Camber of Culdi Short Guide

Camber of Culdi by Katherine Kurtz

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Characters

The central character of Camber of Culdi is Camber himself. It is not surprising that Camber becomes the center of legend and is even canonized, for Kurtz gives him every advantage: He is wise, gentle, stern, a master politician, a doughty fighter, a kind father, good master, intellectual giant, and possessor of the greatest and most fluent power in Gwynned. For all this, however, Camber still emerges as human and believable. He is subject to doubts and to grief, and he exhibits a dry sense of humor. In other words, Camber is not simply set forth as paragon: Camber lives, acts, and feels.

Kurtz uses Camber in several ways. He is the sounding board for other characters. He and Joram are meant to act out the classic confrontation of father and son (although this is stated more than shown). Camber and Alister Cullen exemplify the man of intellect and the man of action, and the ways they can overlap.

Camber and Cinhil are contrasting types of idealists: Camber the pragmatic, able to act on his idealism; and Cinhil, the dreamer, preferring his ideal world to remain just out of reach.

Perhaps Camber's most interesting relationship is with Brother Benedict, born Cinhil Haldane, rightful heir to Gwynned's throne, and yanked from the peaceful anonymity of his cloister to take that throne whether he wills it or not.

The two men in many ways mirror each other. Both have a real vocation. Camber, in the court of the books, will go from the active man of the world to become leader of a religious order and finally bishop. Cinhil, on the other hand, moves oppositely, from monk to king, from God to world. And yet neither ever fully leaves behind his original bent. Camber remains politically active, and Cinhil mourns his lost priesthood to the detriment of his kingdom and his family.

Camber, a man born to lead and to shoulder responsibility, must retreat more and more, eventually surrendering even his personal identity to further the cause of the kingdom. Cinhil, although of the royal blood, never really accepts his kingship or his responsibilities as king, although he performs such duties as are required of him.

Cinhil is one of the most complex figures in the novel. The other characters decide upon their course of action and then follow it willingly and with determination. Cinhil is never given the luxury of choosing his own way, and so his doubts and fears and even his very human selfishness and anger are understandable.

When he manages to act with dignity or compassion for another, one senses he has gained a real triumph, even though he invariably relapses immediately.

Each of the other characters in Camber of Culdi is masterfully drawn, so that despite the crowded canvas no character is ever confused with another. Each is a brightly-delineated individual.

Oddly enough, however, Kurtz seems to be uneasy about working with women and romance. Her men are individualistic, drawn by a master hand, but her women are little more than one-dimensional figures. Ariella of the Camber series can hardly be distinguished from Charissa of the Deryni books. Bronwyn and Megan are virtually interchangeable even though their situations are vastly different. Even Evaine, the most fully-drawn, seems to be but a more evolved version of Richenda, Morgan's love-interest from the Deryni trilogy. For the most part, Kurtz's female characters are mere plot contrivances and lack the lifelike richness of her male characters.

Social Concerns

Katherine Kurtz's Deryni books reflect a number of trends which had their roots in the late 1970s: loss of faith in government, a growing distrust of science and technology, an increased sense of isolation and loneliness, and an accompanying feeling that the actions of one person were of little use in a society dominated by giant conglomerates and bureaucratic government. Many young people wished to go "back to the land"—to rediscover unpolluted nature and feelings of self-sufficiency. Some also moved from the Eastern mysticism of the 1960s to nature religions.

In popular literature, interest in science fiction, with its technological orientation and "can-do" spirit, fell off, shifting instead to the genre of fantasy, which presents a potent alternative to the complicated modern world. It is a reaching back for an old, pre-Christian time of mystery, magic, individual worth, and black-andwhite simplicity.

Camber of Culdi presents its readers with a beguiling place of well-ordered kingdoms and gracefully-described royal courts in a medieval, feudal-based society.

More importantly, it follows a small group of people with the ability to effect a change for the good, although not without considerable sacrifice. There is also in the Camber trilogy a depiction of a particular type of magic. Focused through the mind of a gifted person, it is summoned by meticulously drawn ritual.

These gifted people, the Deryni, could also communicate directly from mind to mind, sharing thoughts, feelings, and memories.

Thus, Camber of Culdi, and indeed all of Kurtz's Deryni books, touched upon three important aspects of the time: She showed individuals changing their society for the better by their own efforts. She presented a picture of affection, cooperation, and communication among her heroes. And since magic, like flying, is one of man's oldest dreams, she touched on an ancient chord of response with her depiction of Deryni magic.

Techniques

One of Kurtz's gifts as a writer is her ability to people her novels with attractive, believable characters. In Camber of Culdi, for example, she sketches Camber's son Joram brilliantly in a neat, precise paragraph, and thereafter is faithful and consistent in her depiction of him. There are few, if any, inconsistencies in her characters. They are as firmly themselves as any "real" person.

Kurtz then turns this ability to the creation of tension by not guaranteeing the lives of these characters. Camber's eldest son Cathan is murdered in Camber of Culdi. The gruff, wise Alister Cullen is killed early in Saint Camber (1978). And Rhys Thuryn, one of the series' most sympathetic characters, dies in Camber the Heretic (1981). Although each death is essential to the plot, the reader is nevertheless shocked and grieved by them.

It is also of interest to note the steady maturation of Kurtz's style. In the first Deryni trilogy, her choice of words is sometimes unfortunate. At one point, for example, the villain, Charissa, "flounces" from a room. Kurtz also tended toward stereotyping, such as Charissa's "Lady of the Veils" pose and the renegade Morgan's habit of wearing black to reflect and enhance his unsavory reputation as a half-Deryni. The climactic magic duel is replete with lightning bolts shooting from fingertips, monstrous shape-changing, and sing-song magic verses.

In Camber of Culdi, the difference is immediately noticeable. The stereotypes of the magic duel are replaced by the "high" magic practiced by Camber and his family and associates. More importantly, Kurtz enhances her natural elegance of style with a more thoughtful choice of words. This naturally adds power to her characterizations as well.

Themes

Within a framework of politics and religion, Kurtz takes as her theme the idea of social responsibility and the price it sometimes exacts. The king, Imre, is dethroned because he is capricious, unjust, and dangerous to cross: He orders the destruction of entire villages and religious orders, murders his best friend, and commits incest with his sister.

Yet Camber, undeniably on the side of justice and order, is himself the instigator of a series of questionable acts: a kidnapping, the coercion of a harmless and religious monk, a forced marriage, the dethroning of an annointed king, and ultimately, the vast deception entailed by the assumption of another man's identity.

All this he does for the good of the kingdom of Gwynned: the end, Kurtz seems to say, justifies the means.

Nevertheless, in the long run it is perhaps Imre who gets off the most easily.

He loses his kingdom and his life, and that in short order. Camber, in his fight to restore a just rule to the kingdom, loses his lands and tide and his eldest son.

He also suffers the ultimate loss, that of his own identity, first by assuming the identity of another and later by having the very mention of his name declared heretical during the anti-Deryni sentiment that sweeps the kingdom.

But this is a price Camber is willing to pay if justice can be established. Those who conspire with him are just as willing to pay a high price, believing that the good of the majority outweighs individual benefit. Camber speaks often of social responsibility to Cinhil during the long weeks of teaching the priest to be a prince, as do Joram, Alister, and Evaine.

For Camber, and for his family and friends, the biggest sin is to do nothing in the face of oppression and injustice.

Key Questions

Camber of Culdi has three merits which seem to make it stand out from the crowd of fantasy novels: It features exceptional characterizations, a graceful prose style, and political commentary.

This last aspect of the novel may be the best place to start a discussion of the novel. Kurtz seems to invite comparisons between the situations in her novel and contemporary America. She further presents a story of men whose choices about what society should be stem from their moral consciences. That is, morality underlies their choices, and they act for the good of society because not to act would be morally wrong. The implication is that our own choices in modern society should stem from our knowledge of good and evil and that we should take action to shape society out of a moral imperative.

Is this a rational approach to vast social problems such as those portrayed in Camber of Culdi and those we experience in modern America?

Another issue is Kurtz's handling of male and female characters. Are the female characterizations notably inferior to those of the males? What might this tell of Kurtz's aims in writing Camber of Culdi?

Should she take a militant feminist approach such as Ursula Le Guin sometimes takes in her fantasy novels? How would the novel work if females held the major roles instead of males? The possibilities for exploration are great. In creating a credible fantasy world and populating it with compelling characters, Kurtz offers us a chance to explore issues of power and social justice, as well as the roles of men and women as heroes, villains, and victims.

1. Just how good is Kurtz's prose style?

How does it contribute to the effect the book has on you?

2. In Camber of Culdi, Kurtz confronts some nettlesome religious issues. Her dual switch of one character from religion to politics and another from politics to religion seems to invite thought about religion and its role in government as well as society at large. What conclusions do her characters draw about religion? How does it fit into government? Is its role positive or negative?

3. Kurtz may be taking a typically American approach to religion and government—that the two do not mix well.

Indeed, the mixing seems to lead to persecution. Is Camber of Culdi representative of a clearly American point of view on morality and ethical issues?

4. What does the novel suggest is the individual person's proper response to social and governmental evils? Is this practical?

5. Is Camber too close to being idealized to serve as a good example of how people should respond to challenges?

Who in the novel would be a better example?

6. Does Camber commit evil acts in order to do good? Can good possibly come out of evil? What do you think of his subterfuges? Are they justifiable?

7. Why put a man on the throne who does not want to be there? Cinhil Haldane seems to be a bad choice for kingship. Could someone else have taken his place? Can one reasonably expect justice from such an unhappy man?

Literary Precedents

Like nearly every other modern writer of fantasy, Kurtz owes a debt to J. R. R. Tolkien. She has created an alternate Earth on which to stage her story, and she adds authenticity to its history by beginning each chapter with a quotation from the Gwynned Bible. Both these things are drawn from the Tolkien model.

Kurtz's books are curiously political.

One seldom finds such an emphasis on politics within a work of fantasy, but a precedent may be seen in Frank Herbert's Dune books, especially the first.

Dune (1965; see separate entry) seethes with the political jockeying of the Bene Gesserit, the Spacer's Guild, and the two rival Houses of Atriedes and Harkonnen.

If the Eleven Kingdoms are an alternate Earth, one could call its pervasive religion an "alternate Catholicism." Many of the major characters are monks or priests. Camber himself is ordained when he takes on Alister Cullen's identity. (It might be noted here that Kurtz's apparent discomfort in working with women characters is reflected in a lack of mention of religious orders for them.) And in the Camber books, the rituals used for working magic, while not part and parcel of the Church, are Church-oriented and call upon the archangels and the Virgin for protection, assistance, and power. At least one of the religious orders, the Gabrillites, is famous for its arcane learning. Among the more ordinary inhabitants of Gwynned, people celebrate mass and attend confession.

This emphasis on the Christian religion is unusual. In fantasy, the Church seldom appears as an active entity. It is more usual to find Christianity presented as allegory, as in the Narnia and Perelandra books of C. S. Lewis.

Related Titles

Camber of Culdi is the first book of Kurtz's second trilogy of Deryni books.

The first trilogy is comprised of Deryni Rising (1970),Deryni Checkmate (1971), and High Deryni (1973). This trilogy deals with fourteen-year-old King Kelson Haldane, descendent of the Cinhil of the Camber books, his advisor Alaric Morgan, and Morgan's cousin, Duncan McLain, and their battle to hold the kingship for Kelson both against the predations of Charissa and against the anti-Deryni oppression that has existed over the intervening two hundred years.

In the Deryni trilogy, Kurtz mentions Camber as a mysterious presence and alludes to his legend. Her second trilogy, consisting of Camber of Culdi (1976), Saint Camber (1978), and Camber the Heretic (1980), explores the man behind the Camber legend. The Camber books also allow Kurtz a freer hand with her depiction of ritual magic, since they are set in the last days of Deryni freedom, when the art was much used. An additional trilogy set in the grim years just after Camber's death explores the efforts of Saint Camber's circle to provide for Deryni survival in the coming dark age. These books include The Harrowing of Gnynedd (1989; see separate entry), King Javan's Year (1992; see separate entry), and The Bastard Prince (1994).

With the publication of The Bishop's Heir in 1984, Kurtz began a new trilogy and returned to the story of Morgan, Duncan, and Kelson. The second book, The King's Justice, was released in 1985, and the third, The Quest for Saint Camber in 1986. Like Javan, Kelson survives and succeeds. Readers of the whole series will recognize many parallels.

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