

The Book of Skulls Short Guide

The Book of Skulls by Robert Silverberg

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Characters

Silverberg's quartet of young rebels are a group of ethnically varied students: Eli, the philosophic mind, is Jewish and introspective; Oliver, a Midwestern Protestant with athletic talent, is something of an extrovert but with hidden insecurities; Timothy is a spoiled rich youth; and Ned, the fourth, who longs to be an artist, is a homosexual and excessively aesthetic in his approach to life. These characterizations seem a deliberate effort to make the protagonists a cross section of American youth in the early 1970s. And, since all participate in a kind of unholy crime, all are more or less equally guilty of moral irresponsibility.

Their journey takes place during the Easter vacation, and their quest is surrounded with similar ironies, as the events of the book provide numerous ironic parallels to stories of the search for mystical enlightenment. Their journey is inspired by the discovery of the mysterious Book of Skulls, supposedly an ancient manuscript, much like the books of forbidden lore in H. P. Lovecraft's fiction.

In Arizona, they become neophytes in a secret order called the Brotherhood of the Skull, which claims to be a monastic group surviving from the days of lost Atlantis and to possess the secret of immortality. Yet the symbol of the order is a skull, and the monks require the deaths of two of the four seekers as the price for admitting the other two. As a result, Eli murders Timothy, and Ned plays on Oliver's weakness, his guilt over his latent homosexuality, to encourage Oliver to commit suicide. Yet the reward of the two successful seekers is a life that seems to be a living death in the Arizona wasteland. Clearly, the Brotherhood of the Skull, whether it possesses a secret means of maintaining life or not, is an order obsessed with death.

Hence the irony of Silverberg's novel becomes clear: The search after immortal life and forbidden knowledge is really based on the obsessive fear of death. As a result, such a quest is doomed to be monomaniac and preoccupied with self rather than life affirming. Moreover, in their willingness to kill to obtain the secret knowledge they long for, the protagonists show themselves to be guilty of hubris. Consequently, Silverberg's novel tends to dissect the darker side of the youth movement of the 1960s. Although Silverberg's other fiction frequently shows sympathy for the transcendental yearnings of 1960s romantics, *The Book of Skulls* describes four romantic questers who are selfish, arrogant, and egocentric.

Despite some sympathetic qualities, this quartet is not very likable, and it is hard for most readers to feel sympathy for them when they have made their choices and embraced their ironic fates.

Social Concerns

The Book of Skulls was written during an era when students were rejecting institutionalized education and "dropping out" of conventional social roles to search for mystical enlightenment and alternative life styles. In Robert Silverberg's novel, four students leave their New England university and undertake a journey across the United States to find their "Arizona Shangri-la," a mysterious monastic retreat where a secret order follows the rituals of the Book of Skulls, and seeks not only a higher consciousness but assurance of immortality.

The four students turn out to be an illassorted bunch, and despite their considerable intelligence, they are by no means thoroughly committed mystics. A Christian theologian might call them modern "gnostics," searching for a hidden wisdom unknown to the rest of the world.

They are also motivated by arrogance or hubris, for the most part, and generally lack the will to self-denial and abasement of the ego associated with authentic mystical quests. Their various egotisms emerge on the trip and in their experiences in Arizona as they undergo a trial to join the order.

No doubt the quest of Silverberg's protagonists would seem vain and fruitless to the orthodox believer in Judaism or Christianity, and it would seem absurd to readers who are guided by a commonsense empiricism. But the lure of the promise of immortality is a seductive attraction, and has proved to be a tragic siren song for followers of several cults in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Silverberg's novel describes a religious quest which turns out to be extremely ironic because its completion requires a ritual murder and because it leads to a life of asceticism which requires rejection of ordinary human concerns. Yet the novel provides some insight into the mentalities of student rebels in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it offers explanations as to how intelligent people may become committed to a cult promising some form of secret or esoteric salvation.

Techniques

In technical terms, *The Book of Skulls* is one of Silverberg's superior works, especially for the major period of 1968-1974.

Silverberg relies on four first person narrators to characterize his four student protagonists who have fled from the campus to seek enlightenment. The narrative voice of each is credibly developed and effectively employed to reveal the flaws of the protagonists. Since the four main characters come from different ethnic backgrounds and have different interests, developing and sustaining their narrative voices was a considerable achievement. (Silverberg, in fact, called it a "harrowing technical exercise," in a 1979 preface to a new reprint of the novel.)

As the different voices advance the story, the contrasting attitudes and beliefs of the questers create a sense of cumulative irony. Moreover, when a reader begins to perceive that one of the characters will become a sacrifice, Silverberg's tale creates a growing sense of horror and moral revulsion. This effect is enhanced by the images and allusions that make *The Book of Skulls* an ironic parody of successful religious quests.

Themes

This novel describes the quest of four rebellious college students to find arcane wisdom, an obscure cult, and the secret of immortality, all of which are supposedly located in a secret monastic order in the Arizona desert. Their journey, which starts with their departure from a New England college and proceeds across the North American continent to Arizona, is at times a vivid and almost hallucinatory experience; but it ends tragically with the suicide of one of the students and the murder of another by a third. In short, this novel is an ironic version of the theme of the quest for mystical enlightenment and transcendence. The search of the four oddly assorted students is in reality not an enriching and ennobling pursuit of religious experience, but instead a debased perversion of such a quest: Its main concern is the longing for assurance of personal immortality, through entry into a communion which requires one to sell one's soul (metaphorically, if not literally).



Key Questions

The Book of Skulls reflects the mood of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as do many of Silverberg's works written during this period. Perhaps it would be helpful for a discussion group to review the rise of New Age cults in the latter part of the twentieth century. Another historical matter to review would be the cult that centered on Charles Manson and the ritual murders they performed in 1969 on Sharon Tate and others. Just as the Manson group committed an appalling ritual murder, so Silverberg's seekers of immortality also become murderers.

A discussion might also focus on the romantic interest for students in rediscovering a forgotten or neglected sacred text, such as The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Student rebels in the latter half of the twentieth century have often constructed movements around texts neglected in their culture—often choosing books as different as works offering the quotations of Chairman Mao or new translations of Zen or Sufi wisdom. Given this historical basis, discussion groups could focus on the mysterious The Book of Skulls.

1. What is the substance or nature of the mysterious text known as The Book of Skulls, which inspires the four college students to drop out and go on their pilgrimage to Arizona?
2. The author of The Book of Skulls is well known as a science fiction writer, but is The Book of Skulls science fiction? What arguments support or refute placing it in that genre.
3. The main theme of The Book of Skulls is a flawed quest for immortality and its tragic results. Does Silverberg suggest that the quest for immortality is itself a foolish idea, or does the novel merely demonstrate that making immortality one's chief priority can corrupt the minds who pursue the goal relentlessly?
4. Of the four protagonists, Eli, Timothy, Ned, and Oliver, who becomes the most morally corrupt as a result of the quest? Justify your answer by discussing their actions throughout the book and in the murder of Timothy.
5. Did Silverberg lessen the interest of his novel by failing to include a female protagonist or two? Would not feminine seekers have been just as interested in obtaining immortality as Silverberg's male protagonists? Could not the mysterious monastic order in the novel have had a female branch?
6. Is the mysterious monastic order in Arizona really a group of immortal men who have lived since the days of Atlantis?

Or should we consider them a hoax, like many similar cults?



7. Since entry into the mysterious monastic order requires a death, isn't the quest a fundamentally ironic venture? Is Silverberg suggesting that immortality at such a cost might provide physical longevity but moral death?
8. Why does Oliver, apparently such a strong character, commit suicide? Is Oliver's death a result of his inability to face his homosexuality? Or does it result in part from shame over the fact that others know?
9. What is revealed about the four different protagonists in the course of the novel? Do any of them gain any redemptive self-knowledge in their quest, or do they find instead an escape from the self into a mindless oblivion?
10. Has Eli gained any enlightenment at the end of the novel? How should we interpret his narrative comments about losing an awareness of time?

Literary Precedents

As Silverberg has noted, many reviewers were confused by *The Book of Skulls* on its first appearance: Some mainstream reviewers saw it as science fiction, and some reviewers for science fiction magazines questioned whether the novel was actually science fiction or a simple story of betrayal and murder. Since Silverberg leaves the identity of the mysterious monks an ambiguous matter, there is no clear indication that the novel is either science fiction or fantasy. Yet the book is clearly in the tradition of the quest romance which has influenced both genres; it also owes much to the ironic vision of modernist literature, as it is represented in the works of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and other modernist writers. Certainly *The Book of Skulls* may be described as a novel that is constructed around a pattern of comprehensive irony, for the journey of the four seekers provides a richly ironic parody of the conventional quest for sanctification depicted in the lives of Christian saints. The novel also parodies the conventions of mystical quest, as they are presented in various devotional works and used in Silverberg's own fiction, notably *Downward to the Earth* (1971; see separate entry), *Nightwings* (1970), and *A Time of Changes* (1971). For instance, the novel employs a number of motifs common to the literature of religious quest: a sacred book of occult knowledge, a journey that tests the will of the seekers, a brotherhood of initiates who share a body of esoteric knowledge and partake of a mysterious communion, and so on.

In another respect, the novel is indebted to modernist and some mainstream popular fiction as well: *The Book of Skulls* makes use of a fairly sophisticated narrative technique. Each of the four protagonists narrates the story in alternating sections, in the mode employed by William Faulkner, for instance, in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and by numerous other authors of literary stature. The result of this multiple narrative is an enrichment of the possibilities of irony. Moreover, the characters help to establish a moral perspective for the novel by alluding to standards which they pretend to honor, yet clearly undercut by their choices and actions. To sum up, Silverberg in *The Book of Skulls* uses some of the conventional themes and subjects of science fiction but presents his story with the use of literary techniques acquired from a wide reading in twentieth-century literature.

Related Titles

Silverberg produced several novels dealing with the feelings and aspirations of counterculture youth of the late 1960s and early 1970s, most notably in the unsuccessful attempt at a romantic visionary statement, *Son of Man* (1971), and in *A Time of Changes* (1971), which romanticized the possibilities of a drug culture.

Neither of these has the satirical impact of *The Book of Skulls*, but his novella, *The Feast of Dionysus* (1973) treats from a tragic perspective the search for reality in a religious cult in the southwest desert.

Indirectly, other Silverberg novels of this period comment on some of the themes of *The Book of Skulls*. His celebrated novel, *Dying Inside* (1972) describes the reality of the contemporary world from which Silverberg's students are fleeing. The horror of recognizing the isolation of the self—the fate of the surviving protagonists in *The Book of Skulls*—is depicted in *The Man in the Maze* (1969); *Downward to the Earth* (1972) explores attempts to overcome isolated selfhood through a mysticism of nature.

A pair of more recent Silverberg novels comment on the quest for religious knowledge. *Tom O'Bedlam* (1985) describes the mind of a religious visionary who may be insane. By contrast, *The Face of the Waters* (1991) sympathetically describes a serious religious quest.

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