All the Myriad Ways Short Guide

All the Myriad Ways by Larry Niven

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

"All the Myriad Ways" tells of a police investigator's effort to understand why multimillionaire and owner of Crosstime Corporation, Ambrose Harmon, would kill himself. Harmon's suicide is eventually linked to a series of recent suicides in the area that far exceed normal incidents of the sort. The story does not merely relate the police investigation, but is also an exploration of the concept of alternate universes and an examination of the idea of the importance of cause and effect in understanding human behavior. The language moves at a sprightly pace and the concepts explored in the narrative are exciting.

About the Author

Laurence Van Cott Niven (Larry Niven) was born in Los Angeles on April 30, 1938, to a lawyer, Waldemar Van Cott Niven and Lucy Estelle (nee Doheny) Niven. He was educated near Beverly Hills and attended Cal Tech from 1956-1958. He says he discovered a bookstore full of used science fiction magazines and then flunked out. He finished his degree in mathematics at Washburn University in Topeka in 1962.

After attending graduate school from 19621963 at UCLA, Niven lived off of a trust fund set up by his great-grandfather while he worked at becoming a professional writer, selling his first story "The Coldest Place" to Worlds of If, then one of the leading science fiction magazines. He later revised a science fiction story into his first novel, World of Ptavvs, published in 1966.

Niven married Marilyn Joyce Wisowaty on September 6, 1969. By then, he was already a well-known writer. In an era in which soft science fiction—speculations of social changes or outright fantasies imitating such works as The Lord of the Rings but set on alien planets—were subsuming hard science fiction. Speculation about technological developments and their effects on people were common themes, and Niven was writing popular, much admired works in which technology was a powerful, beneficial force for humanity. Niven is sometimes credited with keeping hard science fiction respectable during the 1970s and with laying the foundations for a new generation of writers such as Tom Clancy and Greg Bear who emerged in the late 1970s and in the 1980s and who also use technology in their works. Niven himself is conscious of influences upon his own work, and he cites Murray Leinster's "Sideways in Time" and O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny" as inspirations for his stories of multiple timelines such as "All the Myriad Ways."

Niven is aware of the appeal much of his work has for young people. In N-Space, he suggests that in stories such as "All the Myriad Ways," and in works by such writers as Keith Laumer, Poul Anderson, and Fritz Leiber, it is "the dance of ideas that hooks us before our teens." As with many other writers of science fiction, "What if stirs his imagination, and the ideas that emerge form the basis of tales that appeal mightily to young adults and captivate grownups, as well: "What if? These ideas include stories about other worlds, about the past and the future, about worlds where magic works: younger readers see playgrounds for the mind. Mature readers and novelists see more."

Setting

With the exception of the ability to travel across time, the first glimpse of DetectiveLieutenant Gene Trimble's world seems very similar to twentieth-century America. As the narrative of "All the Myriad Ways" advances, it becomes evident that there are distinct differences between the history presented in the story and actual events that happened in the twentieth century. References to the Cuba War and eradicated cities give the reader clues that not only is "All the Myriad Ways" about alternate timelines, but it in fact takes place in an alternate timeline.

In the story, Harmon is an eccentric millionaire who has invested his money for years in impractical projects. One of his ventures succeeds, however—machines that can travel across time. This ability has made Harmon rich and has enabled people on Earth to introduce new technologies from other, more advanced timelines. A curious effect of the discovery has also been an extraordinarily high rate of suicide among the pilots of the time machines as well as the population at large. Is it caused, as Bentley suggests, by "a new bug from some alternate timeline," or by something even more sinister?

Social Sensitivity

The view of society presented in "All the Myriad Ways" is a grim one. Take away people's certitude about physical reality, and some of them lose control. Perhaps they all do; perhaps in one timeline every human being kills him or herself because of what Crosstime reveals about the multiple universes. This bleak view of human nature is intended more as a comment on the absurdity of the concept of forever-branching timelines, but it nonetheless suggests that human beings need to have fundamentally consistent views of how the universe works. In this view, Niven is not unique.

Changes in understanding the universe wrought by Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein have brought confusion and dismay to some. When American astronauts landed on the moon, news wires had many reports of suicides by people who could not adjust their perceptions of the world to encompass human beings actually standing on another world.

Teachers or other grownups who present this story to young adults should take into careful consideration the personalities and states of minds of those who will read it. (It is a story that works better if read to oneself, leaving time to think through its ideas, than if read aloud.) Nearly every reader will find the ideas presented in the story interesting. The tale has proven itself to be a memorable favorite for young readers—something they may think about even years after they have read it.

Literary Qualities

"Breathes there a history student with soul so dead, that he has not wondered what would have happened if?" asks Niven in his introduction to "All the Myriad Ways" in his N-Space. Niven believes that this question is the foundation of the interplay of ideas that attract young readers to his alternate history fiction. In the case of "All the Myriad Ways," he challenges the validity of the very concept of alternate histories by revealing the contradictions of physics that would be inherent in the concept. He humanizes the problem by having people act out the contradictions such as having Trimble shoot himself, and yet not shoot himself. It is an absurdity that the bullet would choose different directions to go in different timelines.

Niven asserts that alternate timeline stories are not actually science fiction, but fantasies "without fantasy trappings." By this, he means that the stories have more in common with tales of unicorns and dragons than with stories in which science is to be taken seriously. Further, he says, "In fantasy, more than in other forms of literature, the obligation is to teach something universally true about the human condition." Thus, when one studies "All the Myriad Ways" or Niven's other alternate timeline fiction, it would be well for one to keep in mind that Niven is trying to communicate something about the human condition. The suicides, murders, and crimes in "All the Myriad Ways" reveal something about human beings in general. Clues to what Niven wishes to say about people may be found in such phrases as "If every choice was cancelled elsewhere, why make a decision at all?" and "If alternate universes are a reality, then cause and effect are an illusion. The law of averages is a fraud."

People, these assertions suggest, need the certitude of cause and effect; they need the knowledge that when one takes a particular action that it will have particular effects (the effects need not be known ahead of time, just so long as they exist). Every cause has an effect, every effect has causes. Without this, human beings become insane, taking spontaneous, crazy actions because the actions have no true effects.

Themes and Characters

"Senseless suicides, senseless crimes. A citywide epidemic. It had hit other cities too. Trimble suspected that it was worldwide, that other nations were simply keeping it quiet." Detective-Lieutenant Gene Trimble has a mystery to solve. "Why would a man like Ambrose Harmon go off a building?" he asks himself. Trimble has already begun questioning numerous other suicides, but Ambrose Harmon's death seemed the most pointless of all.

Harmon had inherited great wealth and had spent it whimsically, without a care in the world. In backing many impractical ventures, he might well have gone bankrupt, but instead he struck gold: a machine that could travel between alternate timelines, retrieving technologies developed in other possible universes. The result was his Crosstime Corporation, and "The Crosstime Corporation already held a score of patents on inventions imported from alternate time tracks." After all, there were "Lasers, oxygen-hydrogen rocket meters, computers, strange plastics—the list was still growing.

And Crosstime held all the patents." Trimble speculates that given Harmon's carefree personality, the fact that he had great wealth, and that he had just won $500 at an all-night poker game, Harmon had no reason at all to kill himself.

It is the "no reason" aspect of Harmon's suicide that is at the core of the story's themes. "None of the methods showed previous planning," Trimble observes of the many suicides in his city. As a police officer and a detective, Trimble is trained to look for motives and causes for people's behavior. Thus Bentley's suggestion, "I think one of the Crosstime ships brought back a new bug from some alternate timeline," intrigues him. "A suicide bug?" Trimble asks. The idea has appeal; a disease has to have a cause, and a cause can be found, perhaps even fixed. Perhaps even the murders and other crimes have been caused by the disease.

The ideas presented in "All the Myriad Ways" are more significant than the characters, who are by and large not fleshed out beyond the minimum requirements of the plot. For instance, Bentley offers up his theory but is otherwise a mystery. Trimble is an exception to this rule, however, and his character grows and deepens as the themes of "All the Myriad Ways" unravel.

He is, after all, an investigator used to plodding his way through clues, assembling them in different ways until they make sense. For the thematic purpose of the story, he is the cause-and-effect man, a representative of linear, cause-and-effect thinking, and he needs to expand his thinking to encompass a concept that violates cause and effect.

He thoughtfully assembles his clues: The incredible suicide rate among Crosstime pilots could not be coincidence.

Two Gary Wilcoxes, two vehicles.

Casual murder, casual suicide, casual crime.

The idea of spontaneously doing something as significant as killing oneself on a whim is alien to Trimble. Through his point of view then, the absurdity of the concept of alternate timelines is revealed; even as Trimble expands his mind to work through the idea that no decision means anything, to accept the alien concept, the notion that decisions have no causes and no effects is ridiculed. "If every choice was cancelled elsewhere, why make a decision at all?" Trimble then finds his motivation, the cause lurking in the insanity of the plague of suicides and crime: "If alternate universes are a reality, then cause and effect are an illusion. The law of averages is a fraud. You can do anything, and one of you will, or did." Thus the story ends with Trimble doing several different things at once. Trimble's actions are an analogy used by Niven to tie up the themes of "All the Myriad Ways": that alternate timelines are ridiculous and that human beings need the cause-and-effect universe in order to function. Otherwise, their lives are, from the start, pointless—dead.

Topics for Discussion

1. Niven believes the idea of alternate timelines to be nonsense, and in "All the Myriad Ways" he shows why. If this is so, why has he continued to write alternate timeline stories such as the Svetz series (please see the entry for "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine") and "The Return of William Proxmire"?

2. What clue tips us off that the timeline of "All the Myriad Ways" is not actually our own? (A help for the teacher: Note the references to the Cuba War.)

3. Is it possible that some people would never kill themselves or murder anybody and thus would never have a timeline in which they commit suicide or murder?

4. What does Niven imply about human nature with the events of "All the Myriad Ways"?

5. "All the Myriad Ways" paints a grim picture of human beings under stress.

What might account for its appeal to young readers in spite of the grimness?

6. Is Trimble a stick figure or is he developed enough to seem fully human?

7. Which are more important in the story, the themes or the characters? Why?

8. Why does Trimble shoot himself? What would Bentley and other police officers make of his suicide?

9. Could fiction, especially short stories like "All the Myriad Ways," exist in a culture in which there is no cause and effect? What might literature be like in such a culture? Would there be any literature?

10. How does "All the Myriad Ways" show that what one does in every life is important, that no actions are meaningless?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find the source for the quotation recalled by Trimble, "And Richard Cory one calm summer night, went home and put a bullet through his head."

Who wrote it? How does it apply to "All the Myriad Ways"?

2. What role does cause and effect play in police investigations? Cite examples and explain how cause-and-effect reasoning was used.

3. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges was an advocate of the idea of everbranching timelines and influenced many American writers with his work.

Read his "Garden of Forking Paths" and compare it to "All the Myriad Ways." Which is the more sophisticated work? Which story makes the better case for its point of view? Which view do you believe is correct?

4. Is Trimble's point of view culturally biased? Are there cultures that have no cause and effect? Are there cultures that strive to eliminate cause and effect?

5. Niven mentions Murray Leinster's "Sideways in Time" and O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny" as predecessors to "All the Myriad Ways." What are these works about? What do they have in common with "All the Myriad Ways"?

Does Niven echo the views of Leinster and O. Henry, or does he part with them in significant ways?

6. How do scientists use the concept of cause and effect in their research? What role does it play in experimentation?

How is cause and effect dealt with in the scientific method?

7. Assuming Trimble does not die at the end of "All the Myriad Ways", what do you think happens after his suicide attempt fails?

8. Niven says that although he believes the idea of alternate timelines to be nonsense, he likes writing alternate histories because of the opportunity to play with ideas that they provide. Take advantage of this opportunity yourself and write a story of alternate timelines— one in which you explore ideas you have picked in school or from your reading.

For Further Reference

Bernardo, Anthony. "Larry Niven." In Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography Series. Volume 2. Ed. Kirk H. Beetz. Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 1355-1358. Bernardo presents an account of Niven's life and career, as well as primary and secondary bibliographies.

Clute, John. "Niven, Larry." In The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993, pp. 873-875. Discusses Niven as an important exponent of hard science fiction.

Easton, Tom. Analog Science Fiction-Science Fact 111, 1-2 (January 1991): 308. Easton finds N-Space, in which "All the Myriad Ways" appears, to be a slightly unsatisfactory read.

Hartmann, William K. "A 'What-If' World Comes to Life in Los Angeles."Smithsonian 12 (March 1982): 86-94. Niven, artists, and scientists jointly create an im aginary but scientifically possible world.

Of interest for its insights into Niven's creative methods.

Jonas, Gerald. New York Times Book Review (October 26, 1975): 49. After suggesting that "hard science" science fiction is stupid, Jonas places Niven's Tales of Known Space in the middle of it.

Niven, Larry. "The Words in Science Fiction." The Craft of Science Fiction. Ed.

Reginald Bretnor. New York: Harper and Row, 1976, pp. 178-194. Niven often invents slang for his futuristic characters to use; here, he explains how he uses invented words. His invented terminology such as stasis field has had a broad influence on literature, making this article especially interesting.

Platt, Charles. "Larry Niven." In his Dream Makers: Volume II. New York: Berkley Books, 1983, pp. 15-24. Platt provides some biographical background for Niven, and in an interview Niven discusses his development as a writer and his view of the status of science fiction as literature.

Stein, Kevin. The Guide to Larry Niven's Ringworld. Riverdale, NY: Baen (Paramount), 1994. A dictionary of the elements such as characters and places of Niven's Ringworld fiction.

Steinberg, Sybil. Publishers Weekly 237, 30 (July 27,1990): 226. An enthusiastic recommendation of the collection N-Space, which includes "All the Myriad Ways."

Related Titles

Niven seems to suggest that the idea of multiple timelines is absurd, and he declares alternate history fiction to be fantasies without the trappings of fantasy—that is, there is little science in them, so they are not the hard science fiction he prefers. Even so, he recognizes in the concept of alternate histories the opportunity to play with Ideas, to ask "What if?" In the case of "All the Myriad Ways," the what if is "How would people respond if alternate timelines were proven to be real?" His answer is that cause and effect would cease to be real to people, and people would behave in ways atypical for them, suicides by people who have no reason to kill themselves; murders by people who would normally abhor murder; crimes committed on whim. What people did would cease to seem to matter, because they would know other versions of themselves would go on living normal lives in an alternate history.

"All the Myriad Ways" does a good job of exposing the absurdity of the concept of alternative timelines. Even so, Niven seems unwilling to allow his own verdict to put an end to his own playing with alternate histories. For example, in "The Return of William Proxmire," he has a former United States Senator persuade Congress to fund the research and development of a time machine, just so that he can go back to the 1920s and give Robert Heinlein an injection that will cure his tuberculosis. He blames Heinlein's science fiction for inspiring people to become scientists who then push for what Proxmire believes is a wasteful program of space exploration. By curing the young naval officer Heinlein, he hopes Heinlein will remain in the navy and not leave to become a writer. The effects of his actions are not what he expects. In the new timeline that he creates, there are several space stations, two colonies on the moon, and the Apollo program had reached beyond twenty expeditions. The Soviet Union is not much of a threat because Admiral Heinlein will not let them have spacecraft, although he is allowing six of their scientists to accompany Americans on a exploratory trip to Mars. In "The Return of William Proxmire," Niven takes the opportunity to express his debt to Heinlein and others, and to indicate what their influence has been on science and literature.

Niven has also written a series of stories about Hanville Svetz, a time traveler who works his way through alternate timelines without realizing that he is doing so. His stories all share a humorous tone and Svetz's wild encounters with are with beasts of our myths rather than real-life creatures. For instance, in "Leviathan!" Svetz encounters a huge sea serpent with enormous pointed teeth. It bites into his extension cage and hangs on, giving Svetz some frightful moments. Once free of the leviathan, Svetz manages to catch what he was supposed to, a sperm whale. But this sperm whale is all white, with a harpoon in its back; Svetz does not realize what we readers recognize, that he has captured the fictional creature from Herman Melville's Moby Dick.

To cap off the humor, Svetz's compatriots think that it is too bad that the whale is white. In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" (please see separate entry), the story draws on gothic fiction with a depiction of humanlike wolves and references to Count Dracula.

Other creatures include a Chinese dragon that breathes fire that is mistaken for a gila monster and a fabulous "horse" with a horn on its head.

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