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# The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate

*By Ted Chiang*



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## The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate By Ted Chiang

In medieval Baghdad, a penniless man is brought before the most powerful man in the world, the caliph himself, to tell his story. It begins with a walk in the bazaar, but soon grows into a tale unlike any other told in the caliph's empire. It's a story that includes not just buried treasure and a band of thieves, but also men haunted by their past and others trapped by their future; it includes not just a beloved wife and a veiled seductress, but also long journeys taken by caravan and even longer ones taken with a single step. Above all, it's a story about recognizing the will of Allah and accepting it, no matter what form it takes.



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## **The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate** By Ted Chiang Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2251076 in Books
- Published on: 2007-07-23
- Released on: 2007-07-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .45" h x 5.66" w x 8.24" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 62 pages

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This curious time-travel novella from Hugo-winner Chiang (*Stories of Your Life and Others*) is a gracefully told lesson about accepting fate—or, as better suits this medieval Arabian setting, the will of Allah. A Baghdad merchant discovers an alchemical device that can send a traveler back in time 20 years. Despite the alchemist's warning that "what is made cannot be unmade," and three illustrative tales about others' attempts to alter the past, the merchant is determined to return to an earlier time to save his long-dead wife. Half lyrical Arabian Nights legend and half old school cautionary SF tale, this skillfully written story and its theme of insurmountable fate may comfort as many readers as it makes uncomfortable. (*July*)

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From [Booklist](#)

In the manner of the Arabian Nights, Chiang wraps stories within a story, and all of them interrelate to argue that "the past and the future are the same." Not that past and future are identical, but that they stay the same and cannot be altered, even if one could journey back to the former or forward to the latter to change it. In medieval Baghdad, a merchant obtains an audience with the caliph to apprise him of a merchant-alchemist who has created doors between past and future. He relays the tales the door maker told him about a rope maker and a weaver who each ventured through a 20-year-spanning door more than once, and then the tale of the well-to-do man's wife who did the same—all before he imparts his own time-hopping adventure.

Eventually, interconnections between the four stories surface, and they boggle the mind, more so, perhaps, than any of the tales of similar effect in Chiang's dazzling *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2002). Could fantasy be more intelligently exquisite and, ultimately and surprisingly, morally sound than this? Olson, Ray  
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**Sophia Hartman:**

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