



Shadow of the Scorpion

Neal Asher

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Raised to adulthood during the end of the war between the human Polity and a vicious alien race, the Prador, Ian Cormac is haunted by childhood memories of a sinister scorpion-shaped war drone and the burden of losses he doesn't remember. Cormac signs up with Earth Central Security and is sent out to help restore and maintain order on worlds devastated by the war. There he discovers that though the Prador remain as murderous as ever, they are not anywhere near as treacherous or dangerous as some of his fellow humans, some closer to him than he would like. Amidst the ruins left by wartime genocides, Cormac will discover in himself a cold capacity for violence and learn some horrible truths about his own past while trying to stay alive on his course of vengeance.

Shadow of the Scorpion Details

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From Reader Review Shadow of the Scorpion for online ebook

Dirk Grobbelaar says

Shadow of the Scorpion isn't a very big book, compared to other entries in the *Polity* series. This is a good thing, since all it **really** sets out to do is reveal that Agent Cormac was a serious bad-ass long before *Gridlinked*.

She turned and gazed at Cormac for a moment. "It would appear that this soldier is a walking abattoir."

That said, this isn't criticism, it's actually a nod to an author who keeps himself in check when that is what is required, or at least as far as page count is concerned. There are some nice action sequences here, but nothing as elaborate as elsewhere in the series. Is it over the top? Yes, to some extent, but since when has this kind of thing **not** been. It's military Space Opera at once both streamlined and unapologetic.

Remember – this is a prequel to *Gridlinked*, even though it was written later. So, is it as good as the other novels in the series? You decide. It doesn't have the plot depth of some of the other instalments, but it doesn't need to. It's a nifty little origin story, is all. Oh, I might as well mention that some of the more explicit action scenes might have you squirming a bit if you're the sensitive type.

The novel touches briefly on the Prador War, but not to the extent that completists would like. However, if you are interested in that specific aspect of the *Polity* universe, you'll at least have *something* to chew on (no pun intended). I suppose you could easily give this a skip and still die a happy camper if you're not *that* into Asher, but I would certainly recommend it to **fans** of Agent Cormac and all the delightful mayhem that surrounds him. But... read *Gridlinked* first, it just works better that way.

"Stone Killer" was a description that occurred to him, but it seemed far too dramatic, he felt that maybe he was just becoming accustomed to the life . . .

Dawn says

This book reads very much like the prequel it is. There are many flashbacks into childhood and it reads very much as a character creation story. While I didn't think it was the best book I've ever read for these purposes, it did serve to intrigue me and I look forward to starting the main series for Cormac.

Lady*M says

4+ stars

This is a prequel of the Agent Cormac series and follows Ian Cormac through two time periods - his childhood during the war with the aliens and his youth when he joined the Earth Central Security.

The war is over, but there are alien stragglers left behind who are still lethal. Their technology is attracting

the separatists determined to use it against the Polity. Cormac shows certain skills which involve him with the intelligence operations and hunt for the traitor. Through these events and the memories of his childhood we learn of his connection with the scorpion war drone Amistad (he was in *Dark Intelligence* as a warden of planet Masada). Asher is also laying the groundwork for Cormac's own series. This is, basically, Cormac's origin story.

The most fascinating part of these books for me is artificial intelligence. The various drones, Golems (androids) and AIs all have a distinct personality. The author asks the question are they so different from us just because their brains are made of circuits and ours of flesh? If they feel, if they suffer, are they less than us? Cormac's personal bias towards the Golems and his experiences with his comrades and Amistad serve this author's goal.

And, how cool is Cormac's special Shuriken?

Highly entertaining, fun romp through the space and Polity. Also, highly addictive. Also, highly recommended.

Bradley says

This one is easily a better novel than the previous one, but I can't quite tell if that's just because the heavy lifting of the tech and aliens has already been long-established from within Prador Moon.

This one moves well beyond a straight high-tech military porn and delves into the creation of Ian Cormac, of whom later novels are focused, and the reveals he slowly learns about his erased childhood, splitting the novel between his adulthood and his formation pretty equally, while also being embroiled in a technopolitical thriller years after the main wars have already been waged.

Human separatists are still an issue, of course, as are the Prador.

More interestingly, for me, is the introduction of the new places and the titles of later books and a hint of their importance for later. It's these things that hook me and make me a fan. A good novel is still a good novel, with a full beginning, middle, and end, but without these juicy tidbits of a far-off adventure, I might have stopped here.

I'm not stopping, suffice to say. :)

I'm really getting into this now. It's no longer a fun and fast-paced pew pew popcorn, but a serious character tale, too. :) Yay!

Chris Berko says

4.5 rounded up. I cannot convey my love for Neal Asher adequately using mere words. All six Cormac books, the three Spatterjays, and this being the third standalone Polity novel I've read and I'm always entertained. While this offers nothing new other than Cormac family tree stuff, the pacing is relentless, the action is epic, and as always there is a shitload going on. Don't start here if you're new to Asher but definitely

pick it up if you enjoy his other books.

I think one of the things I appreciate most about his writing is the effort he puts into all the different characters. There are so many classifications/categories of humans, different alien species, multitudes of AIs, drones, haimans... I love it. And they're all unique, they each feel different, and to me that helps because with the complexities of his storylines it helps to remember who's who and why everyone is doing what they do. To me Asher is the epitome of fun, in terms of my reading life.

spikeINflorida says

Prequel to the Ian Cormac series. First half 3 stars with threaded back stories of Cormac as preteen and military soldier...and overly excessive amounts of setting descriptions. Second half 4 stars with copious amounts of ass kickery...and where many loose story threads were sewn. Loved the too few scenes with crab-like Prador and once-human hoopers, both from the author's best novel THE SKINNER, which I recommend reading first along with Ian Cormac books 1 and 2.

Ken says

I'm finding it slightly difficult to review this book. As even though I felt it was a well written story, I struggled to connect with the characters in this world.

I'd read Pardor Moon a while ago and with this being listed as the second in the 'Polity Universe' on Goodreads I felt that it would be a great place to continue.

The book introduces the character Ian Cormac to the series.

I couldn't put my finger on why I was struggling to full grasp the story, it wasn't until I started reading a few other reviews and found out that it was a prequel to another series in this universe.

I've always felt that book series should always be numbered clearly, just like DVD boxsets.

So I've gone straight down the middle for my rating, it was fine - but knew I would have enjoyed it more.
2.5/5.

Karl Ljungberg says

Ah yes, the Polity universe. I wasn't sure what to expect when I started this series, back with Prador Moon, and I didn't do much research outside of finding out how many books there were and what the general consensus was. And, for the most part, I liked it. At least enough to give further books in the series a try. Why I early on surmised they weren't meant to be highbrow literature, it was definitely an entertaining read. And sometimes that's all I ask for.

Then I read Gridlinked and it didn't hit the same spot at all. Too long, filled to the brim with stuff I just couldn't care about and a main character that was about as interesting as paper pulp. To anyone not working in the paper industry, at least. There was still something there, something that made it appealing and I can't deny that Neal Asher is a perfectly competent author, odd spelling mistake, strange sentences and the unnecessarily complicated word aside. But minor issues I had with the first book I read came back in spade

and clearly identified this as one of his earlier works, before he had sanded all those rough edges.

I stayed the course, finished that book and decided, based partly on my own opinion and partly on the opinion of others that things got better, to continue. And now here I am, having read *Shadow of the Scorpion*.

And *Shadow of the Scorpion* was... pretty good. If you're in this for some kind of highbrow literature that expands the mind, you best go elsewhere. Neal Asher writes for the common man, infusing his action adventure with a whole slew of sci-fi-concepts. Such as androids, AIs, advanced weaponry, space travel and a society that's ruled by reality and logic, no mushy feelings involved here! But at its core it's still a pretty standard action novel, the "Casino Royale of Ian Cormac" if you will. There's spies and traitors, a threat to the galactic peace and lots of undercover work where you're not quite sure who's who!

And of course death.

And a whole lot of preaching about how stupid us "contemporary" people are and how we go about things. Why, if Neal Asher was in charge, things would be... okay, going off on a tangent.

As you can tell, I still have a bit of an issue with some of Asher's future society but that's good. I enjoy reading works that challenge my perceptions and where I can come out of the book and say "Nope, I'm still right. But thanks for trying." But unlike *Gridlinked*, where things were laid out in a way that suggested that "Duh, of course this is the better way!" Here it's more open to suggesting that things might not be so rosy in the Polity after all, that while quality of life is generally good, they've also given up a lot to have the "good life". Ian Cormac himself does a LOT of soul searching in this book and not only about how he fits into this world but also how he perceives it. If I had read this before I read *Gridlinked*, I might actually have cared more about the dull, personality-deprived Ian Cormac of that book.

It also gives a lot more depth to the relationships Ian Cormac forms along the way, even if they tend to be pretty shallow. And there was, yet again, a strange obsession with sex but this time WAY more detailed than it was in *Gridlinked*. But I still cared a lot more, at least to the point when the inevitable happened, I felt something. Something I can't quite say about *Gridlinked*.

And when I say inevitable, I do mean it. Everything in this book was clearly laid out from start to finish that it was hard to even act surprised when somebody "suddenly" died or when he was betrayed. Hell, I saw the ending coming a mile a way and Neal Asher just so obviously hammered home some points that if you've read *Gridlinked*, you knew exactly where things would end up. The part following Cormac as an adult was so very run of the mill that I kept thinking "Wow, I wish he'd go back and follow young Cormac around a lot more."

Cause the book is divided up between adult and young Cormac and we get a very good idea of how Cormac ended up where he was at the beginning of *Gridlinked*. His personality is so much clearer now and while that whole "gridlinked"-thing is still a bit of a mystery to me, at least I can tell that something had changed. And the mystery revolving around Cormac's youth and the titular scorpion was genuinely interesting, if a bit predictable.

It also established the universe a bit more firmly in my mind than *Gridlinked* ever managed. That book was a mess of concepts introduced at a flying pace and much of it didn't seem important. Here, with *Gridlinked* and *Prador Moon* already established in my mind, the technology and lore flowed much better. It was, perhaps, the wrong way around to do things, I admit, perhaps I should've read it in the order suggested by other people but I do have time for reading in chronological order (though I realize I skipped this book before).

In general, then, I found this book to be a great read. Luckily I had a lot of time on buses and park benches this last week and when I decided to read, it was a hard one to put down. Despite being a step ahead almost constantly, the writing was solid enough and the story compelling enough to have me continue reading. After all, I don't expect you to reinvent the wheel every time. Just give me a perfectly good wheel that will serve me for now and I'm happy. Mostly.

Damon says

Predictable and hard to read.

Allan says

The story centers round Ian Cormac, showing his beginnings as a soldier, promoted to the Sparkind and later as an ECS agent. Interspersed with this are flashbacks to his childhood, relating the details of his mother and brother's tales during the Prador war and how he has no memories of his father or how he died in that war.

Another installment in Asher's Polity Universe, this tale gives us some of the background to Ian Cormac's early life, his joining ECS and how he acquires that lethal Tenkian weapon of his. It also introduces the war drone Amistad, who we meet later in *The Technician*. Yes, I read them in the wrong order but it doesn't really matter as this is really about Ian Cormac.

Not a blockbuster of a novel but a decent read for fans of the Polity and Ian Cormac.

Kristin says

The best thing about airplane trips is nearly uninterrupted reading, which, for a book like this, is a sheer delight.

This book is listed on Goodreads as Polity #3, but I think it could also be listed as Cormac #1, because we get to see Agent Cormac's formative years. A blending of events, the winding down of the Prador War and Cormac's background information all nicely packaged into one strong book.

I'm usually not a fan of back and forth timelines, where the characters bounce between the past and the present, but I thought Asher did a good job of integrating the timelines and events through the use of younger Cormac's deleted memory cards. That was a deft bit of writing to bring everything together cohesively.

My main complaint with the plot perhaps resided in the conclusion. Without giving away any spoilers, the book followed younger Cormac as he grows into adulthood, as well as the somewhat older Cormac as he trains as a grunt and, later, a Sparkind. As events come to fruition, the nemesis hunted down, and the big reveal at the end, it all rather felt abbreviated, almost too short - rushed perhaps, after the multi-generational build-up. I hit the end and wondered where the rest of the story was.

This is the fifth Asher book I've read, and I haven't been disappointed yet. Recommended.

Luci Ann Keenagh says

This is only my second Asher book so I'm not that knowledgable on Polity stuff. What I can say is that I loved it! I enjoyed the world and the characters very much and thought it a very engaging story. The action is awesome and I like the fact that he's not afraid to get quite gruesome in detail. Very taken with Cormacs character and liked reading about his young life in parallel to current events. The scorpion drone is amazingly cool and scary, I want one!!! Having previously read Prador Moon, I was rather wishing for more Jebel Krong but I can see my timeline needs some work here! Generally, I feel I shall become a convert and look forward to my next adventure.

Ben Babcock says

Fresh from the worldbuilding present in *Perdido Street Station*, it's not surprising that *Shadow of the Scorpion*'s worldbuilding does not impress me much. This is straight genre fiction—and that is not a bad thing. It appeals to the ardent science fiction fan in me by using standard tropes or settings like artificial intelligences running the society; a "space army" composed of infantry, marine troops, etc.; an alien enemy that is distinctly non-human in both form and thought; and a lone protagonist influenced to lead his life in a certain way by events during his childhood. There's very little unique or original about the mythology of *Shadow of the Scorpion*. Hence, it's Neal Asher's writing, and what he *does* with this standard-fare mythology, that makes this book appealing.

Asher takes the concept of memory editing and applies it to the psychological aftermath of war. It makes sense that some soldiers, and even civilians, would choose to remove memories of painful events. Ian Cormac's mother, however, goes further and edits *his* childhood memories. Asher attempts to deal with the moral consequences of these issues—not always successfully, as we're usually interrupted by the relentless call of the main plot, and not with any degree of subtlety. Even so, and maybe just because I'm fascinated by the concept of memory in general, I still find this part of the book enduring and interesting. Since the editing of Cormac's memories happened when he was a child, it has contributed to the person he has become today, the person who must now decide how to react to the memories that were removed. It's the sort of uber-complicated situation that tends to crop up in sci-fi.

Beyond psychological issues, however, there's plenty of action. In fact, the main plot consists of a manhunt for Cormac's former squad-mate, Carl Thrace. Asher writes action scenes like they're going out of style, which has both advantages and drawbacks. On one hand, they're both detailed and intense. One of the difficulties of writing action scenes for a science fiction story is balancing the technology (and technobabble) with the . . . well, action. It's easy, especially with the level of advanced technology available to Asher in his Polity universe, to succumb to the temptation to press a button and kill all the bad guys. (We see this a lot in *Star Trek*.) At the same time, an author can't always discard technology altogether so his or her protagonist is forced to use wholly primitive means of survival. Striking the balance is tough, but Asher manages to do so consistently, delivering fresh action filled with firefights, superpowered soldiers, gruesome injuries, and plenty of explosions.

In fact, sometimes it seems like action *is* the only good part of *Shadow of the Scorpion*. The more mellow scenes are, by comparison, just so slow and expository. The scenes alone are not bad, but they don't compare in quality to the action wrapped around them. It's as if there are two different stories at war in *Shadow of the Scorpion*: the intense manhunt for Carl, and Cormac's exploration of his personal history and destiny. Despite being strong individually, the two stories never come together to form a completely whole narrative.

At the end, the former story doesn't deliver the resolution I was expecting. Cormac's confrontation with Carl lacks much in the way of suspense or even creative conflict. And Carl, of course, commits the classic faux pas of talking when he should be shooting. A threatening villain this book does not have.

There's a lot to recommend about *Shadow of the Scorpion*. This was my first Asher book, and I'll read more of his Polity/Agent Cormac novels now, because this one wasn't bad. It lacks the spark of something *more*, something sublime enough to make it a great book instead of just a good one. Yet if you're interested in this type of action-oriented science fiction, you can't go wrong here.

Terry says

I enjoyed this second book in the Polity series very much. Lots of interesting technology and good sci-fi action keep the pacing very good. The characters are an interesting mix, especially since multiple different AI's are included, and some of the interesting aspects of the relationships between people and AI's are explored. I'm definitely going to read the next one.

Mark says

Having enjoyed Ian Cormac in Gridlinked and later in Brass Man, I thought I really ought to get my act together and read the entire Ian Cormac series in order. This starts with Shadow of the Scorpion in which Cormac, an 8-year-old with a dysfunctional family begins to notice that this scorpion-shaped war drone keeps showing up where it isn't supposed to and it has something to tell him.

Or does it? This book does two things really nicely:

1. Tells us the story of how Ian Cormac came to join ECS and how he came to be the person he is.
2. Explores the angles of memory editing in a striking way. I won't post spoilers, except to say that it can play havoc with your narrator's time flow.

Really, really enjoyable story if you like the latest style of sci-fi out of Britain in the mode of Iain Banks, Alistair Reynolds, and Peter F. Hamilton. All four (including Neal Asher) write about space-based societies with strong cultural boundaries and war and soldiers and spies. They remind me of John Le Carre, but in space.
