The Man in the High Castle by Philip K Dick (288 pages)

Some months ago I purchased a history magazine from W H Smiths bargain bucket, dealing in Alternative Histories (i.e. what would have happened if). It included a recommended reading list of four books. These included, Fatherland by Robert Harris and SS: GB by Len Deighton both of which I had already read so I decided to give another of the recommendations a try, The Man in the High Castle.

This book imagines a world conquered by the victorious Axis powers from an American perspective. The Axis has won WW2 and Roosevelt has been assassinated. The victorious powers each control a part of USA with a neutral buffer zone in between. The book is largely located in the Japanese controlled Western seaboard territory, mainly in and around California and tells the tales of four main characters. One is Robert Childen, an antique dealer with a large clientele of wealthy Japanese with a taste for collecting rare Americana. Another is Frank Fink, a skilled producer of counterfeit antiques, who is Jewish and living under a false name. The third is Frank’s estranged wife, Juliana, who is recovering from addiction. The fourth is a Mr Baynes, a secret agent travelling under false papers with vital intelligence warning the Japanese of a Nazi plot against them. Their tales intertwine although they rarely come in contact with one another. Suspense, political intrigue and tension are all supplied via Frank’s attempts to avoid deportation to the Nazi held eastern USA and its death camps, Juliana’s desire to meet the “Man from the High Castle”, which involves her unwittingly in a plot to assassinate him, and the Nazi plan to intercept the agent before he has chance to deliver his important message.

The characters are effectively formed even though Dick uses descriptions sparingly. The book is quite brief and written in an easy to read style. One particular feature that was appealing was Dick’s use of a very literal translation of Japanese thought and language when put into English. The Japanese culture of politeness and etiquette really showed in the dialogue.

The book was a good read and thought provoking, although it left many questions unanswered. The imagining of what life could be like in the Japanese zone was very interesting and the menace of the Nazi controlled east quite disturbing. It would appeal to readers, who enjoy historical fiction, fans of Dick’s science fiction novels interested in how he handles another genre and those who have watched the TV adaptation and wish to compare it with the original book.