

At the Earth's Core Short Guide

At the Earth's Core by Edgar Rice Burroughs

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

At the Earth's Core Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	9
Adaptations.....	11
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16

Overview

At the Earth's Core offers a diversion of wonder and adventure in which readers may become so enthralled they will forget their real-life troubles.

In the novel a noble-hearted young man participates in a daring experiment and then finds himself in a world inside the Earth, a world called "Pellucidar." Here, David Innes struggles to survive the many dangers of a primitive land, including fierce battles with prehistoric monsters, frightful creatures unknown to the surface world, and numerous other enemies such as evil men and the wicked Mahars. This novel, overall, is good fun and fine entertainment, one of the best works of an author who is very skilled at the art of spinning adventure yarns.

About the Author

Edgar Rice Burroughs was born on September 1, 1875 in Chicago, Illinois. He attended the Michigan Military Academy from 1892-1895 and then served in the United States Cavalry from 1896-1897. He was married twice: first in 1900 to Emma Centennia Hulbert, whom he divorced in 1934, and then to Florence Dearholt in 1934, whom he divorced in 1942. Before he became a writer Burroughs tried numerous careers, including cowboy, stationery store owner, factory clerk, miner, and railroad policeman. He was thirty-five and working at another of his failed jobs, this time trying to sell pencil sharpeners, when he first seriously considered writing. As he would reminisce in 1929, "If people were paid for writing rot such as I read [in magazines] I could write stories just as rotten. I knew absolutely that I could write stories just as entertaining and probably a lot more so than any I chanced to read in those magazines." He had a wife and children to support, so he tried his hand at writing for a popular magazine. His first effort he titled *Dejah Thoris, Martian Princess*, which he submitted to *All-Story*. This novel was accepted for publication and was serialized in *All-Story* in 1912 under the title *Under the Moons of Mars*. Published in book form in 1917 as *A Princess of Mars*, it was the beginning of Burroughs's series of Mars books, also called the *Barsoom* series.

In October 1912, *All-Story* published in one issue *Tarzan of the Apes*, which became a sensation, launching Burroughs into the forefront of popular fiction writers. The character of Tarzan is one of the most famous fictional figures in twentieth century literature; innumerable radio shows, television programs, comic strips, and motion pictures have featured Tarzan.

Burroughs insisted that he wrote primarily to earn money and not for artistic reasons, and his literary career encompasses dozens of fantasy and science fiction tales. Many of these works are among the most memorable of young adult readings, offering excitement and adventure, as well as marvelous lands and worlds.

Burroughs incorporated himself in 1923, controlling the copyrights to his books. He founded his own publishing company in 1931. The wealth made from the immense sales of his books was partly invested in land in Southern California; this land became the city of Tarzana, which still flourishes.

By the time of his death on March 19, 1950, he had made over ten million At the Earth's Core 4453 dollars (a huge sum in those days) and had written more than seventy books.

During the 1950s, the growing paperback book trade opened up even larger markets for Burroughs's writings, and in the 1960s they became staples of young adult literature, even though they still appealed to older readers.



Setting

Most of the action takes place in Pellucidar, Earth's inner world, which is a vast place with oceans and continents of its own. In this strange realm, Burroughs has unleashed his imagination to run free of the natural restrictions of Earthly lands such as Africa, where the setting, conditions, and creatures need to conform to what is known about the country. Burroughs makes excellent use of this imaginative freedom to populate Pellucidar with fantastic denizens—devising new species of intelligent beings, mixing prehistoric animals with creatures of his own invention, and conjuring up exotic locales to suit the needs of his plot. For instance, when David and Dian need some time together to forge their bonds of love, nearly impassible mountains appear where they can live together isolated from the events of the rest of the world.

The "buried city of Phutra" is a fine creation inhabited by slaves, guards, and the Mahars, winged reptilian beings. The open spaces, the streets, and the interiors of buildings are well described, creating the impression of a very ancient city built to meet the demands of its masters. The temple where the queen and other Mahars feed on humans is suitably primitive yet impressive, built out of rock, with a mysterious interior. The outdoor scenes may not be quite as richly developed as the indoor ones, but the vast plains of Pellucidar teem with wildlife and make excellent terrain for battles, and the mountain home of David and Dian is a wonderful place for a love affair to mature.

When he contemplates what he sees in this formidable world, Perry remarks that "We have been carried back a million years, David, to the childhood of a planet. . ." Because Pellucidar is so primitive Burroughs can endow it with people who regard David and Perry's scientific knowledge with awe, he can also dispense with the modern world's social restrictions, letting his main characters venture and love freely, without inhibition. Another significant aspect of Pellucidar is that "time is no factor where time does not exist." There are no seasonal rhythms to Pellucidar as there are on the outer Earth. The inner sun, appearing about three times as large as the one we see, always shines.

There is an inner moon, but it revolves around the inner sun in sync with the Earth's rotation on its axis, so the moon appears stationary to the people of Pellucidar, casting a permanent shadow over one part of the inner world. Thus the usual markers for the passage of time are absent, removing any normal time-frame from David's adventures. When he returns to the surface world he is surprised to learn that ten years have passed. This timelessness adds to the otherworldly tone of *At the Earth's Core*; Burroughs uses it to enhance Pellucidar as a land of dreams, a place where anything could happen anytime. The disorienting quality of this timelessness is enhanced by the unsettling perspectives of a world without a horizon; the world curves upward in all directions, so that even oceans seem to rise vertically. This disorienting perspective further emphasizes that Pellucidar is home to adventures far outside ordinary experience.



Social Sensitivity

Typical of an Edgar Rice Burroughs fantasy adventure, nudity abounds in *At the Earth's Core*, with women and men stripped to the waist. Shapely, athletic men and women in scanty attire is common in sword-and-sorcery adventures, and young adults who have read Burroughs's other novels or those of authors such as Robert E. Howard or L. Sprague de Camp are likely to be familiar with the customary bare-breasted women. The graceful sensuality of Dian and others is never the focus of the story but is instead just part of the setting—an essential feature of the background that makes Pellucidar an exotic, exciting place for heroic adventure.

Perhaps more worrisome are the scenes of torture and brutality, although they always promote one or more of the chief ideas of the novel.

The vivisection scene in which Mahars dissect conscious human beings reflects an issue that was very controversial in Burroughs's day and remains highly contentious even now—scientific experimentation on living animals. Burroughs's views on this subject matter could not be clearer—he has the hypocritical, vicious Mahars experimenting on the noble, beautiful humans who are innocent victims of ultimately pointless experiments. Other scenes are the stuff of nightmares, as when a sentient but helpless woman is slowly eaten alive by the Mahars. The description may give sensitive readers pause. The intent of the scene is to show that the Mahars are grossly depraved, so vile that they even violate their own law against eating humans. They are shown to be evil hypocrites, worthy of violent opposition.



Literary Qualities

At the Earth's Core is quintessential Edgar Rice Burroughs—it is a magnificent daydream in which the imagination is allowed to create great wonders and to shape cultures into forms that are pleasing to the eye and the libido.

As is always the case with Burroughs at his best, the descriptions are sharp and evoke the otherworldliness of the landscape: Had I still retained the suspicion that we were on Earth, the sight that met my eyes would quite entirely have banished it.

Emerging from the forest was a colossal beast which closely resembled a bear. It was fully as large as the largest elephant and with great forepaws armed with huge claws. Its nose, or snout, depended nearly a foot below its lower jaw, much after the manner of a rudimentary trunk. The giant body was covered by a coat of thick, shaggy hair.

Roaring horribly it came toward us at a ponderous, shuffling trot.

Burroughs uses his descriptive skills to conjure up animals and beings that captivate with their strangeness, and he uses them to transport his audience to another world that has its own rules, one full of surprises and thrills.

The structure of *At the Earth's Core*, is a sophisticated one that reflects Burroughs's literary skills. He uses a frame narrative to set up the main narrative. The frame consists of the first-person voice of an English adventurer who met David Innes in the Sahara; the frame narrator tells of how his account of David's adventures were met with contempt in London, but he swears that David was absolutely sincere and then tells the story in the first person from David's point of view. The frame ends the novel with the implication that David has either been murdered by Arabs or has returned to Pellucidar to rejoin Dian; this concluding part of the frame narrative emphasizes the mysteriousness of David and the possibility that his tale is true. It also leaves an opening for a sequel.

It is significant that someone other than David tells the story, a narrator who is trying to remember how David originally told him the events of his history. Burroughs has distanced his personal voice from the narrative by putting two layers of characters between his authorial presence and the novel's events. The story is David's— one character—as recalled and interpreted by an Englishman— another character. This has an interesting effect on how one may experience the novel. By making himself remote from the narrative, Burroughs creates an imaginative space where his readers can envision themselves as the main character; there is little sense that a godlike author is the dictator of events. On the other hand, the frame narrator plainly wants to have David's story make sense because he wants the story to be believed. The result is that the frame narrator is structuring the story so that its events may be understood; each event arises logically out of previous events. Thus the daydream quality of the tale of high adventure is tempered by a logical frame narrator who makes sure that the sequence of events makes sense to readers. This allows Burroughs to have his



narrative function in seemingly contradictory ways: The narrative retains its daydream tone implying anything can happen at any moment, and it avoids the randomness that daydreams may have by overlaying a sense of logical order through the frame narration of events.



Themes and Characters

The protagonist of *At the Earth's Core*, David Innes, spends ten years of his life, beginning at age nineteen or twenty, in Pellucidar. He is a serious man with a noble heart who had been diligently working in his late father's firm as a faithful son who wished to fulfill his beloved father's wishes for him. Even though heroic, he is quite bland, without much sense of humor or passions beyond his love for Dian.

This is typical of heroes of escapist fiction; authors often make such heroes indistinct, with few individualized characteristics so that their readers may imagine themselves as the hero and attribute their own personalities to him.

If David is bland, the characters around him are not. Perry, inventor of the machine that drills from the surface world into Pellucidar, is eccentric and full of ideas. Prone to wander into trouble, he needs David to keep him out of harm's way. His quick mind and experience as an engineer enable him to create devices like bows and arrows that can help the pair survive.

Perry's sheer enthusiasm for all that he sees adds much to the comic relief of *At the Earth's Core*.

On the other hand, a novel by Burroughs would be incomplete without a romantic interest to motivate the hero, making Dian at least as important as Perry. According to David, Pellucidar humans are usually well built, with the men and women strong and beautiful; they are also nearly always naked save for loin clothes. David has a multitude of lovely young women to attract his eye, but being a novel of high adventure, he accidentally binds himself to Dian, a princess, by gallantly protecting her. This causes her humiliation, because she must submit to David—a matter which David, somewhat dense about women, is at first unaware. The two spend much of the novel at arm's length, each unsure of the other, with Dian being aloof and irritable with him. This pattern should be a familiar one to readers, and its outcome is to be expected: The two eventually declare their love for each other. Although the pattern may be familiar, the love affair is played out in extraordinary circumstances; the love between Dian and David grows amidst slave quarters, mysterious Phutra, open plains, and high, isolated mountains, and it is constantly threatened by an assortment of exotic villains.

The villains of *At the Earth's Core* are an extraordinary group. The greatest villains are the Mahars, the pterodactyl-like rulers of Phutra and the dominant species of Pellucidar. They enslave other intelligent species and seem to take particular delight in tormenting humans. That their pretensions to superior intellect are shallow becomes plain as they focus on abusing those they rule. They are served by Sagoths, big apelike beings who are universally slow witted. Their loyalty to their Masters is one of the keys to Mahar rule; they enforce the Mahars' laws and guard the slaves. Although David is rhapsodic about how beautiful the humans of Pellucidar are and how superior they are to those humans of the outer Earth, insisting that "All they lack is opportunity. We have



opportunity, and little else," the humans provide some nasty villains. One is Hooja, the Sly One, who covets Dian and hates David for having thwarted one of his schemes. He is a menacing presence through most of the novel because his cleverness is needed to help David and others escape the Mahars even though his potential for treachery is well-known. Another evil human is The Ugly One, Jubal, who usurped tribal kingship from Dian's father and who intends to force Dian to marry him. A terrible injury has removed half his face, making him so repugnant that other maidens have committed suicide rather than submit to him. Whereas Hooja provides the threat of cleverness, Jubal provides the threat of brute force. David displays his heroic qualities by outsmarting Hooja and outfighting Jubal. Having defeated the evil human figures and having won the love of a proud, strong, and courageous woman, David chooses to confront the greatest evil of Pellucidar, the Mahars (why not just remain in the mountains and live happily ever after?).

The Mahars are oppressors, and David reminds us of their menace even during tranquil scenes. Their tyranny helps to bind the story elements together, making oppression the unifying theme of *At the Earth's Core*.

Thus, to develop the theme fully, David must eventually confront the Mahars in a contest between the forces of liberty and those of tyranny. To do this he uses the qualities he has displayed against other villains: cleverness when helping people escape Phutra, intelligence when dealing with Hooja, and physical strength when battling Jubal. He helps to unite the oppressed human tribes in the common goal of freedom, and he helps them create new weapons and devise better battle tactics for defeating the forces of the Mahars. Perhaps the only frustrating element in an otherwise neatly constructed adventure is that whether his efforts succeed or not is not fully revealed; he accidentally returns to the surface of the Earth, in the Sahara, before the theme of oppression is resolved.

Adaptations

A British motion picture *At the Earth's Core* was released in 1976. Its producers were Max J. Rosenberg, Milton Subotsky, and John Dark, and it was directed by Kevin Connor.

Doug McClure stars as David Innes, with Peter Cushing as Dr. Abner Perry. McClure is too old for the part—in the novel, David Innes begins his adventure when nineteen or twenty years old—but he may be the best part of the picture, playing a dashing, redoubtable hero. Cushing's polished performance also adds to the motion picture's appeal. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the picture verges on the amateurish. Only one special effect succeeds for a moment in creating the illusion of being in another world—the view of the city of the Mahars as seen from a cliff-side trail. Otherwise, the wires on the Mahars are visible, the giant monsters are in rubbery costumes, and the heavy haze around them makes it obvious that they or the actors were superimposed on one another. Caroline Monro playing Dian, adorns a halter rather than bare breasts—the only effort in the picture to hint at any of the garb described by Burroughs in the novel. In any case, the motion picture is sometimes fun, rarely suspenseful, and even by the standards of 1976, somewhat disappointing in execution.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the purpose of the scene of a woman being eaten alive?
2. Why is David surprised that ten years had passed while he was in Pellucidar?
3. Why do the Mahars not believe David's account of the surface of the Earth?
4. Why do the humans not overthrow the rule of the Mahars?
5. What are the different intelligent species in Pellucidar? What are their roles in the societies of Pellucidar?

4458 At the Earth's Core 6. Will the humans of Pellucidar build a free society without David?

Will the Mahars eventually win?

7. According to David, what qualities do Pellucidar's humans have that make them superior to the humans who live on the outer Earth surface?

Do you agree with David that the humans of Pellucidar are superior?

8. How valuable is Perry's scientific knowledge in Pellucidar? Could his knowledge be valuable in real-life adventures? Would you be able to apply the science you have learned in real life to your survival if you were in Pellucidar?

9. One reason that Burroughs ends *At the Earth's Core* the way he does is that he needs David to return to the surface of the Earth to tell his story.

What other reasons would he have for creating an enigmatic ending?

10. Why do David and Dian not live in the mountains, raise a family, be happy, and ignore the rest of Pellucidar?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who was John Cleves Symmes?

What was his hollow-Earth theory?

2. Write a history of the belief that the Earth is hollow, ending with modern advocates of that view. You might begin with Edmund Halley, the English astronomer, who in 1692 proposed that the Earth was hollow with a sun at its center.

3. What do most scientists say is actually beneath the surface of the Earth and at the Earth's core? What evidence do they cite to support their views? You may wish to make and include a diagram that illustrates the different geological layers which scientists say lie beneath the surface of our planet.

4. Pellucidar is a vast world, almost equal to the outer Earth in size, allowing for the invention of many different cultures and settings. Write a story that takes place in Pellucidar. Try your hand at making your own hero, telling how he or she copes with the many dangers of Pellucidar.

5. Compare Tarzan at the Earth's Core to At the Earth's Core. Which is the better novel? How successful is Burroughs at integrating Tarzan into the Pellucidar series?

6. Compare At the Earth's Core to Jules Verne's Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864). What traits do the novels have in common? Which is more scientific? In what ways? Which is more entertaining? Why?

7. Pellucidar exists without the contrasts of night and day and other signs of the passage of time. What does scientific research say about how human sleep patterns and biological cycles change when there is no night and day, no indicators for the passage of time? How would these changes affect how people live in Pellucidar?

How would they affect David's perception of the passage of time?

For Further Reference

Aldiss, Brian W. "From Barsoom to Beyond the Borderlands: Swords, Sorceries and Zitidars." In *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. New York: Avon Books, 1986 (2d ed.), pp. 155-173. Aldiss summarizes the contribution of Burroughs to science fiction and tries to explain why his work is science fiction yet is not science fiction. Accompanied by photographs of Burroughs.

Beetz, Kirk H. "Edgar Rice Burroughs." In *Research Guide to Biography and Criticism*. Vol. V. Edited by Walton Beacham, et al. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1991, pp.

108-114. Discusses the biographical and critical resources for researching Burroughs and his work.

Farmer, Philip Jose. "Burroughs, Edgar Rice." In *20th-century American Literature*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980, pp. 113-115. (Great Writers Student Library.) A bibliography of Burroughs's books along with a short critical introduction to the major themes of his work.

Gunn, James. *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*.

[New York]: A & W Visual Library, 1975, pp. 107-113. Discusses the successful career of Burroughs. Well illustrated with photographs.

Lupoff, Richard A. *Edgar Rice Burroughs: Master of Adventure*. New York: Ace, 1968. Provides information on Burroughs's sources and evaluations of his books.

Porges, Irwin. *Edgar Rice Burroughs: The Man Who Created Tarzan*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975. The standard biography. Exhaustively detailed.

Pringle, David and John Clute. "Burroughs, Edgar Rice." In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al.

New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995, pp. 177-179. An overview of Burroughs's career. Pringle and Clute say that "Pellucidar is perhaps the best of ERB's locales—a world without time where dinosaurs and beastmen roam circularly forever—and is a perfect setting for bloodthirsty romantic adventure."

Related Titles

David Innes never became the popular character that Tarzan and John Carter (of Mars) did, perhaps because he was too bland; but Pellucidar became a popular setting, and Burroughs wrote a short (for him) series of novels in which the action takes place on Earth's inner world. Even Tarzan makes an appearance (Tarzan at the Earth's Core, 1930), showing off what a real action hero can do to Pellucidar's villains. Crucial to the success of the books is that Pellucidar remains a wonderful world for daydreams, where any reader could become a brave hero or heroine who wins the love of a beautiful or handsome, semiclad princess or prince.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996