

# Bug Jack Barron Short Guide

## Bug Jack Barron by Norman Spinrad

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# Characters

Bug Jack Barron is the tale of a muckraking talk show host who takes on a powerful, unscrupulous entrepreneur and gets more trouble than he bargained for. It is not much of a novel of character. The vivid images in the stream-of-consciousness soliloquies do not reveal character as much as they set mood and milieu. We do learn that Bennie Howards is a thoroughly nasty man, willing to do anything to attain his goals. Lucas Greene both enjoys his perks and power as the first black governor of Mississippi, and worries that he has sold out to the system by the very process of gaining power.

Other secondary characters merely act out their roles in the plot.

Only Jack Barron and his ex-wife Sara come across as more complex people. Their values were shaped in the counterculture of late 1960s Berkeley, which they both look back to as a golden age in their lives. As Jack moved from defying the system to his call-in show slot, he tasted real power.

Unable to resist, he hates himself for succumbing to its lure. Along the way, Sara found herself unable to live with the new, success-hungry Jack, and left him.

Has Jack sold out, as Sara says? He thinks he has. It is true that Jack Barron uses unsavory tricks to bug his powerful adversaries. He is master of the spin long before the term spin meister was invented in real life. He revels in shaping public opinion, in the sheer power this gives him, and in the perks that go along with it, like uncomplicated nights with his choice of beautiful women. When he agrees to front for Howards's Freezer Monopoly campaign, it would seem his corruption is complete.

And yet, even as he accepts an immortality contract, Barron thinks he can outwit Howards. Even as the parade of women pass through his apartment, the face he sees is always Sara's.

And when he bugs the powerful, it is usually on behalf of some ordinary person.

Sara Westerfield has gone back to her counterculture roots. She creates "kinesthop interior effects" and lives in the Village. But in living on the fringe, she has also come to realize that her hippie friends, who only talk social change and live in a drug fog, may be the real cop-outs. When Howards bribes her to go back to Jack she jumps at the chance. She has never outgrown her love for him either and is sure that once they reunite, they can face anything the world — and specifically Bennie Howards — throws at them.

By the book's end it is clear that Jack will always enjoy managing the levers of power through the media. But he has learned a bitter lesson about its limits, and his own. As for Sara, she is both a woman of complex, independent values, and a somewhat idealized "dream girl."

# Social Concerns

Critics have praised Bug Jack Barron for its sharp insights into media shaping of politics and public opinion. It reflects television's growing influence in the decade it was written, a decade that opened with the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates. But the novel also uncannily predicted some things to come. So many major events in the 1992 presidential election occurred on Larry King's prime-time program that it was compared to Jack Barron's. Televised talk shows and call-in radio forums flourish — and sometimes change political and business fortunes — long after this novel first focused on them.

The book also pays more than passing attention to television methods.

Through split screens, zoom shots, camera angles, and other techniques, Barron is able to manipulate his subjects' impact on viewers. These details, along with his loaded questions, provide a primer in how to manage media images.

The political situation in Bug Jack Barron is a forecast from the vantage point of the 1960s. The novel is set in the mid or late 1980s. A corrupt Democratic party is in power nationally.

Republicans are a definite minority party, but they hold some statehouses and are still important as the party of the wealthy. A new left-wing Social Justice party has gained some electoral clout and its officials are now falling into the inexorable trap of losing their idealism to the demands of power. In a subplot which ties into the main action, Barron and his friend Lucas Greene, the Social Justice governor of Mississippi, negotiate with Republicans to form a coalition ticket for the next national election.

The picture of politics is cynical, and events in the real world did not fall out at all like those in the novel. The latter is a hazard of science fiction with a near future setting, of course — developments are likely to be disproven within the lifetime of the author and the readers! Actually Spinrad got more things right here than most such books do. The importance of media image to elections is emphasized, and Reagan is cited as a prime example, long before he became President. The book also recognizes the rising importance of black politicians.

Bioethics is another social issue examined by the book. The plot centers on the Human Immortality Foundation and its activities. The Foundation freezes and stores human bodies for later resuscitation — but only the bodies of those who can afford to sign over assets of at least \$150,000. The Foundation's owner, Bennie Howards, is pushing for a law giving it a monopoly on this business. As the novel opens, Jack Barron looks into a charge of racism in selling freezer contracts. But racism or not, after-death freezing is only available to those with considerable wealth.

Barron's investigation questions the morality of letting the market or political influence make life and death decisions.

As the plot thickens, he learns that freezing is not all the Foundation does.

Howards shocks and tantalizes Jack with the prospect of real immortality — a rejuvenated body immune to the normal ravages of age. When, near the story's climax, Jack learns what this procedure involves, the stakes are raised even higher. Howards's ghoulish use of kidnapped children as organ "donors" raises a host of further questions. Organ transplants, the use of fetal tissue, and even bigger issues like the relative value our society assigns to rich white men and to poor black children, rear their inconvenient heads.

Such problems have only multiplied in the years after the novel was first published. Bug Jack Barron seems eerily prophetic.



## Techniques

As an innovative work, *Bug Jack* by Barron stirred controversy beyond that over its dirty words. Exploring ideas and future scenarios has always been central to science fiction, but prior to the 1960s it almost always used a direct and even pedestrian style. The New Wave opened the genre up to stylistic experiments as well. In this novel, Spinrad uses collages of fast-moving images to reflect the world his characters live in, a world shaped in major ways by television. Interspersed with conventional narration and dialogue, they replace the usual internal monologues. Spinrad says he wrote the novel "insideout," presenting in words what would best evoke what he wanted to happen inside the reader's mind. His intention was to let the images in some paragraphs pile up, hitting the reader with a simultaneous blur or impact more akin to watching TV than to reading linear prose.

Whether or not he succeeds may depend upon the perceptual style of the individual reader. Regardless, some stunning effects come out of the pileup of images. Jack goes from sweet lust to repulsion when he and Sara make love after their operations; the two paragraphs in which this happens are a real tour de force. And when Sara jumps from their balcony, her last thoughts cry across the city to Jack like a crazy replay of all their past dreams.

# Themes

Despite its concentration on political and media tactics, Bug Jack Barron is not really about these subjects. Many critics have missed this point. When the book was first published, it created a storm of controversy. Those reviews which did not simply deplore its four letter words and explicit sex — then rare in science fiction — praised it for its treatment of media techniques. With the exception of the bioethics issue, the deeper themes are more hidden in the novel's structure. Perhaps because of this, perhaps because they are more upbeat than savage, or perhaps because they contradict Spinrad's reputation as one of science fiction's bad boys, they have been relatively ignored.

The most obvious theme is the price of immortality. In the Foundation's procedure, it comes at the cost of another human life. Jack Barron discovers this under the grimmest of circumstances, when he is already, unwittingly, implicated in the scheme. His prior reasoning — "Who wouldn't grab the chance to be immortal?" — is thus turned upside down. Before the book is over he has paid an additional price: the suicide of his ex-wife Sara, whom he still loves. Behind these events in the novel is the suggestion that immortality, or any near equivalent, might always exact an inordinate price.

But the other interwoven themes celebrate things most of us want to believe in: the power of truth-telling, the power of democracy, the power of love. And more than coincidentally, the power of the media. The last ultimately turns out to be positive, as Barron uses his TV show to reveal the shocking facts about Howards's Foundation. This crushes Howards's power and realigns American politics. The next election may see a less corrupt administration voted into office. But more significantly, Jack appeals to his audience to believe him about the way he was deceived into taking responsibility for his immortality operation. And they do. Despite lies and constant "spins," people will ultimately sort out truth from falsehood, if they get the chance to hear it. This defense of the First Amendment echoes Thomas Jefferson's argument. It is as applicable in the electronic age as it was two centuries ago.

The power of love almost traps both Jack and Sara. Once they discover that they have bought immortality at the price of children's lives, even their lovemaking turns to ashes. Each would expose Howards and risk a murder charge individually, but does not want to put the other in such jeopardy. Sara is so distraught that she takes acid and then jumps from their balcony, knowing this will free Jack to tell the truth.

The love story is as moving in its own way as any other part of the book. The sacrifices Jack and Sara make for each other were seldom noticed in the reviews which focus on style, taste, and media implications of the work.



## Key Questions

Bug Jack Barron is among the few novels with a near-future setting where it hardly matters that the author guessed wrong on details, because its larger issues are still important. Television is still a prime mover and shaper of public opinion and politics. We still struggle with decisions about life and death, made harder by technology's new promises. Not a few of us also recognize its characters' dilemmas. Can personal values be kept while working for a corrupt system? Even while holding power in it? Can one make progress, in fact, only by working within the system for change? Can an old love be revived?

There is much material in the novel for rewarding discussion. Whether it starts out considering the public issues or the individual ones, a group is likely to touch on both eventually.

1. Jack Barron and Lucas Greene's Social Justice party are willing to make a deal with the Republicans, even though all they have in common is opposition to Howard's Freezer Monopoly and the corrupt Democratic administration. Is this plausible? Justifiable? How would it be likely to work out in real life?

2. Has Jack Barron sold out his youthful values?

3. Barron uses shocking, intrusive methods, like filming a dying old man, to manipulate his viewers' emotions.

He also uses virtually every trick of video technique to show those he questions as sympathetic or untrustworthy, whichever he wants. What actual shows use similar tricks? Can you spot them when they do?

4. Would the kind of questioning Barron did be possible today? If not, is it because the media or individual anchors lack sufficient clout? Lack the technology? Other factors?

5. The immortality treatment Howard developed is still a long way off.

If it ever becomes possible to get it — or even a vastly increased life span — at the cost of another's life, will an underground spring up to provide it?

Are there circumstances under which it might be offered openly?

6. On the other hand we now can extend life through organ transplants and fetal tissue injections. Do the issues raised by the Human Immortality Foundation also apply here? Is it valid to make any life and death decisions on the basis of ability to pay? Is it inevitable even when unethical?

7. In many ways Sara Westerfield is too naive for the task Howard gives her when she goes back to Jack. Do you think he knows this? Is he just trying to set her up as a hostage?





8. If they had not been manipulated by Howards, do you think Jack and Sara would have ever reunited?

9. Spinrad had some trouble getting Bug Jack Barron published; a formerly supportive editor pronounced it unpublishable. On the other hand, when he took it to the Milford Conference, a writers' workshop, for critiquing, everyone there understood what he was trying to do. What do you think accounts for these ups and downs?

## Literary Precedents

Bug Jack Barron does not fit within any subgenre, except for falling in the general category of extrapolatory science fiction. There are precedents for some of its various elements, though.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was the first novel noted for using stream-of-consciousness techniques. Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* (1956) examines immortality from another angle. Later, John Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* (1975) also presented a future dominated by media images.

Spinrad says his technique in *Bug Jack Barron* was inspired by McLuhan's theories in *Understanding Media* (1964).

The milieu of the 1960s, both the general counterculture influences and the ferment the New Wave brought to science fiction writers — still a relatively small circle in this era — are also obvious in the book.

## Related Titles

Spinrad dislikes most "sequel" and "series" novels and has seldom written them. Only in its themes, motifs, and willingness to experiment (and shock) does this novel resemble others by the author. Politics, advanced media manipulation, sex, and immortality are thematic elements which recur frequently in his novels.

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