

David North: The Heritage we renounce

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A review of a new history of the Fourth International

The heritage we defend: A contribution to the history of the Fourth International by David North, Labor Publications, Detroit, 539 pp \$12.95

Any book that claims to be 'a critical Marxist history of the Fourth International' should be worth reading. The only other two books available in English which make a similar claim are *The Death Agony of the Fourth International* (Workers Power/Irish Workers Group 1983) and Pierre Frank's *The Fourth International* (Inklings 1972). In the event only the *Death Agony* lives up to its claims. North's book, like Pierre Frank's, has more in common with the publications of the Catholic Truth Society—riddled with chop logic, exhortations to the worshippers to keep their faith and a disdainful attitude to the facts of history.

In Frank's case the purpose of his work was to gloss over the manifold errors of the USFI wing of the Fourth International. North, on the other hand, has written a defence of the International Committee tradition. To the student of Trotskyist history who is concerned to understand the past the better to build in the present neither book is of much use. Not only is North's book not a 'history of the Fourth International' (over half the chapters are exclusively devoted to the American SWP), it does not even attempt to address the real political problems raised in the fifty years since the foundation of the FI. North prefers to take refuge in well-worn proclamations of 'orthodoxy' and fiery incantations against the 'revisionists'.

North is the leader of the US Workers' League (WL) and guru of the misnamed 'International Committee of the Fourth International' (ICFI). This motley crew is all that is left of Healy's ICFI which blew apart following the collapse of the British WRP in 1985. His book began as one of those interminable series so beloved of the Healyites (this one ran for 35 weekly episodes in the WL paper, the *Bulletin*), in response to an article by North's one-time ICFI comrade, Mike Banda of the WRP. Explaining its inordinate length North wrote, 'autopsies can sometimes be messy and arduous affairs'. We should add, especially if performed by butchers.

Having overseen the expulsion of Healy, Banda began to drift out of 'Trotskyist' politics. His long article '27 Reasons Why the International Committee should be buried forthwith and the Fourth International built', published in *Workers Press* in February 1986, was but one step along a road which has since led him to embrace Stalinism. In this article, which piqued North so much, Banda mixes up a series of pertinent criticisms with one-sided assertions and historical howlers. North either avoids or fails to answer the former, and leaps upon and heroically demolishes the latter. He does so in the very worst traditions of Healyite polemic. Not content with proving Banda wrong North has to elevate the importance of his own somewhat minor role in world affairs, by investing in the meanderings of Michael Banda a world historic significance. Thus, Banda is not just wrong he has become 'an open political agent of world imperialism and its Stalinist lackeys'.

A partial history of the ICFI

The best we could have hoped for from North would have been some source material reproduced from the ICFI's files. Alas North's book fails to provide anything new. He sticks closely to the orthodox Healyite view of history, whereby the bad guys (the 'Pabloites') are beaten by the good guys (the International Committee). Concomitant with this is the analysis of the forces of revolutionary Marxism as a series of ever decreasing circles, located, after each split in the ICFI as whichever faction David North happened to be in. North adds one new twist, namely the discovery that by the late 1970s the WRP had a 'right-centrist character'. (p 8) Thus for the last ten years North and his handful of acolytes have been the sole embodiment of Trotskyism, and the only true bearers of the banner of the Fourth International. The fact that for most of this period there was not a shred of evidence of political disagreement between North and Healy is conveniently overlooked. Nor will references to North's published disagreements with Healy over dialectics pass muster as evidence of his opposition inside the ICFI. It did not lead to any break with the ICFI's scandalous support for dictators in the Arab world or with any other aspect of that outfit's rotten political practice.

The last quarter of the book is entirely devoted to in-fighting in the Healyite ranks. This subject deserves study, but it is of no more interest (and probably of less) than the 1965-77 debates in the USFI over guerrillaism, the Moreno split of 1980, the Moreno/Lambert fusion, the USFI debate over permanent revolution and so on. None of these events or issues are even mentioned in North's 'history'. His reply would no doubt be that these 'revisionist groups' do not represent the 'Fourth International': how then does he explain the fact that even the 1971 Healy/Lambert ICFI split is not discussed? Even as a history of the ICFI North's book is a failure.

North's method of historical analysis is crude and simplistic. Wherever Banda criticises the history of the FI or of the ICFI, North will regurgitate the 'orthodox' reply if one exists. He will quote Cannon or the ICFI at length, but he will not critically examine the problem and try to arrive at a politically solid conclusion. Let us take one of the early examples, that of the role of the Trotskyists during World War Two, to which North devotes over fifty pages.

The FI in World War Two

Banda attacked the Socialist Workers Party of the USA (SWP) for not having put forward a revolutionary defeatist position in the war, and raised similar criticisms of the other sections. As we have shown in *The Death Agony of the Fourth International*, this criticism (which was first raised by the ultra-left Munis at the time of the 1941 Minneapolis trial of 28 leading SWP members), is justified. The SWP in general, and Cannon in particular, did not clearly state 'the defeat of your own [imperialist] government is the lesser evil', as the Transitional Programme puts it. Despite pages of bluster, North is unable to disprove this criticism of the SWP. Instead, he prefers to concentrate on reproducing Cannon's replies to some of Munis' more stupid and ultra-left criticisms. Given that the question of defeatism was the one criticism to which Cannon did not reply, North obviously did not feel in a good position to take up the argument! The whole problem with such an approach is that it leaves the problem of the SWP's war policy unanswered. If we are to learn from what was an essentially healthy period of the SWP's life then we have to face up squarely to the mistakes as well as the gains.

Instead of looking at the articles in the SWP's press during the war North dodges around the question of political line. Had he bothered to examine the SWP's material he would have achieved two things. He would have disproved Banda's stupid assertion that Cannon was involved in a 'criminal betrayal'. The SWP's line was always characterised by anti-imperialism and therefore was not (as Banda suggests) the product of a hopelessly social patriotic organisation. He would have also discovered that there was a real centrist vacillation by the SWP on the question of clearly stigmatising the US ruling class as the 'main enemy' and of sharply posing the implications of a defeatist policy in relation to it. A vacillation and a

betrayal, however, are two different things, a point that the Healyite school of polemical thuggery (to which North belongs) could never accept.

To defend the reputation of the other sections, North simply provides a list of the militants who were killed by the Stalinists and the fascists during the war. Although he would claim by so doing to be honouring their memory, nothing could be further from the truth. The memories of the those who heroically gave up their lives to try and build the Fourth International is not served by a selective and deceitful rendering of that organisation's history. The failure to face up to the errors committed by the British, French and other sections built into the practice of the post-war FI a bad method. And that was a disservice to the martyrs of the Fourth International, a disservice that North continues to perpetrate.

North confines himself to reproducing Cannon's attacks on the German exiles, the IKD, who said some similar things and who represented little in the FI. Perhaps he didn't know about the errors in France, in which case we can only suggest he was a bit presumptuous to try and write 'a critical Marxist history'. More likely he preferred to stay on the safe ground, which had already been trodden by one of his 'orthodox' forefathers.

And when he is obliged to depart from the traditional scriptures of the IC, North is unable to deal with the central problem which faced the Fourth International in the post-war years, the nature of the overturns in eastern Europe, Yugoslavia and China, and the nature of Stalinism. There is no 'orthodox' account of these events or of the FI's analysis of them. However much North, and many others who cling on to a defence of the IC tradition, may protest, the history of the Healy group, the SWP and the French Trotskyists reveal unambiguously that International Committee 'orthodoxy' was riddled with the same methodological flaw as 'Pabloism', and held exactly the same centrist position on the nature of the Yugoslav revolution. Indeed the IC went on to render Pablo's centrism more profound in their various love affairs with Stalinists like Mao and Ho Chi Minh.

Trapped by his political method and his fidelity to the 'IC tradition', North is unable to explain the political degeneration of the FI in the post-war years. Indeed, he barely even attempts any explanation, simply asserting that 'The Third Congress of 1951 revealed that a full-blown revisionist tendency had developed within the leadership of the Fourth International' (p 197). How? Why? These questions are not even posed, never mind answered.

Errors of perspective

He does not deal with the problems of perspective that were raised in the post-war years, except (predictably) to quote Cannon against Goldman-Morrow. He does not appear to consider it worth his (or our) time to examine the political bases of the FI's perspectives of 1946, which were essentially those of the Transitional Programme, involving an imminent revolutionary crisis within which the FI would come to the leadership. Was this adherence to the pre-war perspectives correct or not? Any 'critical Marxist history' of this period has to answer this decisive question. North simply avoids it. When faced with the practical consequences of this analysis, in the shape of the American SWP's 1946 'Theses on the American Revolution', which foresaw the rapid transformation of the SWP 'from a propaganda group to a mass party strong enough to lead the revolutionary struggle for power', North gushes about their 'bold and inspiring perspective' (p 12). The fact that this perspective was completely wrong, the fact that it disoriented the SWP after the war, the fact that it led directly to a strengthening of the SWP's national centredness and their willingness therefore to 'leave' the running of the FI to the Europeans, is neither here nor there for North.

Yet understanding this error of perspective is essential to understanding the errors of the post-war FI, and the roots of its centrist degeneration. Clinging to the pre-war perspective of an imminent revolutionary

upsurge, the FI failed to understand that developments in the world situation had begun to falsify these perspectives, particularly in the USA and western Europe. The first signs of world economic stability were clear. FI members in Britain and the USA noted these developments, giving the lie to the claim that such a recovery was impossible to foresee (though of course its duration was impossible to predict at that stage). Equally important in terms of reorienting the FI's perspectives was the recognition that the revolutionary situations that had come out of the war (Greece, Italy, Vietnam) had been betrayed by the Stalinists.

Other potential flashpoints (France, Germany) had been headed off by the bourgeoisie and their labour lieutenants, through 'democratic' counter-revolutions. Moreover, the victories of the Red Army had allowed Stalinism to expand in eastern Europe and gain prestige in the west, thus contradicting Trotsky's perspective that the war would finish it off.

These developments were not understood by the FI leadership—Pablo, Frank, Mandel, Healy and Cannon. Instead this leadership collectively buried its head. Its false perspectives merely became matters of 'tempo'. It paved the way to the FI's political collapse, a process that began in earnest in 1948 after the Tito-Stalin split and culminated at the centrist Third World Congress in 1951.

The Stalin-Tito split

Following the public declaration of a split between Belgrade and Moscow the FI's perspectives, increasingly at odds with the objective situation, now came to be used to justify an abject capitulation to Stalinism. For ten years the young FI had been living with the perspective of imminent revolution. However, its forces remained as small as they had been in 1938, and the mass reformist parties of the working class were still as strong as ever, despite the predictions of the Transitional Programme.

With the Tito-Stalin split, the FI found itself presented with the apparent fulfilment of its perspectives for Stalinism's demise and therefore of the possibility that important sections of the Stalinist apparatus splitting to the left. By aligning the FI with these forces the leadership—and they all endorsed the 'Open Letter' to the Yugoslav CP which hailed the Stalinist butcher Tito as a friend of the revolution—hoped they could find a short-cut to the difficult goal of establishing revolutionary parties and a mass revolutionary international

The whole of the FI (not Pablo, Pablo, Pablo, as North claims) embraced the view that the CPs were, under exceptional conditions such as civil war, capable of 'projecting a revolutionary orientation'. From this the FI concluded that Tito was a centrist. Yet, apart from fulfilling Trotsky's prediction that Stalinism would fragment along national lines following its wholehearted endorsement of 'socialism in one country?' there was no evidence that Tito's break with the Kremlin altered his politics one bit. Yet the race was on in the FI to grovel before Tito. Pablo was adept at it, but before we exonerate the IC, let us remember Healy's role in organising work brigades to go to Yugoslavia, his junkets at the Yugoslav embassy in London and other such antics.

These events occurred after the Second World Congress of the FI (1948) and marked the opening of a period when fundamental revisions were made of the Marxist analysis of Stalinism, leading to the adoption at the Third Congress of the resolution on Yugoslavia which declared against political revolution in that country and argued that no section of the FI should be built there. Only the state-capitalist Swiss section voted against (for their own erroneous reasons) this monumental revision of Trotskyism.

Yugoslavia became the role model for all Stalinist parties that, to one degree or another, demonstrated an independence of the Kremlin bureaucracy. It provided the practical justification for the 'theory' that under certain conditions (Pablo provided them for everyone with his notion of the impending world war-revolution, revolution-war) centrist formations would inevitably develop within Stalinist, social-democratic or petit

bourgeois nationalist groupings. These would open the road to a workers' state which was merely 'deformed' in the same sense as Lenin talked of bureaucratic deformations in the early Soviet state, and therefore in need of reform.

Enshrined within this theory was the justification for the FI's strategy of 'deep entry'. North is happy enough to attack 'Pablo' for developing this analysis, but he does not either link this 'entrism sui generis' to its theoretical roots, nor does he dare discuss Healy's thoroughly opportunist (and Pablo-approved) deep entry work in the British Labour Party (1948-56). Once again, his 'orthodoxy' absolves him from explaining reality. This is not surprising, because close analysis reveals that the same method lies behind the FI's position on Yugoslavia, the SWP/Socialist Labour League's position on China and Vietnam, the USFI's position on Cuba, Lambert's position on the Algerian MNA, the WRP's analysis of the PLO, Gaddafi, etc. For the ICFI to attack the FI on Yugoslavia would threaten their whole 'Fourth International' dreamworld.

This is shown all too clearly when North, who spends a lot of time repeating that the theoretical stakes were very high in the 1947-51 debate on the nature of eastern Europe, manages to avoid giving us any inkling of what the ICFI's answer to these problems is. Similarly he evades any discussion of the Chinese Revolution and the IC's attitude towards it. These are not mere oversights: they are the product of forty years of systematic political evasion and doublethink by Healy and his followers.

The 1953 split

For North, as for all who claim the 'IC tradition', the pinnacle of the post-war FI was the 1953 split, followed by the foundation of the IC. North, ever a man for the grand allusion (or is it illusion?) compares this ill prepared manoeuvre to the 1903 Bolshevik/Menshevik split. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Whatever the confusion over the 1903 split, it was clear even at the time that the two tendencies represented two different methods in terms of intervention in the class struggle. The political consequences of these different methods became apparent over the next decade. The exact opposite was the case in the 1953 split. Both 'sides' had exactly the same methodology: they agreed on the centrist nature of the Yugoslav CP and on the revolutionary nature of Mao's China. They agreed on the need for 'deep entry' into the mass organisations of the working class. Where they disagreed was that the ICFI sections did not want to be subjected to the control of the International Secretariat (IS) and did not want to have to enter the communist parties. They did not disagree with the key revision lodged within 'entrism sui generis', namely, that for the duration of the entry (a protracted period argued Pablo) there should be no open fight for the key, relevant elements of the Trotskyist programme. Indeed the question of liquidationist entryism was agreed on both sides of the split: both the IS and the IC praised Healy's opportunist practice in the British Labour Party.

In our book on the history of the FI, we described the split as having been 'too early and too late'. It was too early because the political differences between the IS and the IC were not sufficiently developed, and the split, therefore did absolutely nothing to help educate the cadres of the FI world wide against centrism. It was too late because the key issue—the nature of Stalinism and of Yugoslavia—had been unanimously accepted at the Third Congress two years previously. That had been the moment to fight, but Cannon, Healy, Lambert, etc kept quiet, precisely because they agreed with the centrist analysis.

Thus the SWP's 'Open Letter' of 1953, through which Cannon and Dobbs bounced their co-thinkers into a split may sound 'orthodox' on the nature of Stalinism but it does not deal with the real issue that led to the FI's political degeneration: are the Stalinist parties capable of 'projecting a revolutionary orientation?', as the whole of the FI agreed was the case in Yugoslavia and China? This error, common to both sides of the 1953 split, prevented the IC from ever functioning as a revolutionary alternative to the centrism of the

IS. Moreover it paved the way for the 1963 fusion that produced the USFI.

The IC and the Cuban Revolution

The fact that Healy did not participate in that fusion does not mean that he maintained a revolutionary position as against the SWP and the IS on the nature of the Cuban Revolution, agreement on which was the ostensible basis for the formation of the USFI. Indeed, Cuba shows only too clearly the inability of the Healyite IC of pre-1985, and of the North ICFI today, to understand the key developments in the post-war world.

Faced with the IS/SWP analysis of Cuba as a relatively healthy workers' state, the ICFI (embodied by Healy's SLL) argued that no workers' state existed and started hunting around for a phantom bourgeoisie to explain Cuba's supposed capitalist nature. The motivation for this sudden adoption of state capitalism with regard to a country which, by the mid-1960s had an economy clearly identical in nature (though not scope) to the USSR, was purely factional. Healy would not brook unity with the IS and its representatives in Britain. To justify his factionalism Marxist categories were gutted of meaning as Healy 'discovered' the dialectic to explain the contradictions in the SLL's analysis of Cuba. In his hands the dialectic became a means of obscuring reality.

The bankruptcy of the ICFI/SLL position was shown by the ease with which the Lambertists (who had maintained it for years) dropped it without so much as a whimper when they fused with the Morenoites in 1980. North himself unwittingly underlines the problem with his organisation's analysis. In the chapter on Cuba, North never once mentions the class nature of the Cuban state! Instead he prefers to sneer:

'The claim that the class character of the Cuban state could be determined simply on the basis of the expropriations and nationalisations carried out by Castro was a fundamental departure from the Marxist theory of proletarian revolution.' (p 355)

North is wrong and the pro-Stalinist leanings of the IS and the SWP do not make him right. Hansen and the IS, like the Fourth International in the 1940s, were able to register empirically the development of a Cuban economy in which the law of value—the mainspring of capitalism—had been suppressed. Their real error was not their characterisation of Cuba as a workers' state. It was their inability to understand the counter-revolutionary manner, from the standpoint of working class power, in which this workers' state had come about. As with Yugoslavia and eastern Europe they combined empirical recognition of the creation of a workers' state with a political capitulation to the Stalinists who brought about a bureaucratic social overturn.

The IS/SWP relegated the political form of the dictatorship of the proletariat to a secondary question. None of the existent workers' states are healthy, precisely because the working class does not hold state power through soviets or similar bodies, and, except in the case of the USSR, they never have done. These states are all controlled by a Stalinist military-bureaucratic apparatus which rules over the workers and poor peasants. The key task of revolutionaries in these countries is to smash this apparatus and launch a political revolution.

However, the brutal fact of the existence of a post-capitalist economy, of a degenerate form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, was there in Cuba for all with eyes to see. Castro and co, like Mao and Tito before them, carried out a counter-revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, against the immediate desires of the Moscow bureaucracy, though with its eventual material backing, and without the independent and active participation of the workers and peasants or their independent organs of struggle (soviets).

Indeed the independent organisations of the workers had to be bureaucratically suppressed before the

overturn. In doing so, the Castroite caste defended their own immediate interests, not those of the Cuban workers and peasants. Furthermore, they were only able to undertake this transformation on the basis of i) the bourgeoisie having failed to regain direct control of its repressive forces after the revolution against Batista i.e. a situation of dual power existing and ii) their own adoption of the bureaucratically degenerate USSR as a model; that is, their embracing of Stalinism. This analysis, developed at some length in our book *The Degenerated Revolution* (1982), maintains the revolutionary analysis of Stalinism and avoids the Alice-in-Wonderland 'theorising' of the ICFI, who, as far as we are aware, still maintain that capitalism exists in Cuba to this day.

The ICFI's position on Cuba is not original. Their argument consists of the following syllogism: only the working class can expropriate the bourgeoisie; the working class did not make the Cuban revolution; therefore, no expropriation has taken place. The final logic of this position, (at which the ICFI balk) is that workers' state equals workers in power. This was the position of Shachtman, Bruno R and others during the 1930s, and it implies that the USSR is no longer a workers' state. At least the state capitalists/bureaucratic collectivists are prepared to bite the bullet on this point, even if it means junking even more of 'the old Marxism'.

Inferior to Wohlforth's history

North does not dare come face to face with this problem. If he did he would be obliged to explain why the ICFI hailed Ho Chi Minh (the butcher of the Vietnamese Trotskyists) as the leader of the Vietnamese revolution. Where was the working class' direct political involvement in the overthrow of capitalism in North Vietnam in the 1950s? Where were its organs of state power? To avoid this contradiction the ICFI in the 1960s sought refuge in contrasting the 'people's war' of the Vietnamese Stalinists with the small scale guerrilla operations of the Castroites prior to their seizure of power. The former was classified as a form of proletarian revolution, the latter as a means of placing a Bonaparte in power who would rule on behalf of a phantom bourgeoisie. This theoretical nonsense dressed up in a dialectical garb was designed to justify the IC's capitulation to one wing of world Stalinism as opposed to another. And, in not confronting the real problems of Stalinism and their impact on the IS and ICFI, North is skating over the fundamental problem of the last forty years. A failing that robs his analysis of any real use or interest.

Not all contributions from the 'IC tradition' are as sterile as North's. In this respect it is a great shame that he did not bother to re-read more closely *The Struggle for Marxism in the USA* (1964), written by his ex-comrade Tim Wohlforth when Wohlforth was the leader of the Workers' League. Despite very serious faults, at least Wohlforth's document tried to locate the FI's problems in its political method with regard to its analysis of Stalinism and of the Yugoslavian Revolution. However, his political answer to this problem—his theory of 'structural assimilation'—contained reformist implications and he found himself unable to apply it to Cuba, the ostensible cause of the split between the SWP and the ICFI (see *The Degenerated Revolution* for a full critique of Wohlforth's position).

North's book owes a great deal to Wohlforth's choice of quotes, but does not use any of Wohlforth's more pertinent insights. Instead, in the best Healyite tradition, North sees the world as being divided into goodies and baddies, marionettes without any motivation or relationship with the class struggle. For example, North's 'explanation' of the degeneration of Cannon and of the SWP in the mid-1950s resolves itself thus:

'Exhausted and unable to fight opportunism, Cannon became an opportunist.' (p 323) Politics is reduced to age and physical fatigue. Ah! the wonders of science!

Even the sections dealing with the history of the SWP are unenlightening. Whilst drawing attention (like Wohlforth) to the SWP's totally false perspectives on McCarthyism (their characterisation of it as a form of

American fascism), North is unable to see the perspectival continuity between the assumption that 'American fascism is on the march' (1954) and the 1946 'American Theses', which saw the American revolution just around the corner. Exaggerated catastrophism—something the ICFI, and now North's ICFI, have always revelled in—was lodged in these perspectives. The SWP's political activity over this decade is of a piece with, and was intimately connected to, the FI's post-war disorientation, as we have recently shown (Permanent Revolution No.7). There is no material in his coverage of the SWP that was not dealt with by Wohlforth that is not freely available in Cannon's writings. Indeed, on a whole series of questions, like the SWP's use of the labor party tactic, their electoral work or their union work, North has nothing to say. The interested reader will learn nothing of substance about the life of the SWP from this account.

Given that North has invested a lot of political (and financial) capital in Healy's paranoid 'Security and the Fourth International' campaign, it is not surprising that this surfaces in this book, too. Thus the new reader can discover that, according to the ICFI's army of amateur sleuths, the current leadership of the SWP is composed of FBI agents. North also attacks Jean van Heijenoort, one time secretary of Trotsky, as:

'an odious and cynical subjectivist' whom Trotsky had dismissed from his household in November 1939. (p 109), who 'for reasons which he never chose to make clear [. . .] maintained an extensive file of addresses of his old contacts within the Trotskyist movement.' (p 122)

Like 'Security and the Fourth International', these accusations are based on amalgam and innuendo typical of the 'IC tradition' and directly culled from Stalinism by the leaders of the IC. Despite van Heijenoort's later errors, he was not 'dismissed from Trotsky's household', nor was he at the time 'an odious and cynical subjectivist'. He was sent to the USA to develop politically and to participate in the political life of the SWP, and Trotsky so valued his contributions on dialectical method, written against Burnham, that he described them as 'excellent', and got two of them reprinted in *Clave*, the journal of the Mexican section (*Oeuvres*, 23 p 196). Further, despite breaking from the FI and becoming a state capitalist, van Heijenoort continued to help researchers into Trotskyist history and to participate in the *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, a quarterly journal set up by French historians around the Lambertists. In his role as Vishinsky, North ignores all this. It is far more to his taste to insinuate that van Heijenoort was, surprise surprise, an FBI agent. (p 122)

What we have in this book is serious distortion of the entire history of the Fourth International since 1940. It is as useless to the revolutionary fighter as Banda's outpourings were. Virtually every page contains an historical or political error. The reader who is already familiar with the history of the FI will learn nothing new; the inexperienced reader will be horribly misinformed and misguided by North's twisted Healyite logic. If you do read it, and it is an expensive waste of time at £10 a throw, make sure you re-read this review after every chapter a necessary protection against the IC wastes of the North!

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