

The Big Time Short Guide

The Big Time by Fritz Leiber

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

The Big Time Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11

Characters

Greta Forzane, a hostess at the R&R center, is the novel's protagonist and narrator. Greta defines herself with economy in *The Big Time's* first paragraph: "Twenty-nine and a party girl would describe me." On the surface at least she is the ultimate good-time girl, attractive, witty, and full of energy, a bit of a cynic, a U.S.O. poster girl come to life. There is, however, a very good brain behind Greta's wit, as well as emotional endurance, and an enormous capacity for thankless hard work. More than just a dance partner or prostitute, she is a trained nurse and a talented therapist. She and the other people who work at the R&R center have been recruited from quite literally all space and time to take care of time-traveling soldiers on leave. Among her fellow works are Sidney Lessingham, the center's proprietor, an Elizabethan Englishman; Mark, an ancient Roman; Erich, a German soldier; and several aliens. Greta's humor, and the interplay between her and her compatriots, keep the novel moving but her gradually increasing understanding of the complex ways in which the horrors of war destroy or emotionally damage the men who fight serves to focus Leiber's pacifist message.

Social Concerns

The Big Time and the other stories in the Change War series concern an ongoing war fought by two time-traveling armies known only as the "Snakes" and the "Spiders." Their primary battle maneuvers consist of moving back and forth in time, changing history. Many of the short pieces in the series are simply good, relatively light-weight adventure stories, packed with odd historical tidbits and interesting timetravel paradoxes, but in The Big Time, which won a Hugo in 1961, Leiber has a more serious purpose.

The story, set almost entirely in one room, a Spider Rest and Recreation Center positioned outside the universe, consists essentially of a series of conversations, arguments, and fights between the soldiers and other personnel involved in the war. By juxtaposing the beliefs, experiences, and complaints of these people, not all of them human, Leiber is able to delineate a powerful antiwar message. The book's influence can clearly be seen on such later pacifist works as *The Forever War* (1974) by Joe Haldeman and *The Two of Them* (1978) by Joanna Russ.



Techniques

Leiber's technique in *The Big Time* is unusual. The son of actor parents, himself an experienced actor, Leiber chose to set his novel up very much like a well-made play. Greta Forzane serves as first-person interior narrator, commenting on and interacting with the other characters. Various soldiers enter, are individualized largely by their use of language, and exit, stage left or right. Confined as the plot is to one room, the action is relatively limited, but the crispness and intensity of the dialogue more than make up for what might otherwise be a shortcoming. The technique seems a bit artificial, but Leiber uses it with enormous skill.

Themes

Unlike most other examples of what might be called Time War science fiction — Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1952), Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (1955), and Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* series, including *Guardians of Time* (1960), come first to mind — Leiber's *The Big Time* and the other stories in the *Change War* series tend to deny that either side of the conflict is entirely or even partially in the right.

The rarely seen leaders of both the Spiders and the Snakes, Leiber's two opposing armies, are highly Machiavellian and perfectly capable of doing anything necessary to advance their own morally ambiguous ends. Greta's own Spiders, for example, have attempted to manipulate British and American politics to keep England and the United States out of World War II and thus guarantee a Nazi victory. The common soldiers on both sides are essentially ignorant of the goals for which they are fighting, goals which may not involve the betterment of humanity.



Key Questions

American science fiction has traditionally tended to view the world in black and white terms. There are almost always clearly defined good guys and bad guys. The protagonist of the typical science fiction novel is almost invariably on the side of right and, if at some point he discovers that he is not, he switches. In *The Big Time*, however, Leiber sets this idea on its head and any discussion of the novel might do well to center on the morally ambiguous position of both the Snakes and the Spiders.

1. A number of other authors, most notably Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Poul Anderson, Joanna Russ, and John Crowley have used the concept of a Time Patrol, a quasi-military secret organization that polices time travelers and fights guerilla campaigns to either prevent major changes from being made to historical events or to cause them. How exactly do Leiber's Snakes and Spiders do their work? You might want to compare how they operate to how similar organizations work in other time travel fiction.
2. In what way does Leiber use *The Big Time* to deliver an antiwar message? What exactly is that message?
3. It has been suggested that the theater is a major influence on *The Big Time*. What examples of theatrical conventions can you find in the novel?
4. Science-fiction novels tend to be rather large scale, taking entire solar systems or galaxies for their canvases, but *The Big Time* is a major exception to this tradition. What does Leiber gain by setting his entire novel in one room?
5. Greta Forzane is at first presented as a combination U.S.O. girl and prostitute, yet we quickly realize that there's much more to her than this. Beyond the obvious, what is Greta's role in the novel?
6. Read Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* or Joanna Russ's *The Two of Them* and compare it to Leiber's *The Big Time*.

To what extent is Leiber's novel clearly an influence on these later books?

7. What is the significance of the labels "Spiders" and "Snakes"? Why did Leiber choose names with negative connotations for both side in his time war?
8. Many time travel stories evoke the idea of time paradox as a major element. The most famous formulation of such a paradox involves the question of what would happen if someone went back in time and murdered their own grandfather. If they did this, it seems logical that they would immediately cease to exist, since, after all, with their grandfather dead, they would never have been born. If they were never born, however, then they would not be around to go back in time and commit the murder. Therefore, they would still exist, which would make it possible to go back in time and commit



murder. A never ending loop is formed. The Big Time does not use this exact paradox, but does it use any others?

9. The Big Time is considered Leiber's masterpiece, but he wrote a number of other stories set in the time of Change War universe. Check some of them out.

What do they add to the original novel?

Literary Precedents

Future war and time travel are two of the most common themes in science fiction, as is the idea of going back in time to change history. Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (1955) deals with a conflict somewhat similar to that of *The Big Time*, although without delving as deeply as Leiber's book does into the philosophic and moral consequences of such a conflict. Robert A. Heinlein's short stories "By His Bootstraps" (1941) and "All You Zombies —" (1959) play brilliantly with similar ideas, but again largely for the fun of the paradoxes involved.

Related Titles

The Big Time initially appeared in the March and April 1958 issues of Galaxy Science Fiction before seeing slightly revised book publication in 1961. Related short stories have appeared in a number of different magazines and book collections, including The Change War (1978) and the somewhat different Changewar (1983). Although some of the short stories in the serie are simply lightweight tales of adventure which incorporate ingenious time-travel paradoxes, a number of pieces stand out as particularly excellent. One of the best stories in the series is "No Great Magic," in which Greta Forzane, apparently suffering from amnesia, is working in the costume department of a New York theater company. As her memory gradually returns, however, she realizes that both the theater and its on-going production of Macbeth are involved in the war between the Spiders and the Snakes. In another fine story, "Knight to Move," Erich, one of the employees of the R&R center in The Big Time, finds himself involved in a chess game played on another planet in the distant future.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, 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, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994