining this "story".

The book starts off introducing the two main characters, before they get time-displaced and start their separate adventures. And while we get familiarized enough with them, by the end they only become small parts of a much larger battle between super-evolved humans and Cowl. The twists and turns and betrayals are based not on the main characters that we started with, but with these other superior beings. Who are they? What drives them? Why should we care? Any motivations and actions are secondary to the grand scheme of time travel.

Adding insult to injury is the actual story of these two "main" characters. It seems at first that their actions in different eras of time will mean something, but nope, they are just jumping backwards in time to millions of years ago, where the important plot ends up happening. The only important thing they do in each era in between is literally **eating**, so that the time-travelling device can feed off their body energy and jump again. That's it! What's the point!

That's not even the worse part: the novel insists on introducing other humans from different eras, also forced to travel back in time, and they are all disposed of... in a single scene. They are all, say it with me, absolutely pointless.

So yes the time travel is complex and fascinating, and it's the only saving grace of this novel, but it gets highly technical to the point of incomprehension, and by the end it feels like a lifeless and abstruse essay on time travel rather than a proper story.

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## Geo says

I'll start off by saying that I found the basic premise of this book to be really fantastic. The approach to time travel and alternate histories and such was really well thought out and not like anything I'd read about before. Or perhaps, he took the concepts further than anything I've read before.

The pace was good. I didn't ever really find myself bored. Inherently with books involving time travel and such, you're invariably going to end up having to think a bit harder about what things are happening when, but some of the limitations the author placed on that helped keep it manageable. I think I would have been better served reading this one in larger chunks. I was reading this in roughly 30-60 minutes chunks over a month or so. I found myself having to go back a few times and familiarize myself with characters that were mentioned previously. That continuity wouldn't have been an issue if I'd read it with fewer interruptions.

I like authors that aren't afraid to focus on bad guys. Or even, have protagonists that are, like everyone, flawed in one or many ways. It feels more natural and real to me, and allows me to suspend disbelief less often. The characters developed well, and in ways that made sense. There were a few bits that made were choppy that could have been handled more slowly and deliberately, but that is probably nitpicking a bit.



I think I would have liked a bit more time spent on some of the Heliothane characters to give more context once their story starts to get threaded in. The author does make an effort to explain some of that history, which was fine... but I found myself suddenly dealing with a few more main characters that were never really introduced well. I think that might have been intentional, given the overall plot, but it was a bit jarring.

An excellent read overall, and I'm looking forward to digging into this author more in the future.

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### **John says**

Cowl is a truly inventive and refreshingly invigorated novel.

I disliked the main character, Polly, at first, but she slowly grew on me. The supporting character, Tack, introduced as a heartless villain, transforms a greatly. Into a character I actually cared about. The morality the book builds is remarkable. Moving elegantly from black and white, to no side actually being the good guy.

The sci-fi elements are excellent. The main villain is actually terrifying because he's intelligent, a rare element in any book. Most evil geniuses have advanced means, but rampage in a straight line, taking no real initiative. Asher's villain breaks this tedious mold masterfully. Cowl's tactics remain enigmatic and unpredictable through out most of the book.

With the exception of the first chapter, the book is a true classic in my opinion.

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### **Zare says**

Interesting story based around time-travel and long exhausting war that spreads millions of years starting from the future backwards - yup you read it well, backwards :)[return][return]Characters are great - maybe not too fleshed out but nevertheless very well portrayed. Main characters seem to be of the Asher's favorite type - good person forced to live at the edge of society and do things that others find awful and distasteful and the brutish merciless one, perfect killing machine bred for war, assassinations and combat who finally discovers himself to be a person - not a robot. Now mix this with the most unexpected sort of time travelers and you are in for a treat.[return][return]Great read. Recommended.

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