

Alien Citadel Short Guide

Alien Citadel by Douglas Hill

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Contents

Alien Citadel Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

Alien Citadel is the final book in a trilogy that features the young hero Finn Ferral. Readers who have already encountered him in the two previous novels will be interested in learning whether the situations left unresolved will come to a happy ending for this brave young man. Even those readers unfamiliar with Finn's previous life, however, will have no trouble picking up on the history of events in this novel. Enough background is presented that the reader not only grasps the events of the past but begins to root strongly for the novel's main characters, who are struggling against great odds. Survival is their first and most critical problem. If they succeed in this, then the next challenges are to retain some dignity and to spark the hope needed to rebuild human civilization and free the Earth from the evil Slavers.

Alien Citadel can be read for sheer excitement, as it is full of nonstop dangers and unexpected plot twists. And readers who delve more deeply will be fascinated by the story of the invaders who take horrifying advantage of humans' weaknesses for their own purposes—and the unexpected way that the humans' problem is removed.

About the Author

Douglas Hill was born on April 6, 1935, in Manitoba, Canada, but he grew up in the neighboring province of Saskatchewan. From his early childhood, Hill enjoyed reading, and he also learned that he could entertain himself by writing, a tremendous discovery for a boy who spent much time alone while growing up on the prairie.

After graduating from the University of Saskatchewan in 1957 with a degree in English, Hill did graduate work at the University of Toronto. He soon decided, however, that he was not cut out for the academic life, and in 1959, he moved to London. Within a few years, he had published several short pieces and had also found his way into the first of a series of editorial jobs that he would combine with freelance writing for most of his career.

Hill's first few books were adult nonfiction and included several works of history, including *The Opening of the Canadian West* (1967) and *Regency London* (1969), as well as some books on aspects of folklore, *Magic and Superstition* (1968) and *Fortune Telling* (1972). In collaboration with Gail Robinson, his wife at the time, he also produced a volume of tales collected from various North American Indian cultures, which was entitled *Coyote and the Trickster* (1975) and intended for children. With the publication of this book, Hill decided that he had found his niche, realizing that he was happier writing books for children than for any other audience group.

Since that time, he has drawn on his lifelong love of science fiction to create a number of serial adventure stories set in future worlds. Most of these are aimed at young adults, but Hill has also written a few adult novels, which he describes as "faricically comic space adventures." With the success of his novels, Hill is now able to concentrate on those projects that interest him most, while maintaining connections with the rest of the literary world through occasional book reviews and articles. Hill continues to work and live in England, but he considers himself a Canadian.



Setting

Alien Citadel takes place on Earth, but on a future Earth that only barely resembles our own world. In this future world, humans live in fear, hiding from the Slavers, the planet's new masters. The planet is covered by desert wasteland, forested wilderness, and radioactive firesands where monstrous mutant creatures prowl. There is no more civilization and little hope. The Citadel, built underground in a mountain hideaway, is where the Slavers take those humans whom they spare for use as slave labor: child-bearing women are used for breeding experiments, and the rest of the captives are used as laborers in the Slavers' mines.

As the novel opens, Finn Ferral has just travelled across a continent strewn with dangers. Slavers run rampant over the planet, scouring the land with heat weapons in their efforts to eliminate any humans and other "vermin" still infesting its farthest reaches. But the Slavers are not wholly responsible for Earth's desolation: several centuries earlier, humans waged a nuclear war that leveled civilization. Survivors of the holocaust pulled themselves together to rebuild and regroup, but what little they managed to rebuild was wiped out once more with the arrival of the Slavers, who blasted their settlements from the skies. Now, Earth's cities and technology are a very dim memory. The remaining humans live in primitive villages hidden deep in the forests, or they wander in bands as they constantly flee the Slavers.

The setting of Alien Citadel blends two classic science fiction motifs: the terrors of a postnuclear-holocaust world and the struggle against alien invaders. By bringing humanity back to a pretechnology level of existence, Hill sets his small band of protagonist characters up against almost impossible odds in their battle against the Slavers.

Yet by doing so, they are able to express their dignity and their hope. And there is always the possibility that they will win. Like most dystopian settings, the world of Alien Citadel is innately more interesting than a Utopia because it offers the chance for its characters to fight against evil.

Social Sensitivity

The brave deeds and alien invaders in this novel could easily mark it as a simple adventure tale. But underlying the exciting plot are some deeper themes and questions, which will be apparent to the more thoughtful reader. The Slavers were sent by the Vlantis, inhabitants of a distant planet, to exploit the mineral resources of Earth.

And because Earth's inhabitants are smaller and weaker than the Slavers and unable to speak their language, the invaders considered them expendable vermin. Thus, humans can be killed, enslaved, and used for grisly biological experiments with no more hesitation than using rats. Indeed, Finn at one point discovers that the Vlantis' translator uses the terms "man" and "rat" interchangeably.

Comparisons with many episodes in human history are inescapable. Groups of humans driven by dreams of territorial and/or economic gain have pushed aside, enslaved, or simply killed less powerful humans who stood in their way. For instance, when the Spanish first came to what are now North and South America, only their priests believed that Indians had souls and were thus entitled to any rights or concerns.

More often than not, the Spaniards killed those native peoples whom they conquered. As a further example, for many centuries, some leaders of Christianity held that women had no soul and were therefore not fully human. In more recent history, one of the arguments used to support African slavery in the Americas held that Africans did not feel pain or exhaustion as Europeans did.

Beyond these parallels, the invaders' work suggests some further issues, such as biotechnology and genetic experimentation. Although the Slavers' motives are hardly justifiable by any measure, the broader topics are timely and controversial today. Is it ever justifiable to intensify or eliminate a genetic trait for a motive other than the individual's own welfare? And how do our beliefs on that issue apply to other species? Any debate here leads to two conflicting positions: the useful domestication of animals resulted from just such a process, and human arrogance might well make the same error as did the Vlantis and mistake a complex or even sentient being for vermin. Obviously these questions touch on many current debates, including animal rights and future space-exploration policy. Awareness of such implications helps the reader appreciate Hill's depth.

Finally, the nuclear holocaust that forms the backdrop for the trilogy has important social implications. Currently, this particular threat appears to have receded with the end of the Cold War, but nuclear war is far from an impossibility. Many countries in today's world have or are developing nuclear arsenals.

At least one reviewer, Michael Cart, has criticized the character of Rainshadow as a "stereotype Indian." However, his role in this novel is so secondary that it is difficult to either support or disprove this allegation. Yet there is another point here that a reader

may reflect on. How does Rainshadow's traditional knowledge of living off the land affect his ability to adapt to the harsh environment of the Wasteland?

Literary Qualities

Alien Citadel is written in a straightforward, third-person style. Although the focus is on Finn, the narrative sometimes shifts from his point of view. Within most of the chapters, scenes of what he is doing and thinking are interspersed with those of Baer and the warrior band members as they struggle through dangerous terrain to reach Finn. Finn's thoughts and memories are revealed occasionally, but those of the other characters are revealed only through their actions and words.

Action, dialogue, and description are well balanced in each chapter. Events flow smoothly, making for easy reading and comprehension. Characters' speech patterns are distinctive: Baer uses slang and often leaves off the "g" in words, and the villain Cacinnix speaks with excessive poise and formality. Generally, style is subordinated to the telling of a rousing tale, however.

There is one oddity in the book's format: the first line of every chapter is printed in italics. The reader may not even notice, but this may be misleading to those who do. The italics are not used in this instance to denote emphasis, foreign terms, interior monologue, or any other standard case, and so this flourish detracts from other places in the text where they are used in the correct manner.

There are echoes of many literary traditions in the novel's plot and motifs. The overall structure is that of futuristic science fiction, a genre that often serves as an arena for both cautionary prophetic literature and tales of sheer adventure. Alien Citadel draws on both. Faint traces of the traditional Western are also apparent in the warrior band's trek across the Wasteland and Firesands and in the roles played by the Indian characters.

The hero's mysterious origin is a staple of much heroic myth and fantasy, as is his journey through dangerous lands. From the dragon-bashing knights of medieval fantasy to Luke Skywalker's interplanetary search for lost Jedi knowledge, a hero must usually go on a quest. In the course of this journey, his skills are honed and his character tested, so that when he meets an even greater danger in the future, he is ready. So it is with Finn, who faces the final showdown with Earth's Vlantia masters.

The cyborg beings who come to subjugate the Earth are more typical of adventure comics, though they are certainly not unknown in other science fiction and fantasy literature. At first glance, the book may seem to be a jumble of all these elements, but they work together well. Alien Citadel is a gripping story that is also thought provoking.



Themes and Characters

Finn Ferral, the main character in the novel, is a young hunter in an isolated village at the beginning of the trilogy, but by the time this novel opens, he has crossed most of a continent and has met with many strange events and people. In the course of rescuing his foster father and sister, who were taken by Slavers, he has further honed his already-sharp tracking and survival skills, and he has learned much about the Slavers' operations and machinery.

But many things about them still remain a mystery to be uncovered as events in this novel unfold.

Finn is also a young man of somewhat mysterious origins. His foster father, Joshua, found him as a toddler wandering in the forest. In the previous novel, during a stay at the Slaver base, he found that the raised dots on his arm marked him as a product of the Slavers breeding experiments. Through these experiments, the Slavers hoped to create a race of beastlike beings that would serve as overseers for their human slaves. In Finn's case, however, they inadvertently produced a child with a normal human appearance who had extraordinary instincts and reactions to dangers in the wilderness. Heroes in many types of adventure literature—from comic book heroes to the major figures of Arthurian lore—usually have a mysterious background or unusual circumstances surrounding their birth. They are thus marked at the beginning for greatness. Finn's story draws on this archetype while at the same time keeping his motives and abilities close enough to those of a normal young man that the reader can still identify with him.

Finn's close companion, Baer, is another product of the Slaver's breeding efforts. He is a Bloodkin, lumbering and shaggy in appearance, but a valued ally all the same. Although Baer's mental processes are a bit slow, his judgement is usually reliable and his persistence extraordinary. Baer matter-of-factly does whatever needs to be done, casually shrugging off remarks about his courage. Baer too falls into a familiar literary role—the hero's sidekick. Like the Lone Ranger's Tonto or Han Solo's Chewbacca, he comes from a group considered more primitive than that of the hero, yet he proves himself worthy of any challenge. Baer's role in the story's events shows that the individual spirit can triumph even over the meddling of advanced bioengineering.

Other important characters in the novel include Finn's foster father, Joshua, and his sister, Jena, as well as several members of the Wasteland warrior bands. Rainshadow, an Indian leader, and Marakela, the head of a women warriors' group, are the most distinctive. Another woman warrior, an Indian named Steelfinder, whom Finn meets only after he is captured and brought back to the Citadel, plays a crucial part in the events of the novel.

She tends his wounds, briefs him on their circumstances, and later kills off five Slavers in hand-to-hand combat during a tortuous escape scene. Although the secondary



characters are not well developed, the survival and rescue efforts depicted in the novel would not be possible without them.

Their presence and actions help illustrate Hill's themes of cooperation and mutual concern among diverse people while working for a greater cause.

Lastly, Cacinnix, the alien who is Finn's chief opponent, turns out to be a character with interesting conflicts of his own. He is a scientist stuck on a remote outpost and basically relegated to a "desk job"—a person at odds with his superiors over the basic policy of the "project." A supposedly intelligent being, Cacinnix's prejudices about humans distorts his perceptions of Finn's answers to his question. When Finn actually replies to his idle musings about whether the captive boy might be smarter than a rat, the scientist decides his translating machine is malfunctioning. Though he remains indistinct in many ways (probably as a result of his role as head villain), he nonetheless comes across as a complex personality. It is hard to miss the comparison to a whole class of real-life administrators and technocrats whose intellectual curiosity far exceeds their compassion.



Topics for Discussion

1. Early in this book, we learn that Earth's cities and technology were destroyed by a terrible nuclear war before the Slavers arrive. The author says that humans who have such weapons will always use them. Do you believe this?

Why or why not? Would the aliens have been able to, or even tried to, take over Earth if humans still had these weapons?

2. Finn is taken prisoner when he explores the alien ship. Why didn't he let his companions know he was going inside? Why didn't he wait for them to help him?

3. If Slavers have so much advanced technology, why do they need human slaves to work for them?

4. Cacinnix at first seems genuinely interested in talking to Finn, but when he hears Finn's anger at the Slavers' cruel treatment of humans, he decides that the translator is malfunctioning.

Why?

5. Although Rainshadow's band and the other humans are prepared to fight or flee when the Slaver spacefleet appears at the Citadel, the Slavers just ignore them. What sort of emotions would you feel if you were a character in the novel watching the Slavers leave? In today's world, can people's whole lives change because of a distant decision?

6. Is it likely that if interplanetary travel becomes a reality we will find species who we might mistakenly treat as vermin, as the Vlantis did with humans? What parallels in human history can you use as a guide to answering this question?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Vlantis regard humans as "rats" who can be treated without regard for their thoughts and feelings.

Can you list some episodes from history in which humans have treated other humans in much the same way?

2. During the march across the Firesands, Rainshadow and his band see numerous strange creatures and plants.

Draw some of them based on a mental picture and briefly explain why such mutant forms still exist several centuries after nuclear war.

3. Even though their treatment of people was cruel and immoral, the Vlantis had reasons of their own for coming to Earth and then abandoning it. Try writing something from the point of view of a Vlanti: for example, a log or journal that Cacinnix might have kept; Ikkarak's speech ordering Cacinnix to stop wasting time with such studies; the letter of a Vlanti ambassador, centuries later, who must deal with humans as equals.

4. The Bloodkin are stronger than humans but less intelligent. What will become of them now that the Slavers who created them are gone? Explore this question in an essay.

5. Compare Finn's and Baer's partnership to those of another hero and his sidekick from a legend or adventure story, such as Batman and Robin, Robinson Crusoe and Friday, or Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. How do the pairs of friends resemble one another? How do they differ? How do they work together even when far apart?

For Further Reference

Cart, Michael. Review. *School Library Journal* 30 (May 1984): 89. Brief, unfavorable review that criticizes the book for stereotyped characters and trite dialogue, among other failings.

Commire, Ann, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 39. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. The entry on Hill contains an extensive catalogue of the author's books and other works, including poems, articles, and editing projects.

Fisher, Margery. Review. *Growing Point* 23 (September 1984): 4307. An appreciative review that praises the novel's concrete prose and fast-paced action.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. In *Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989. This work contains a good autobiographical piece on Hill in which he discusses the joys of science fiction adventure and of writing for children. It also includes basic biographical information.

Related Titles

Alien Citadel is the final book in a trilogy about Finn Ferral. In the first book, *The Huntsman*, Finn's quiet life shatters when spywings kidnap Josh and Jena and enslave them. Finn sets out to rescue his father and sister, and his search leads him into many strange and dangerous situations, including encounters with unexpected information about his own origins. In the second book, *Warriors of the Wasteland*, Finn and his Bloodkin ally Baer join with warrior bands to battle Claw, a human collaborator with the Slavers.

As *Alien Citadel* opens, Finn has found his sister and defeated Claw, but these victories have only led to a greater threat as the Slavers decide to rid the Earth of its troublesome "wild human vermin."



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