



# Gnomon

*Nick Harkaway*

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## **Gnomon** Nick Harkaway

In the world of Gnomon, citizens are constantly observed and democracy has reached a pinnacle of 'transparency.' Every action is seen, every word is recorded, and the System has access to its citizens' thoughts and memories--all in the name of providing the safest society in history.

When suspected dissident Diana Hunter dies in government custody, it marks the first time a citizen has been killed during an interrogation. The System doesn't make mistakes, but something isn't right about the circumstances surrounding Hunter's death. Mielikki Neith, a trusted state inspector and a true believer in the System, is assigned to find out what went wrong. Immersing herself in neural recordings of the interrogation, what she finds isn't Hunter but rather a panorama of characters within Hunter's psyche: a lovelorn financier in Athens who has a mystical experience with a shark; a brilliant alchemist in ancient Carthage confronting the unexpected outcome of her invention; an expat Ethiopian painter in London designing a controversial new video game, and a sociopathic disembodied intelligence from the distant future.

Embedded in the memories of these impossible lives lies a code which Neith must decipher to find out what Hunter is hiding. In the static between these stories, Neith begins to catch glimpses of the real Diana Hunter--and, alarmingly, of herself. The staggering consequences of what she finds will reverberate throughout the world.

## **Gnomon Details**

Date : Published January 9th 2018 by Knopf (first published October 19th 2017)

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Author : Nick Harkaway

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# From Reader Review Gnomon for online ebook

## Annie says

The first novel that I have read by Nick Harkaway. From the initial blurb that I read on Netgalley and Goodreads, the book sounded great. However, for me this was a very slow read and when I first started reading the book it felt like the author had swallowed a dictionary. To be very honest and I know this sounds brutal, but I found it boring. This is only my opinion and I am sure many other readers will disagree with me. I'm very disappointed.

Many thanks to Netgalley for the copy in return for my honest and unbiased opinion.

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## Liz Barnsley says

Gnomon is actually a novel that defies description for all the right reasons, it is an epic, an ultimately rewarding read with so many layers inside the layers under the levels that hide the realities that your head will spin and you'll come out of it feeling dazed and probably weirdly wired. Or maybe that is just me. We'll see I guess...

The use of language is purely beautiful, a smorgasbord of differing voices all linked to the main bulk of the narrative through the eyes of the Inspector. Probably. But anyway – the point is, this is literary if you take it in the popularly defined way, as such it might not be for everybody and indeed may challenge you in ways I also can't describe – but in the end you know not one word was wasted.

I feel I should try and explain a little about the plot but the blurb does that in some ways (but not at all in others) and I'm not sure that if I focus on any one element that I wouldn't pick the wrong one to focus on. Peripherally it is about the investigation of an interrogation that has gone awry, in a UK run by "the System" that sees all and therefore by the people rather than a government, this is seen by most within that system as a genuine Utopia. I guess the main theme explored is whether such a thing is even possible, human nature being what it is. That is the simplest way of saying what I saw there but the next reader may well turn around and say "what the heck are you on, its not about that at all"

Now I've read back the above it probably isn't about that....

ANYWAY there you go. Nick Harkaway has created a story that can be wildly interpretive or I suppose if you must, dissected bit by bit until you come to some thoughts about what the author intended – but I don't think it matters what the author intended (sorry Mr Harkaway) but more matters whether or not you love it and get something from it under the guise of your own personality. I loved it but you can't ask me why because I don't really know and probably never will know. I do know that I will read it again in the future, first page to last, with the knowledge of the ending and it will be a completely different novel to the one that I have just read.

Basically I feel like I have just been swallowed by a shark.

Gnomon spoke to me in it's final denouement but what it said I will never tell -because it's going to tell you something different and I wouldn't want to be called a liar – also because that is its reward for sticking with

it, through the craziness and the sense of it as you absorb all those beautiful words and turn them into a whole.

Intelligent, driven, for me summed up in that blurb sentence that reads “a solution that steps sideways as you approach it” Gnomon is challenging, wonderful, descriptively fascinating, unrelentingly clever and in the end worth every moment of your time. A grand sprawling epic of indescribable proportions.

What can I say? Highly Recommended.

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### **Roy says**

This took me so long to finish. One of the most dense, confusing, intelligent and beautifully written novels I've come across. Don't go in wanting a quick easy read. This 700 page behemoth will take awhile for the average reader. This is also more Lit than sci-fi. There were times I had to re-read passages and even look up words haha. The blurb gives you a certain background to the story but it doesn't really give you much. Even trying to describe what I read is impossible. My best friend also read it and we both took different ideas, concepts and views on what happened. If you like beautiful prose with a snail pace plot but with weird sci-fi concepts (could be scary true in a few years time) then give this a shot.

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### **Peter Tillman says**

Made Adam Robert's best-of 2017 list, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

"And then there is Gnomon (William Heinemann), Nick Harkaway's most ambitious novel yet. This story of near-future mass surveillance, artificial intelligence and human identity reads as if 11 novels have been crowded into a matter-transporter pod, emerging on the other side weirdly melded. An enormous, shaggy, infuriating, amazing and quite unforgettable piece of fiction, it's the kind of thing only science fiction can do."

Not sure it's my sort of thing -- plus, 704 pp! And the library doesn't have it, yet. Still....

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### **Bookteafull (Danny) says**

**DNF'ed at 32%. I tried. I really, really did.**

Another week, Another DNF.

Sci-fi is one of my favorite genres but lately, it feels like every time I pick up a sci-fi novel to read - I'm extremely bored, confused, and disappointed. I received this book in a PageHabit box that a friend bought for me. Her heart was in the right place but this book belongs in the trash.

I did not care for the synopsis. Wow, another dystopian society where the government sees and records your every move. So shook, I've definitely haven't read this a thousand times before. This is such an innovative idea.

Basic af plot aside, my primary issue stems from the writing. The author is guilty of data dumping what feels like useless information for pages on end, to the point where the story almost feels convoluted. This shouldn't be a story that's difficult to follow and yet it was. There's a break in the narrative where one of the protagonists has what I can only describe as a spiritual experience with a shark. Yes. You read that right. Although it was one of the more interesting sections to read, I couldn't help but feel that the story was all over the place.

There were various sections where I had to pause my reading and I ask myself: "What is happening?"

I just don't understand how the pacing was *so unbelievably slow* and I *still* missed how entire sections went from point A to point B. This book just wasn't for me. I made it to page two-hundred and something and I couldn't get emotionally invested in any of the characters. They weren't even slightly interesting to me. The more I read, the more distant I felt from the story (and the recondite terms definitely didn't help).

Overall, it felt like I spent the majority of my time and effort on concentrating, on trying to understand what was happening rather than on enjoying anything. I'm sure this is a very clever book for some readers. I'm sure there are people out there who read this book and were mindblown, but I will never be one of those people.

Side note: I discovered a new pet peeve. Long af sentences to describe or state something that can be said in a few words. I don't need a 1k worded prose to tell me the sun is hot. Condense the writing, please.

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### **Phil Costa says**

Ambitious and creative novel set in a dystopian future and told through multiple intertwined voices - some actual, some fictional, some where it's not so clear. I wouldn't suggest I understood all of the twists and turns, or unpacked all of the dense cross-references, but the writing is excellent and the multiple turns of the screw are thoroughly enjoyable if you're willing to stick with the complex narrative. Definitely one of those books where you fell you'd get a lot more out of it the second time through.

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### **Paul McNeil says**

To put my review of this book in perspective, I wrote my MA thesis on the concept of "memoria ajena," or

characters remembering other people's memories, in works by Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Piglia, y Rodrigo Fresán, three Argentine authors whose works blend metafictional concerns, high culture, and science fiction and fantasy elements. If *Gnomon* were written in Spanish, it would have been an ideal fit for my thesis, a perfect overlap with all my favorite fictional obsessions, and it's my favorite read of the last few years.

That said, I'm not sure most readers would love it as much as I did- it's a 700-page Borgesian Russian nesting doll of novel, made out of the elemental particles ejected when *Cloud Atlas* and *Inception* are crashed into each other at the Large Hadron Collider, a meditation on identity, surveillance, artificial intelligence, the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world, and really big sharks. There are radical shifts in narrator and style, and the reader will be as confused as the detective trying to figure out why a reclusive, rebellious writer died during an "interrogation," what near-future England, under the watchful care of the all-seeing AI known as *The Witness*, calls having a small hole bored into your head and your memories read directly. Memories and lies unfold, bleed into each other, warp the plot.

For the reader to whom this sounds like a good time, dive right in, the water's fine. Well, except for the really big shark.

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## **S.J. Higbee says**

I normally read quite quickly – I've read 157 books so far this year. But this one took me nearly two weeks to complete. Partly it's the fact that it is something of a doorstopper at over 700 pages, but the main reason was that early on I took the decision that I wouldn't speed-read through this one. The prose is too rich, too dense – there are too many allusions and clues scattered throughout and as you may have gathered from the blurb, the structure isn't all that straightforward, either.

It might have been tempting to have accelerated through it if I hadn't been enjoying the experience so much. Harkaway is a remarkable writer and this is him at the peak of his capabilities. For all the depth and complexity, I found the book highly readable and engrossing. It would have been a real shame to have thrown away the experience by trying to skim through it. The writing is immersive and each character has their own flavour so that after a while, it only took a couple of lines to realise whose head I was in. Essentially, it is a thriller. But the puzzle is far more of the slow-burn variety, which doesn't stop there being some jaw-dropping twists near the end.

For all their quirkiness, I was fond of all the characters, though my favourites remained dogged, persistent Inspector Mielikki Neith whose investigation of the untimely death of Diana Hunter in custody triggers the whole chain of events – and fierce, beautiful Athenais, once-mistress to Saint Augustine, before he decided to become so saintly. The characterisation is masterly and as I'm a sucker for character-led stories, it was their vividness and sheer oddness that sucked me in and kept me reading.

I also feel a similar anger that sparks through the book – the apathy of too many of us, the blind belief that if we put in place a whole raft of cameras and electronic surveillance, it will somehow be alright, no matter who ends up at the helm and in charge. This is a remarkable, brave book, deliberately constructed and written on an epic scale. Does it work? Oh yes. I loved it, but my firm advice would be – don't rush it. If you try reading this one in a hurry, you'll end up throwing it out of the window – and given its size, it may cause serious injury if it hits someone...

While I obtained the arc of *Gnomon* from the publisher via NetGalley, this has in no way influenced my

### **Paromjit says**

This is a strange multi-layered beast of a book set in a future Britain under total surveillance, governed by the System, where the majority of people remarkably believe this is a good thing. It is a dense and demanding sci-fi and fantasy read requiring attention and patience from the reader. It would be remiss of me not to mention that at 700+ pages, you need to be prepared for the long haul. This is a sprawling tale which goes in a myriad of directions and left me bewildered as to where it was heading and what to make of what I was reading. Inspector Mielikki Neith of Witness is investigating the death of Diana Hunter, which to all intents and purposes should not have occurred whilst she was being interrogated. Diana was 61 years old, divorced with no children. She was an administrator and the writer of Quairendo, rumoured to contain secret truths hidden within it although this is disputed.

Inspector Neath is one of those who believes in the good of the system, but as she investigates she is forced to question her beliefs. Nothing is fixed, not even time or notions of reality. The story revolves around the complex issues of identity, shifting and changing realities and questions of what it all might mean, although the conclusion does help a little. I expect every reader to have different concepts and thoughts as to what this novel is about because it is difficult to discern what intentions the author has. This level of nebulosity is likely to leave many readers deeply frustrated. This is a difficult review to write, I find myself in the quandry of knowing I cannot do justice to this book or even delineate precisely what it is about. If you are happy to be left stranded to make of it what you will, then this is a book for you. There are detailed descriptions, it is beautifully written and slow paced. The vocabulary the author uses is extensive and likely to have you reach for the dictionary often. A novel that succeeds in leaving me shaking my head and, at the same time, enthralled. I am at a loss as to what else to say! Many thanks to Random House Cornerstone for an ARC.

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### **Quirkyreader says**

First off, I received this as an ARC from Penguin Random House. Thank You.

This book fits squarely in the category "what in the heck did I just read". It kind of has a "House of Leaves" feel to it. It's like a Russian nesting doll and The Lament Configuration all in one big puzzle.

It does start off slow, but give it time. Once you start to work to puzzle out you will see why.

This story also screams undertones of Phillip K. Dick. So if you love Dick's work, this is a treat.

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### **Carlex says**

Three and half stars.

As I said previously, English is not my first language, but I dare to comment this complex novel. I must say that the book deserves a more extensive review.

Gnomon has a fascinating beginning, set in a future high surveilled UK, with the marvelous/nightmarish assistance of an artificial intelligence -the Witness- and the plot starts with a murder apparently impossible. So, the novel looks like good science fiction but then, as the different plots develops... well, It does not matter the genre: Gnomon is Gnomon. However, I can say that at the first chapters the expectations of this novel are high, but then...

I think this novel has strengs and weakness, and in a way both can have the same origin. I will try to explain this:

To begin with, the literary genius of Mr. Harkaway is undeniable. In a simplistic way, Gnomon has a multi-multi layered plot with a lot of knots (and some traps), a lot of dramatic moments (Athenais Karthagonensis, Berilun Bekele), also thrilling ones (the murder of Diana Hunter, Lenno Lönnrot), tragicomic scenes (Constantin Kyriakos) and sense of wondering aspects (the Witness, Gnomon). In addition, a lot of classic and religious references, some I know and some not; some can be true and some not (very interesting but for now I have had enough and I do not want to investigate more).

All of this is well written. Mi regret is Mr. Harkaway's insatiable desire to enrich his stories -that is, the four main plots of this novel-. As a result, for me, this is... mmm... not boring, of course not; but EXHAUSTING. And I must add that in the entire book you could not know where all this leads (perhaps nowhere).

The book has a lot of "artifices"; starting, as a little example, for the name of the british main character, the investigator Mielikki Neith: "She has no idea what possessed her mother to give her a Finnish name (...)". In this novel we will see a story inside a story, the History inside the story, meta literary games, endless phisolophical questions by the main characters and more, much more. All of this is good, well developed, excellent! But for me at last, this is also excessively baroque. As a result, by mid-reading I was already looking forward to finishing this book, and this can not be good (in some way it remembers me the latest Peter Jackson's movies: you can make it, but you must make it?). So, as I said, these excesses convert the virtues of this book in defects.

Finally, I must add that the resolution of the plot is not as good as I was expecting, or not as good as this novel deserves. So, is the literary style the most important aspect in a novel? For my taste not, if the book does not work entirely as a whole. And I say this not only as a science fiction reader.

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## **Max says**

This is one of those books that makes you feel that for years you've been killing time with other books, treading water offshore, waiting for a shark to find you. It stretches the sense of what books can do. It gets better the more you think about it, the more you give to it. It's not just a pageturner, though it's that... Not just a literary novel or a science fiction novel, though it's both... I think it really does find more space for the art.

Where's the goddamn sixth star?

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## **nostalgebraist says**

When I reviewed Harkaway's novel Angelmaker five years ago, I expressed a worry that Harkaway was



boxing himself in. That he had settled on exactly one application for his formidable talents -- a boisterous but ultimately fluffy type of sci-fi adventure story -- and that he was never going to do something rawer, more messily human, something with goals beyond the efficient optimization of entertainment density per page.

My fears were misplaced. *Gnomon* is, in many ways, the exact book I was hoping for from Harkaway when I wrote that review. It drops the "everyman hero meets a succession of endearing but disposable extras" structure of the earlier novels, and instead alternates between a cast of core characters who are each given ample space to breathe, to live, to speak in their own voices, to mess up, to be confused. It is about unsettling things, and it aims to unsettle the reader when appropriate; it does not think that we need to be strung along with the promise of candy on every new page, and its scenes and chapters do not break down nicely into different sugary flavors (the big fight, the comedy routine, the teary parting or reunion, the surgically deployed plot twist). It is clearly a heartfelt work by a man who wants to say something about the real world, even if he is entertaining us as he does it.

The only problem is that it . . . uh . . . isn't very good.

Part of the charm of Harkaway's earlier work was the way it under-promised and over-delivered. It was cheesy entertainment, executed uncommonly well. You could tell this Harkaway guy had talent to burn, but he wasn't rubbing his smarts and skills in your face: they were experienced as a long series of pleasant surprises, layered without fanfare over the competent, serviceable sci-fi adventure you knew you were getting when you bought your ticket.

In *Gnomon*, Harkaway over-promises and under-delivers. Fragments of esoterica or wordplay that would, in earlier novels, have been thrown as a light garnish onto one page and forgotten on the next are now treated with the utmost gravity, and expected to bear ten or twenty pages of load each. We are reading a detective story, and so every shiny tidbit Harkaway pulls out of his magpie's collection is a potential *clue*. The Greek word *catabasis* is mentioned early on, and then mentioned again, and mulled over by the detective. There are many catabases in this narrative, it turns out, and we are reminded of this regularly.

Words, phrases, and themes recur, and we are rarely allowed to forget that this is the sort of book where such things recur, and everything is or might be connected. We are supposed say, "oh, what a tangled web he weaves!", and in case we need helping along in this, we are nudged endlessly by the narrative, which -- no matter which character it follows, no matter which layer of the multiply nested metafiction (*oh what a tangled web*) -- never fails to notice, to admire or bemoan, its own tangled esoteric fancy meta nature.

All of this is clearly meant, sometimes, to touch upon topics of importance in ground-level, non-fictional reality. But with so many layers of misdirection, so many false leads whose false notes could well be features rather than bugs, it is hard to tell which notes are meant to be the true ones. When I balk at a near-future surveillance state whose creepy AI-overseen direct democracy is literally called "The System," am I just demanding too much realism from something whose fakeness has a tangled-web purpose? What am I to make of the fact that the overseeing AI is gifted with almost godlike abilities -- far beyond any reasonable extrapolation of present-day technology, and probably sufficient to pass the Turing Test and usher in a whole host of issues never raised in the narrative -- and yet can apparently be completely fooled by a widely known (but illegal) computer program which the detective downloads and uses later on in the story? If she can use this program, why isn't everyone using it, and why doesn't that completely destroy the orderly society she appears to live in?

At one point, a lawyer who knows she is being watched by an agent of a shadowy and powerful para-governmental organization says, to her clients, that this organization represents "a merger of state and

corporate power." One of her clients, known to his friends as a weirdo conspiracy nut, later explains to the others that the lawyer passed them a clever covert message, by saying this -- a message only people like him, and apparently *no one in the shadowy and powerful para-governmental organization*, would understand. Have you got it yet? Have you been in the right classroom, or, hell, read the right Wikipedia page? Yes:

"So the thing I said that she said she couldn't advise on: that's the thing she would advise if it wasn't outside her professional competence. See? That's what she thinks we ought to do. Blow it all wide open. But she can't say that with squit in the room or they'll say she advised us to break the law or whatever and take away her funny hat."

"She's a solicitor," Annie said primly.

"Whatever. That's what she's telling us to do."

"I thought she was telling us not to do that."

"Yeah. Squit probably thinks so, too. Fuck him."

"You're getting all this from what she said about Turnpike?"

"Basically. It was a bit of a red flag. What, it really doesn't mean anything at all to you? Still?"

"Colson," Annie said. "You're an info-rat. Not everyone's brain works that way. The merger of state and corporate power: why is it important?"

Colson scowled as if both the question and the answer were part of some conspiracy of which he particularly disapproved. "It's one of the basic victory conditions of Italian Fascism," he said.

There are some good stories and characters, or at least parts of them, in here. They live and breathe for a time, each of them, but ultimately, this book is not about them. It is about its oh-so-tangled web, made up of little bits of book learning, strewn like bread crumbs for the detective and reader to pick up and marvel over. What we are left with is a very fancy, and intermittently very well done, version of a Dan Brown novel. But we are not promised Dan Brown and given something better; we are promised the world, and given Dan Brown.

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## **Sara says**

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

I really struggled with this, unfortunately and couldn't finish it. The premise seemed really interesting - I love dystopian fiction, but I found the story overly long and convoluted. It was very slow paced, with large sections devoted to descriptions, and unloading a lot of information in one go, making it difficult to hold my attention. I also struggled to get emotionally invested in anything that happened.

Unfortunately not for me, but I'm sure those looking for a deep novel that requires a lot of concentration with

a hint of science fiction will love it.

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### **Emma says**

This was far too dense for me. I can see that this is literary fantasy/ dystopia, but I really couldn't get on with it. I like books, generally speaking, that make the reader "work for it" but I was doing all the work and not getting much pleasure!

Many thanks to Netgalley for an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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