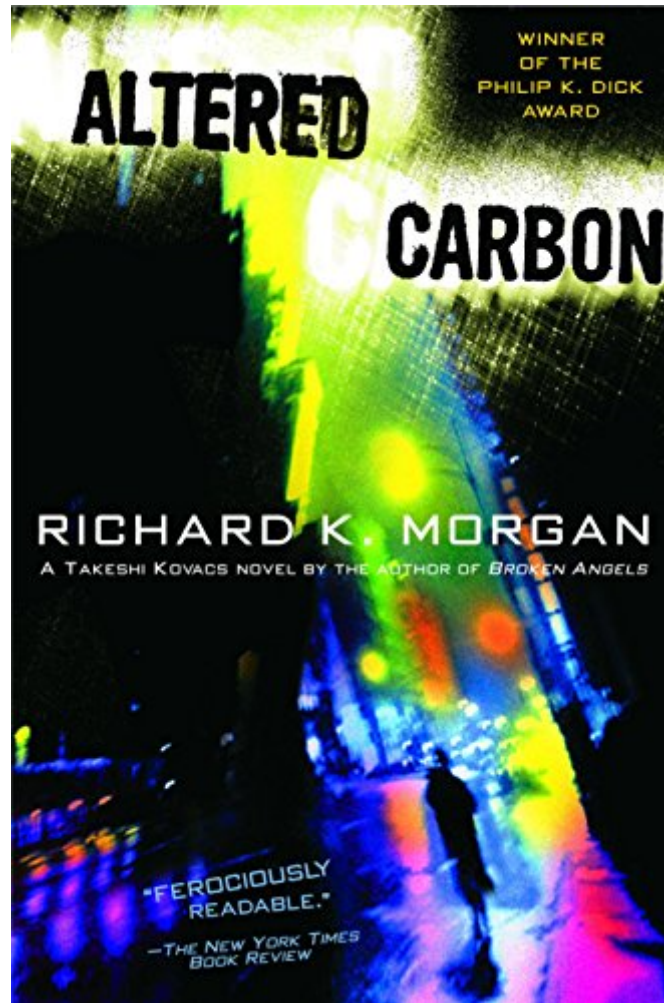


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Altered Carbon (Takeshi Kovacs Novels Book 1)



Synopsis

In the twenty-fifth century, humankind has spread throughout the galaxy, monitored by the watchful eye of the U.N. While divisions in race, religion, and class still exist, advances in technology have redefined life itself. Now, assuming one can afford the expensive procedure, a person's consciousness can be stored in a cortical stack at the base of the brain and easily downloaded into a new body (or "sleeve") making death nothing more than a minor blip on a screen. Ex-U.N. envoy Takeshi Kovacs has been killed before, but his last death was particularly painful. Dispatched one hundred eighty light-years from home, re-sleeved into a body in Bay City (formerly San Francisco, now with a rusted, dilapidated Golden Gate Bridge), Kovacs is thrown into the dark heart of a shady, far-reaching conspiracy that is vicious even by the standards of a society that treats "existence" as something that can be bought and sold. For Kovacs, the shell that blew a hole in his chest was only the beginning. . . . From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Ever since I saw Blade Runner as a kid, I've been in love with the idea of blending science-fiction

with crime, and this is a totally compelling mix of the two. Set about 500 years in the future, the story follows Takeshi Kovacs, a former space marine who has been "resleeved" to investigate a suicide on Earth. You see, in the future, one's mind or consciousness can be digitized and stored in "stacks" implanted in the base of your skull. If you commit a crime, your stack is removed and placed in storage for the duration of your sentence (usually decades or centuries), and then you are "resleeved" in a new body. Of course, resleeving costs, and for many people, a new body is like a new car or new house, with monthly payments to keep up lest your body get repossessed...The flip side of this is that dying is only a temporary thing-unless your stack has been somehow destroyed and there's no backup, then you're subject to "RD" (real death). And if you've got enough money to get into cloning and data storage, one can live a virtually endless and seamless life. It's one of these "Meths" (after Methuselah, just one example of the excellent creation of slang in the book), who has Takeshi remanded and "needlecast" (digitally freighted) from offworld to investigate his alleged suicide in Bay City (aka San Francisco). Takeshi had been in prison, having been captured as a mercenary in a vibrantly kinetic prologue. The meth, Bancroft, is one of the future elite, weaving elaborate corporate and political webs with others of his kind. Apparently he committed suicide a few weeks ago, but he's convinced it was murder.

This is one of the best new SF novels I've read in the last ten years. It's enough of a treat that Richard Morgan can write. The author bio indicates that he taught English as a second language for some fourteen years; he can teach a thing or two to us native speakers as well. His narrative and his dialogue are clean, crisp, and focused, with that sense of heightened reality you get from really good fiction; there's not a word out of place, and there's none of the mannered artificiality of e.g. Frank Herbert's Dune. But it's even better than good writing. Morgan has applied his craft to a brand of fiction that one of the cover blurbs describes as a cross between hard-core cyberpunk and hard-boiled detective fiction. That's an odd description of the genre and makes it sound newer than it is, but it's true that there hasn't been a lot of SF detective fiction. And Morgan's contribution advances the ball considerably. If you're at all familiar with the genre, you're already thinking of Larry Niven's ARM stories (and maybe, though less aptly, of Asimov's The Caves of Steel and The Naked Sun). Well, Morgan's world does owe something to Niven's, but he's got very much his own spin. His main character (Takeshi Kovacs), though arguably more Mike Hammer than Hiro Protagonist despite the snowcrashy backdrop, will remind longtime fans of the wisecracking tough-guy heroes that have populated SF since at least the days of Keith Laumer (not to mention Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat). But he's not just a carbon copy (even an altered one).

Morgan writes one of the most stunning new SF books in some time, bringing us a noir thriller in an exotic yet frighteningly familiar future. The tone is firmly set not in the halls of Science Fiction, but in the legacy of 1930's hard-boiled crime fiction, full of plots, counterplots, seamy locales, seamier people, and above all, sex, violence, and death. This is a world where no one dies for good, where bodies are cloned and personalities held in cortical "stacks" sleeved into them. A rich man "died" by apparent suicide, and when revived calls in a renowned offworld criminal to investigate. What Takeshi Kovacs finds are unhelpful cops, people and gangs out to hurt or kill him, bewildering events, lies everywhere, and dead bodies showing up around every corner. Every ally is a potential enemy, with the exception of the hotel he stays in. After being chased, shot at, beaten, burned, tortured, and nearly killed many times, he slowly realizes that behind it all is another of the ancient power players of the world, one with whom he has an old history. Only then Kovacs tries to get the upper hand, methodically manipulating events to a final showdown. The perspective is gritty, hardened, and not a little bitter. Kovacs is an antihero more than willing to take whatever measures he feels are necessary, including killing - permanently. He is a seasoned Envoy, a long-time criminal (though just how is hazy), and has been through many bodies and many worlds. No one is particularly likable, but many are somehow sympathetic. The combination of hard crime thriller with many unique SF elements - Science Fiction, and San Francisco - works well. The author has done a great job here. There are deeper ideas floating around. What is death?

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