



A Million Open Doors

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Nou Occitan is a place where duels are fought with equal passion over insults and artistic views alike. Giraut--swordsman, troubador, lover--is a creature of this swashbuckling world, the most isolated of humanity's Thousand Cultures.

But the winds of change have come to Nou Occitan. As the invention of the "springer"--instantaneous interstellar travel, at a price--spreads throughout the human galaxy, the stability and purity of no world, no matter how isolated, is safe. Nor can Giraut's life remain untouched. To his wonder, his is about to find himself made an ambassador to a different human world, a place strange beyond his wildest imaginings.

A Million Open Doors Details

Date : Published November 15th 1993 by Tor (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780812516333

Author : John Barnes

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Space, Space Opera

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Andy Love says

"The Man Who Learned Better" is a classic plotline, but when it's done well, it can be very entertaining. John Barnes starts his take on that plotline in a culture designed to emulate a mythical culture of medieval troubadours, devoted to poetry, dueling and "honor" – somewhat foreign to modern eyes, but with values that modern folks are familiar with (and which influence society still – the initial scene which Giraut paints in a romantic light, is basically a rumble between two street gangs, like those in modern cities (or in "Romeo and Juliet")), and takes characters from this society and puts them in a very different place: a society based on a fusion of Christianity and "free-market" ideals. Giraut, of course, teaches his new friends about art-for-arts-sake, but more surprisingly, he learns to see the flaws in his own society and his own character, by encountering people who risk real oppression for their art without the hope of glory or acclaim. I really enjoyed this book, and sequels that followed.

Anastasia says

SF about a culture clash of two planets: a flamboyant poetry-spouting, mountain-climbing, dueling troubador (Giraut) going to a highly repressed religious planet, where there is no art or culture or freedom of expression, and sparks a revolution. Better than I expected, but I had a few quibbles with the book.

SPOILERS The main character is quite repulsed by the appearance of one very plain woman; her flaws (shiny uneven skin, unpleasing features, disproportioned body) are so distracting to him, he has to try not to stare. Then, as he enters a sexual relationship with her, all of his aversion simply dissipates overnight. That's unlikely to the point of impossibility. Someone only highly values beauty would not be able to overcome a base physical distaste so easily, if at all. I've slept with enough ugly people to know that.

An even bigger objection. ***MAJOR SPOILERS*** The planet has a fully automated economy, with everything done by robots. Employment consists of replacing robots for 4 hours a day: the robot is turned off, and person unloads trucks or sweeps the floors. So how can there be concerns of high unemployment, unemployment insurance running out, and people getting upset due to economic shocks? It made no sense.

Liviu says

loved this one and the immediate sequel (which is much darker but resonated a lot), though the third milieu book was a huge letdown; this is lighter but lots of fun

Scott Holstad says

Giraut is from the planet Nou Occitan, a place where duels are fought with equal passion over perceived insults and artistic views alike. A place where the language seems derived from Portuguese and there's entirely too much of it, untranslated. Giraut is an enthusiastic member of a culture based around the ideals of

the medieval troubadours, a culture of literature and art, dueling, and “macho” personal honor. However, with the invention of the “springer,” instantaneous interstellar travel has now become possible. Now the young people of Nou Occitan are turning to the trendy but tacky Interstellars, new to their culture, and Giraut’s “entendedora,” girlfriend/whore, is one of these young women who do so. When he discovers this, he accepts an invitation to travel to the planet, Caledon, as part of an ambassadorial team to help the Caledonians deal with the imminent opening of a gateway on their planet. Caledon couldn’t be any more different from Nou Occitan. It has a patriarchal rigid religious culture where even cheerful color is banned. It is a puritan culture on an icy world -- one where terraforming was only partially carried out because apparently, “suffering is good for the soul.” The arts are dismissed as irrational (everything must be “rational”), and the flamboyant Occitan culture is considered immoral. It is in the inevitable clash between these two cultures where Giraut is forced to face himself and life and grow the hell up.

This book is a lot more exciting than what I’ve described. I’ve done a poor job. Giraut is shown to be a shallow cad who learns, to a certain degree, that he is and is forced to make some changes. Caledon undergoes some radical changes and we apparently learn puritanical religious cultures are essentially evil and stupid. At times, this is a very entertaining and interesting book. At times, it’s annoying as hell. Often, you can’t understand the words being used and there’s no dictionary, so you just have to guess. Often you just want to slap Giraut upside the head for being such a shallow, rather stupid young person who’s a snob. But then he does something good and you relent. At times, it feels like the author is preaching anti-religion to you and while I’m generally okay with that, as I’m not overly fond of most religious cultures, I can see where devoutly religious readers might be offended. Apparently, this is the first book in a series, although I’ve never seen any of the other books in the series. I’d be open to reading the second. So, above average. At times, quite good. At times, annoying. Three stars. Cautiously recommended.

Jim says

This is the first book I have read by Barnes, although I think I've read several of his short stories. In this book, I was not very engaged with the characters, but the "universe" that Barnes created was of much greater interest. This is the universe of The Thousand Cultures. Man has spread across the galaxy and splintered into many, many diverse cultures, out of touch with each other for the most part. This is Poul Anderson territory and he was one of my favorites.

Giraut is from the planet Nou Occitan, a swashbuckler world where people adhere to a dueling code (the language seems to derived from Portuguese). However, with the invention of the "springer," instantaneous interstellar travel has now become possible. Of course, this changes Giraut's culture and life. We see the conflict develop between an isolated but individualistic culture and the larger dominating culture of the Interstellars. The situation gets even more complicated as Giraut is sent as an ambassador to a rigid religious culture on another planet..There is a sequel which I think I will read.

Alan Zendell says

I am truly perplexed by this book. When I read of all the awards it either won or was nominated for, I expected a lot. I wouldn't say the book is bad, but it didn't deliver what its hype promised. For example, one reviewer trumpets that the author really makes the readers care. About what?

I certainly didn't care about the characters, who I found generally unlikable and inconsistent in their development. I simply didn't believe them. I also didn't believe the story in many places, though the general theme is a popular one that's appealing by nature: religious oppression doing more and more harm until it's ultimately overthrown while the adherents of an irresponsible culture get religion of a healthier kind.

I found many long stretches too boring to wade through, discourses on made up economics, fashions, and odd social customs, while the scenes in which there was real action seemed truncated and flat. I realize this book was written to be the first in a series, but that doesn't excuse the final chapter being as unsatisfying as it was in wrapping up loose ends. I was so frustrated, I couldn't make myself read the last few pages.

Almost as an aside, I was surprised by the number of editing errors I found in the paperback edition I purchased from Amazon. The best news was that I only paid \$1.99 for it.

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/1198461.html>[return][return]A great read: perhaps reflecting a bit the fall of the Wall and globalisation more generally, it's about an encounter between cultures, the dour market-driven frozen colony of Caledony being forced to open up to the rest of the galaxy and in partiicular to the romantic troubadours of New Occitan. Lots of interesting politics and general growing-up for our Occitanian narrator as he realises more about the problems of his own society as a result of his Caledonian experience. I'll hunt out the rest of this series now.

Jenne says

A really charming SF story! It's the far future, and there are many Earth colonies on many worlds. Our hero is from a very Romantic culture (lots of art, music, dueling, courtly love, etc) and ends up on a sort of ultra-Lutheran world (very religious, rational, no frivolity).

I liked the little throwaway bits of Earth culture here and there, like how each society gets to make up its own historical facts (e.g. Milton Friedman was eaten by cannibals in Zurich) or how people still sing "The Happy Wanderer" when they go on an outdoor outing:

"...someone was starting to sing what I had assumed was an old Occitan hiking song, though I have since heard it in many places. '*Valde retz, Valde ratz*' means 'the most real things are the most sincerely imagined,' to give it in the bland Terstad, and it is one of the first proverbs most Occitan children learn..."

Steven Werber says

One of the finest first 3 quarters of a book I've ever read. I had a lot of trouble with the last quarter (including that many of our main characters are absent from the overcoming of the book's main conflict.) Good read though....

James Spencer says

This has the flavor of a classic SciFi novel out of the 50's, in its somewhat innocent or unsophisticated attempts to reveal a message about clashing human cultures and morality. The major points are often forced home with rapier sharpness, leaving the reader numb to the more subtle character interplay. Any SciFi enthusiast will likely find this an interesting coming of age story and reasonable first installment of a series. Considering the publication date and world affairs of that time, The phrase "new world order" comes to mind. Its certainly worth a read, however, the lengthy list of awards presented to this book might say more about the politics and quality of SciFi in 1993 than the timeless quality of this novel. I intend to continue the series.

Thomas Blaine says

There was much to like about this novel: you are dumped right into the culture and story and forced to figure things out quickly, to the interplay of cultures and languages, to some engaging characters (though some will disagree on this point). It was also fast moving with a nice mix of action, character development and political discussion. However there were many disappointments as well: many elements which made no sense, development that felt very rushed in many places, and an ending that left me wanting. Too bad this didn't live up to its beginning, but it was good enough and different enough that I'll seek out more books by Barnes in the future.

Fábio Fernandes says

I had heard of this book a long time ago, but I could never find it until I got to Seattle last year. (last time I checked on Amazon.com a few days ago, you can't find a new edition still, and only two books of the Giraut series is available on Kindle - parts 3 and 4, for crying out loud!) This upsets me a lot, because I love to read a series in its entirety when the first book grips my attention. And this far future story sure did it. I loved the way Barnes created a whole retro-Occitan society, and his use of this language and the concepts is pretty good. The clash of cultures when Giraut goes to Caledon is also very credible, and the planet, first presented as dull, is far from it. Giraut's conflicts and his attempts to change Caledonians, at least a bit, are sometimes exhaustive, but it's clear this is a coming-of-age book. I'm looking forward to read the others.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in October 2000.

Each of John Barnes' novels to date has been different, each an excellent piece of science fiction. A Million Open Doors is based on a scenario similar to some of the ideas behind Gordon R. Dickson's Dorsai trilogy - the bringing together once more of the splintered subcultures into which the human race has developed after isolation on colony planets separated by interstellar space - while in tone it is reminiscent of the classic novels of Isaac Asimov (particularly Foundation) and Poul Anderson. It has rather more to say about culture shock than any of these novels, and contains interesting ideas I have never seen before, in over twenty years of avid science fiction reading.

As humankind has spread throughout the galaxy, the insularity of the various colonised planets has been increased by the use of invented cultures, exaggerations of Earthly ones. Now, however, the invention of an instant transportation method - which sets up the million open doors of the title - has ended their isolation. This is the background to the story of Giraut, an enthusiastic member of a culture based around the ideals of the medieval troubadours, a culture of art and literature, duelling and macho personal honour. The establishment of a gateway on the planet of Nou Occitan has led to the crumbling of this culture, as young people turn to the newly fashionable Interstellars who have abandoned Occitan ways for their idea of a pan-human lifestyle. (Occitan is another name for the Provencal language of the south of France in the middle ages.) When he discovers that his entendedora (a mixture between a teenage girlfriend and the object of a troubadour's affections) has been going to Interstellar sex clubs, he is in despair, and takes up an invitation to travel to Caledon as part of an ambassadorial team to help them deal with the imminent opening of a gateway on their planet.

Caledon is an almost complete contrast to Nou Occitan. It is a puritan culture on an Arctic world - one where terraforming was only partly carried out because suffering is good for the soul. The arts are dismissed as irrational, and the flamboyant Occitan culture is considered immoral. The clash between the two cultures is the central feature of the novel, with Giraut's development as a person connected to his realisation that the people of Caledon are human too, and that he can communicate with at least some of them.

A Million Open Doors is an excellent novel, based on interesting ideas drawn out with intelligence, with a believable background and convincing characters.

astaliegurec says

John Barnes' "A Million Open Doors" (the first in his "Thousand Cultures" series) is an interesting book that's a bit uneven. Well, it's actually quite a bit uneven. For instance, the protagonist is from a world whose culture emulates the drawing room crowd of the French Revolution. Or, perhaps, it's the beatnik crowd of 1960s. I don't quite know. But, in a nutshell, the main character is a self-centered, callow, lout. Yet, after a lot of pages with this personality, he walks into a room and is told that there are some questions an AI couldn't answer and could he figure them out? Sure, no problem. He sits down, whips through some data base queries and manipulations, and synthesizes the answers. Where did that come from? If he has those abilities, why does he act like he does? We don't know. But, it really doesn't matter since we never see that side again and he falls back into his (slowly maturing) normal persona. Similarly, the plot of the book will be progressing nicely, and then it will stop for quite a bit of philosophizing. In a nutshell, we're never sure what to expect (not in a good way). But, it IS an interesting book and I (mostly) enjoyed reading it. So, I'm a bit torn over whether I should give it 3 stars or 4. I guess I'll go with an OK 3 stars out of 5.

The books in his "Thousand Cultures" series are:

1. A Million Open Doors -- Kindle version not available
 2. Earth Made of Glass - Kindle version not available
 3. The Merchants of Souls (Giraut)
 4. The Armies of Memory (Thousand Cultures)
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Nicolas says

Dans ce roman, on suit les pas de Giraut, jeune habitant de la planète Nou Occitan qui, par suite d'un dépit amoureux, s'embarque dans un long et périlleux voyage pour la calédonie, une planète qui rejoint enfin le réseau de portes des étoiles ... pardon, de Passeurs reliant les milliers de cultures terrestres dispersées sur quelques étoiles assez proches de la terre.

J'avais, avant de lire ce roman, une opinion curieuse de l'auteur. John Barnes était pour moi l'auteur de deux livres quasiment antinomiques : La mère des tempêtes et Le vin des Dieux. Le premier était un honnête roman cyberpunk, quoi qu'un peu putassier par son insistance à nous montrer des acteurs sursexués, dans lequel la Terre se retrouvait plongée dans une tempête permanente provoquée par le réchauffement climatique. Quant au second, c'était un excellent récit de fantasy mêlant des thèmes aussi variés qu'incongrus dans une sauce qui, ma foi, prenait grâce à une espèce de métatexte assez subtil.

J'ai donc entamé ce roman avec une certaine appréhension quant à son contenu. Une appréhension toutefois rapidement dissipée dès le premier chapitre, qui nous montre la vie trucculente des habitants de Nou Occitan : ils chantent, boivent, se battent en duel pour un rien, et révèrent le fin' amor, qui pourrait ressembler à une espèce de marivaudage ... quoique les choses soient sans doute plus compliquées. En tout cas, on les vopit comme des espèces de gascons célestes, prêts à provoquer en duel la terre entière pour un vers mal déclamé, ou un compliment mal tourné à leur conquête féminine du moment.

C'est d'ailleurs ce qui provoque le contraste le plus saisissant avec la Calédonie, une terre difficile, sur laquelle les habitants ont développé une civilisation extrêmement rigoriste, ou tout, absolument tout, a une valeur marchande et doit être acheté ou loué. Notre troubadour de l'espace (c'est l'auteur lui-même qui, à juste titre à mon avis, utilise ce terme dans l'un des derniers chapîtres) va donc y vivre un choc culturel intense qui va le pousser à se questionner à la fois sur la civilisation calédonienne et sur la sienne, ce qui nous fera voir les défauts inhérents à chacune d'une façon aussi subtile qu'intelligente.

Et de l'intelligence, je trouve que le récit ne manque que rarement. Je me demande d'ailleurs si, plus que de l'intelligence, il en faudrait pas parler de légèreté, voire de frivolité : on s'y attache ainsi presque autant à l'art qu'à la révolution - plutôt meurtrière - en cours. Mais bon, à titre personnel, j'ai toujours beaucoup de mal à résister à ces histoires qui tiennent compte du fait que tous ces récits de papier, pour être divertissants, nécessitent une bonne dose d'art. Et là, heureusement, comme par exemple dans Sculpteurs de ciel ou dans Les bijoux de la couronne, il y a cette légèreté qui nous permet de saisir la subtilité de la leçon que nous donne l'auteur sur le relativisme culturel sans en subir le poids.

Du coup, évidemment, je ne peux que vous recommander de lire ce roman, malgré ses quelques défauts (comme par exemple une intrigue un peu survolée).
