

Children of the Night Short Guide

Children of the Night by Mercedes Lackey

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Characters

Diana Tregarde is an intriguing and likable heroine whose efforts to find a few moments of serenity are constantly frustrated by larger events. Readers without a touch of ESP and no knowledge of wiccan religion can still sympathize with such a dilemma. By occupation she is a writer of romance novels. Since she has not yet managed to make a living with her writing, she also works at other jobs, such as running her friend Annie's occult supply store while Annie takes maternity leave.

Diana is petite and moves with the grace of a dancer, but she shares some traits with the typical hard-boiled detective. She is streetwise, and constantly alert for signs of danger. In Diana's case these include not only things that are "not right" in the everyday world, but on other planes, as well. She is also an empath. Almost everywhere Diana goes, the emotions of others bombard her. Shadowy impressions, from more distant events, reach her too. Other science-fantasy novelists, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Suzette Haden Elgin, have delved more deeply into the theory and implications of extrasensory gifts. But in this book, Lackey concentrates on what psychic awareness of a certain sort might feel like. She conveys such multilevel consciousness vividly. It feels, as Diana notices at one point, "like [being] a sentient burglar alarm."

Andre LeBrel is interesting and intriguing, the very model of the revisionist sexy and benevolent vampire.

Puzzling out which parts of the legend apply to him, and which do not, may pique the reader's curiosity as well as Diana's. But the other characters are not so well explored. Some information is given about Lenny and Keith's talents and personalities, as well as those of Diana's ex-boyfriend Dave and his fellow band members, but they are mostly shown in extreme stress or danger, as victims or acting as Diana's back-ups.

Social Concerns

A novel of occult horror, *Children of the Night* tells of a struggle with dark beings from a mythic netherworld. They appear seemingly at random, consuming ordinary men and women to feed their voracious appetites. Such evil beings are shown as self-maintaining and eternal, not symbols of dangers in the social sphere.

Still, their rampage through Manhattan uses a menacing atmosphere to suggest there are destructive lifestyles in the city. The first victims, for example, die after a party where they try a buffet of psychoactive drugs.

But not all unusual ways of life are destructive. The protagonist, Diana Tregarde, is a witch. Her close friends Lenny and Keith, who also get pulled into the psychic battle, are a gay male couple. And Andre LeBrel, who first challenges the evil Master Jeffries and is almost killed thereby, is a vampire.

There is also a gypsy clan, who turn to Diana and Andre for help. The characters not only provide a touch of exoticism; by being the heroes of the story, they show the changing roles and respectability of lifestyle minorities.



Techniques

The novel opens with Diana spending a rainy afternoon tending her friend's small store, Bell, Book and Candle. Although it is a low-key scene, many of the significant characters appear. Most of the major elements of the tale are set up here. Through Diana's thoughts and her reactions to various visitors, much is also revealed about her character. The gloomy weather and threatening storm foreshadow the atmosphere and revelations of later events. Much of the charm of *Children of the Night*, which goes beyond standard horror fiction in its appeal, is due to the evocative world-within-a-world shown in its opening scenes.

The book focuses largely on Diana's actions. As she goes about her mundane business, she is drawn closer and closer to the entities ravaging the city — a psychic vampire who feeds on fear and turns his victims into copies of himself, and the *gaki*, who steals his victims' souls before he kills. Diana does not face these beings until late in the novel, but hints of their work percolate through her shields much earlier. It is more than coincidence that several of the early victims have ties to her. About ninety percent of the narrative follows Diana as she tries to figure out what is going on, and then to work out a way to confront the entities that has some chance of success. Tension builds by showing Diana's entire range of emotions, as well as the clues that she accumulates.

The other portion of the narrative is shown from the point-of-view point of various victims, just as, or slightly before, they are attacked by the beings.

This is effective insofar as the reader can share their fear, and it adds to the picture of evil stalking the city. The abrupt switches in and out of Diana's own emotional tightrope do slightly lessen the intensity of her own fear.

The novel is primarily a story of suspense and horror, but it also contains an almost overlooked love story, in the relationship between Diana and Andre. Unlike the situation in the standard vampire romance, Andre's attentions will not hurt Diana per se. But the two still have to face the problems that come from their unique, supernatural traits and the attached unique responsibilities. Each also has an existential loneliness that is not likely to be assuaged. The love story thread, woven into a more spectacular battle-against-evil plot, speaks of hidden joy in the midst of danger.

Themes

The main theme is the existence of evil in the world. Fighting it is the duty of all who are able to do so. Diana Tregarde has been "called" to this responsibility by her unusual psychic strengths. She is a Guardian — a commission which has little to do with her neopagan faith. She is required to respond to anyone who calls out for help on a psychic plane.

Diana is contemptuous of those who believe "the universe is a friendly place." Such people are likely to become victims through their own naivete. In fact, in the novel, most people are unaware of the larger struggles going on around them. Thus they are likely to become pawns whenever evil forces run loose. Those tuned in to extrasensory currents, like witches/ neopagans and gypsies, are somewhat more aware of such events, but also likely to attract the unwelcome attention of evil entities. Lackey's subtext thus presents a clear, consistent view of a metaphysical realm. Whether it is also a metaphor for events in the social and political arena is unclear.

There are many hints that things are not always what they seem. At first Diana cannot believe she has seen an actual vampire outside her apartment building. When he reappears, she is prepared to fight him with the prescribed weapon, a cross. Andre merely laughs and grabs her wrist, explaining he has nothing to fear from the Son of God. It turns out that he is far from being a traditional vampire; he even apologizes for taking the blood he must drink to keep up his energies. As events go on, he becomes Diana's ally and lover.

The other side of illusion is the *gaki*, the stalking demon, who can take on his victim's form, or even appear as a cloud of smoke with eyes. This latter ability makes smoggy cities an ideal place for him to operate. The only protection against such a danger is constant vigilance. But even that is not always enough. The author has written a scary and suspenseful story whose message is, in part, "Be wary of the unexpected — and the unremarkable."



Key Questions

The spooky aspects of *Children of the Night* would be an excellent topic for Halloween season, with a look at the psychological uses and appeals of creatures-from-beyond like the gaki and the psychic vampire. The heroine's psychic gifts and responsibilities, and their relation to ordinary life, might be a focus for another approach. This is likely to be as popular as it is controversial.

Questions with larger social or literary implications might include the changing elements of popular suspense fiction. Leaders may also want to compare *Children of the Night* with more traditional horror and mystery novels, to illuminate changes in the structure and themes of these genres. An increasing number of cross-genre mysteries are being published, with sleuths and plot structures that defy the previous mystery formulas.

1. Diana Tregarde was "called" to be a Guardian because of her psychic strengths, yet the showdown with the gaki and the psychic vampires is shown as a physical fight. Why?

2. Are there beings in Western legend who operate like the gaki or the psychic vampires? If so, who? What might they represent?

3. Dave is the only band member who tries to resist his hunger for victims and their fear once he has been "turned." Yet after he learns Diana cannot help him, he kills for the first time. Is his rationale that he needs strength for the coming struggle valid?

Does it make a moral difference that he resolves to prey only on predators?

What other motives might he have?

4. In traditional horror fiction, witches and vampires are objects of fear. In *Children of the Night* and many other recent novels, they are heroes. Is this because we now have different fears?

5. Diana can sort out the innocently curious from the serious practitioners at Bell, Book and Candle almost on sight. She has more trouble with people who come in with hidden agendas, hunting for or fleeing from trouble.

Why is this? Do their emotions affect her empath powers?

6. Andre cures her recurrent panic attacks by making her mentally relive the original experience that caused them, over and over. Are there cases in which this would not work? Did she have other alternatives?

7. Are there real-life parallels to the psychic vampirism that infects Dave and his buddies?



8. Do you think Diana's and Andre's unusual ways of life will doom their budding relationship, or are they a good match?

9. This novel is set in the mid-1970s, but was not published until 1990, yet it does not have the feel of a period piece. Are there clues that a large part of it may have actually been written in the 1970s?

10. Do you think the book was written just to provide thrills and chills, or does it carry any deeper messages?

1.1. The Diana Tregarde books have been criticized for being "anti-Christian." Do you think this is a valid criticism? Or are they merely "non-Christian"?



Literary Precedents

Stephen King's vastly popular horror novels, with their plots of evil emerging from ordinary circumstances, seem a likely influence. *Children of the Night* is also somewhat reminiscent of Bradley's *The Inheritor* (1984), with a cosmopolitan city setting, a neopagan premise and a dark, romantic hero who may or may not need to be feared. The above type of hero, of course, is almost generic to the Gothic romance. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and Anne Rice have developed the vampire even further as a sympathetic and tortured figure.

Adult novels with witches as heroes date back only a short time; Gardner's *High Magic's Aid* (1975) is an early example.

However, Lackey has combined these elements in an innovative way in *Children of the Night*. This book has helped to spark the small but growing new literary subgenres of the occult horror and the occult mystery novel. Other examples of the first include the *Adept* series by Katherine Kurtz and Deborah Turner Harris, and the "Blood" series by Tanya Huff. Rosemary Edghill's contemporary mystery series featuring Bast, a Manhattan witch, is a notable example of the second.

Related Titles

Burning Water (1989) and Jinx High (1991) are other "Diana Tregarde Investigations" in which the occult detective battles reawakened ancient deities.

These are series books only in the sense that they feature the same protagonist. Events in one story do not lead to consequences in the others. The other two novels are less rich in atmosphere and depend more upon horrific imagery for their effects. Jinx High is told largely from the points of view of teen-age characters and victims, and seems aimed specifically at the young adult audience.

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