

The Bronze King Short Guide

The Bronze King by Suzy McKee Charnas

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Overview

Charnas's *The Bronze King* presents a unique blend of fantasy and realism.

Valentine Marsh's quest to recover the stolen statue of King Jagiello and quell the power of the evil kraken is set against the contemporary scene of New York City and is interwoven with social issues of today. Indeed, in *The Bronze King* fantasy is not presented as an escape from the normative world; instead, the problems of our world, such as pollution and vandalism, become the core of the battle for King Jagiello's return.

Valentine Marsh is a strong, engaging, and realistically drawn character who must face not only the evil kraken, but also an array of social and family problems. Especially through this character, Charnas presents the range of problems facing adolescents today—from family issues of divorce, single-parent families, parent-child relationships, and aging grandparents to social problems with peers and feelings of alienation. Charnas examines traditions of the fantasy genre and gender stereotypes as Valentine comes to realize her own strengths and to balance sensitivity with self-reliance in confronting any problems—fantastic or otherwise.

About the Author

Suzy McKee Charnas was born in New York City on October 22, 1939, to Robinson and Maxine McKee, who were both artists. She attended Barnard College, where she received a B.A. in 1961, and New York University, where in 1965 she received a master's degree in teaching. Indeed, she has spent much of her career teaching. She worked with the Peace Corps and taught history and English in Nigeria.

In the United States she has taught history and African studies in junior and senior high schools, and more recently she has served as an instructor at writing workshops. In 1968 she married Stephen Charnas, a lawyer, and now has two stepchildren, Charles and Joanna.

Charnas, who has described herself as "a late bloomer" because her first book was published when she was thirty-four, is well-known for her work in adult science fiction. She received the Nebula Award in 1980 for her short story, "The Unicorn Tapestry," and two years later was nominated for the same award for her novel *The Vampire Tapestry*. In addition to novels and short stories, she has written scripts for the stage; *The Bronze King* was her first novel for children. She has said that her idea for the story began with an image of "a wizard's clubhouse." As the story evolved, however, the actual role of Sorcery Hall was diminished.

Although Paavo, a wizard from Sorcery Hall, works closely with protagonist Valentine Marsh, this story largely focuses on the young Valentine's conflicts and battles with the evil forces of the kraken. In this novel, as in several others, Charnas reiterates images and issues of importance to her—particularly her interest in music and her analysis of sexism. Regarding gender stereotypes, Charnas has noted, "I try not to be either a purveyor or a victim of cultural distortions demeaning to my sex, and I have no patience with those who are proponents of those distortions."

Setting

The conflict in *The Bronze King* is set around New York City's Central Park.

When Valentine discovers that the huge bronze statue of King Jagiello in the Park has disappeared, it becomes her task—with the help of the musician-sorcerer Paavo and boy Joel Wechsler—to recover that statue.

Charnas exploits fears of city living in her depictions of New York as the scene of battle. Particularly, it is the New York City subway system which becomes the locus of evil. The subway is patrolled by a rough gang of boys called the "Princes of Darkness" and serves as the stronghold of the kraken, a shapeless, formless monster which rushes with the speed of subway trains through underground tunnels.

New York may be presented as "a dangerous place," but that setting also serves to emphasize Valentine's strength of character. When Valentine tells Paavo she is "not a fighter," and fears she cannot confront the kraken, he asks her, What about getting down to the store and back again with groceries and the change, in spite of the mean kids on the corner? . . . What about when those kids in school tried to take your allowance from you. . . This city, this world—they don't encourage survival except for tough people like you, Val.

In *The Bronze King*, then, setting is inextricably tied to both conflicts and characterizations. Like the quest she must complete, city life provides Valentine with struggles that develop her strength, insight, and independence. In this way, Charnas's use of New York City as a setting surpasses simple exploitation of city dangers for developing mood; here setting provides the conflicts that predicate Valentine's development of self-identity, and the issues of city living become the basis of Charnas's discussion of good and evil.

Social Sensitivity

In *The Bronze King*, Charnas covers a variety of personal, family, and social issues, ranging from conflicts at school, divorce, and aging grandparents to pollution and gender roles. While the range is ample, these concerns are deftly interwoven, especially through the characterization of Valentine Marsh.

Through her depiction of Valentine's fantastic battle with the kraken, Charnas presents problems of pollution, vandalism, and housing developments.

Through her realistic setting, Charnas explores Valentine's differing relationships with mother, grandmother, and classmates. Valentine's anger is at times vehement, yet offensive language is minimal and what may initially seem to be her callousness toward others can soon be recognized as her defensive reaction against loneliness. Charnas does not shy away from problems facing adolescents today. Even teen-age drug use is examined: Valentine assures her mother that she "doesn't do drugs," and Joel's admission that he does smoke marijuana, seems a reflection of his own insecurity.

Although Charnas uses some stereotypes—particularly of the city—in developing her setting and mood, she largely works against such stereotypes.

For example, Valentine's grandmother, whom many believe is verging on senility, becomes an integral part of the fight against the kraken. Although weakened by age, Granny Gran is a perceptive and powerful guide to Valentine and Paavo. Gender stereotypes are explored and criticized and ultimately even the stereotypes of the city are mitigated as Charnas presents a sympathetic scene of homeless women who spend the night at the New York Port Authority. In the depiction of all of these issues, it is especially the presentation of Valentine's firsthand experience and perspective that allows Charnas to explore such topics without becoming didactic.

Literary Qualities

Charnas uses first-person narrative to develop Valentine's character. By allowing Valentine to tell her own story, Charnas mitigates the protagonist's caustic tone of the subject matter and strengthens the immediacy of Valentine's voice and experiences. At times when she is narrating events, Valentine seems to be speaking directly to the reader. This allows her an informal, conversational narrative voice which is highly effective in realistically relating the emotions and conflicts of the protagonist.

The conflict between good and evil is developed through images of sound and setting. Until the climatic scene, the kraken is an amorphous enemy and Valentine detects its presence only by its foul odor and the sound of "a greedy, gabbling, chuckling noise, snarling and gnashing and coming closer." These chaotic and menacing sounds are countered by the music of violinists Paavo and Joel. Music becomes a symbol of power and magic, overcoming and filling up the emptiness created by the kraken. While the kraken's power comes from vandalism and pollution—in essence, uncreation—the power of violinists Paavo and Joel comes from their ability to create beautiful sounds.

Elements of setting, too, become important symbols. The subway, for example, comes to be the kraken's territory and its darkness emblematic of the kraken's evil. Like music that creates beauty to forestall chaotic sound, thoughtful attention to building and the environment creates beautiful and meaningful landscapes that counter the kraken's attempt to devour the world.

Indeed, the kraken, "a negative interstitial vortex with a big appetite," becomes a symbol of modern destruction of landmarks and environment. Its attempt to "eat up" the world symbolizes modern destruction of world resources.

By placing this battle within a realistic setting, Charnas both links and contrasts the two genres of fantasy and realism. The problems of modern society become the core of the kraken's power, and this battle, in turn, forces Valentine to deal with her own problems at home and in school. Charnas also points out the disparity between idealistic fictional resolutions and realistic problems. When a lawyer comes to discuss landlord problems with Valentine's mother, Valentine contrasts the arrival of this woman with what would have happened if "it had been a movie, [then] the lawyer would have been some handsome, upscale type for my mother to fall in love with. Then she'd get married, and all my weird problems would disappear"

By using the issues and setting of modern life, Charnas emphasizes the differences between this conflict and those most often depicted in fantasy novels. Valentine herself asks, Where were the crystal castles and flying dragons and crumbly old maps and terrific feasts and war horns whooping? No golden goblets of magical wine, no prophetic legends, no princesses in gorgeous embroidered cloaks. No stalwart prince to be our champion.

Indeed, in this story which places fantasy in a realistic setting, the only princes are the "Princes of Darkness," a street gang that tries to prevent Valentine from freeing Jagiello.



Themes and Characters

Protagonist Valentine Marsh is a street-smart fourteen-year-old whose callous attitude is often a veneer that covers her insecurity and her need for affection. She is the scapegoat for her classmates who tell her "you're dumb and you're ugly and you've got no friends and you dress like a reject from the Salvation Army." Alienated from schoolmates and largely forgotten by her father, Valentine finds that her mother is the only person she can talk to, but even that is often difficult for her.

Although Valentine inadvertently sets the adventure in motion when she wishes for the statue Jagiello to "come back and get things fixed the way they belong," Valentine discovers that despite the affection and support of her grandmother and the musician-sorcerer Paavo, she must resolve this quest herself. In this way, the quest to recover King Jagiello tests Valentine so that she must confront and overcome her own fears of isolation and her desperate need for attention and protection.

Valentine's anger, fear, jealousies, and concerns are realistically portrayed. She matures as she works with Paavo, but her development is not a smooth one. Her intermittent resurgences of anger and resentment and her sometimes quick switches in temperament are realistic depictions of a girl struggling through adolescence.

Her relationship with her mother is particularly well drawn, and while Valentine cares deeply for her mother, their relationship includes an honest spectrum of emotions from love to fierce anger.

Other characters are also well drawn, particularly in their interactions with Valentine. Paavo, the musician from Sorcery Hall, is a strong and gentle character who accepts Valentine for herself and allows her to express love.

Valentine's counterpart in this quest, the young aspiring violinist Joel Wechsler, must confront some of the same issues as Valentine, especially his sense of insecurity and need for approval.

Particularly through the depiction of the adults in this novel, Valentine's mother, grandmother, and Paavo, Charnas presents a world in which the need for independence is balanced by the support offered through others' love and understanding.

Gender roles and expectations are an important issue in *The Bronze King*.

Valentine's mother, a "smart, ambitious woman," cautions her daughter "to hide [her] brains so as not to scare away the boys." Valentine is critical of her mother's hope to find "some nice guy to look after [them]," and Valentine's struggles with the kraken prove the need for self-reliance. Charnas's revision of traditional gender roles and stereotypes is apparent when Joel remains imprisoned by the kraken and Valentine must act to free Jagiello herself. Their later argument presents clashing views of expected gender roles: "You had no right!" Joel yells.



"You're the girl, you're the one who should have been stuck in the subway.

Who ever heard of a girl fighting a monster? It isn't fair!"

Valentine shouts back, I'm supposed to leave all the serious, exciting stuff for you to do because you're a boy? Hey, did you ever hear of such a thing as a human being . . . I'm one of them, though I happen to be a female-type human being. That means I do things for myself like anybody else, even if they happen to be dangerous things. Which I'd better be able to do, too, because there isn't always going to be some guy around to take care of it for me

Charnas's other major concern—for the environment—is made clear in her depiction of evil. Particularly, it is the indiscriminate tearing down of buildings and landmarks that has increased the kraken's hold. Paavo explains that "when people get into this mechanistic stage you're in right now, they start moving things, tearing them down, breaking them to pieces to make room for something new without knowing what they're doing." Charnas uses the issue of renovations and building developments to argue for rebuilding based on reason and aesthetics, not greed. "If people paid attention to something besides quick bucks," Paavo explains, "they'd have a sense of how to put up some new things to balance the loss of something old . . . As a rule, there's always power in anything that's been made with enough love to put beauty in it. New or old, that's the same."

Pollution, too, figures in the kraken's power. The dire consequences of pollution are made apparent in the climatic scene when the kraken assumes the shape of a huge monster made of garbage: "It had teeth . . . spokes of bicycle wheels, pieces of wire and jaggedy rods from crates, junk that people had thrown into the lake over the years."

In *The Bronze King*, then, the battle against the kraken has personal and social implications. Valentine notes that her struggle is unlike those in the fantasy stories she has read. Instead of princes coming to save her, Valentine finds that to confront the kraken, she must overcome her fears and act on her own. This entails a change in stereotypical gender roles so that Valentine is active and not passively protected by a male character. By implication, the ultimate defeat of the kraken will also entail the cooperation of society itself—for only when the environment is no longer spoiled will the kraken finally lose its power.



Topics for Discussion

1. How has her mother's divorce and attitudes about men affected Valentine's view of boys and gender roles?
2. How does her time with Paavo change Valentine?
3. At the close of many fantasy-quest stories, the protagonist's initial problems are usually resolved. What issues are or are not resolved for Valentine by the end of the book?
4. How is "hero" defined in *The Bronze King*? What traditional attributes of a hero are praised and which are criticized?
5. How does Valentine's battle with the kraken help her to deal with problems in her own life? Especially examine what characteristics she must develop to confront the kraken and what she learns about herself and others throughout this battle.
6. Describe the kraken. What are the powers of this evil force? Also, how does Charnas describe this monster? Is her depiction an effective one?
7. Granny Gran explains that "most true musicians would be candidates for some level or other of Sorcery Hall if they knew about it." What are the powers of music—in terms of magic and personal development—in this book?

Why is music so powerful?
8. Valentine's relationship with her mother is a tumultuous one. What are some of Valentine's concerns and feelings about her mother? How realistically are they portrayed? Are they ultimately resolved? How would you define their relationship at the end?
9. Describe Granny Gran. How important is she to the development of plot and characterization? What does her presence add to the story?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Examine Charnas's depiction of city life. In what ways does she exploit fears of the city? How is she sympathetic or realistic in her descriptions? Is the city an apt background for such a fantasy? Why?

2. Examine Joel Wechsler's character.

How does he serve as a foil for Valentine? What conflicts does he face and how does he come to resolve them?

3. Valentine contrasts her fantastic adventures with those described by Tolkien. Read *The Hobbit* (1937) by Tolkien, or another book categorized as "high fantasy." What elements are present in a novel of high fantasy? How is *The Bronze King* similar to or different from that genre?

4. Choose one of the issues presented in this novel and show how it is defined and developed through characters, images, or plot. Examples of such issues include gender stereotypes, pollution, adolescence, and aging grandparents.

5. Paavo tells Valentine, "One thing about magic, it takes it out of you. . . .

It doesn't come for free." Develop a definition of magic in *The Bronze King* especially by examining the powers, responsibilities, and costs of magic.

For Further Reference

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Harpers 279 (October 1989): 45-53. A discussion by four authors, including Charnas, about elements of horror stories. Charnas points out that for her, sound rather than visual imagery creates more frightening mood in stories.

Review. *Publishers Weekly* 228 (October 25, 1985): 66. The review summarizes the plot and recommends the novel, especially based on its presentation of city life.

"Suzy McKee Charnas." In *Something about the Author*. Vol. 61. Edited by Anne Commire. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 44-46. This citation includes quotations from Charnas about her interests and her writings.

Related Titles

The Bronze King is the first of a trilogy for young adults featuring Valentine Marsh. As in the first novel, the two subsequent books combine family issues and fantastic battles. In *The Silver Glove*, Granny Gran runs away from the nursing home to avoid capture by an evil wizard. That wizard soon arrives at Valentine's school, posing as a psychologist, and begins to date Valentine's divorced mother. It is up to Valentine to defeat the wizard and reestablish her family. In the third book, *The Golden Thread*, amid the background of her grandmother's stroke and the arrival of a mysterious girl, Bosanka, Valentine must aid her friend Joel Wechsler who has been studying music but suddenly discovers that he is no longer able to play the violin. Particularly because of such recurring images and issues as music and family concerns, this trilogy featuring Valentine Marsh aptly forms a cohesive whole.



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