

# The Chronicles of Amber Short Guide

## The Chronicles of Amber by Roger Zelazny

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# Characters

One of the strengths of the Amber novels is the way in which Zelazny individualizes the members of the royal family of Amber. They are recognizably members of the same family, united by blood and mutual distrust, yet each is very much a unique individual, responding to the crises of the story in distinct ways. Corwin, the narrator and focus of the reader's attention, is in many respects the prototypical Zelazny hero — tough, resourceful, gifted with a sardonic wit and a cynical veneer that covers a growing sense of compassion and duty.

Like many of Zelazny's heroes, he has been shocked out of complacency into growth (by spending centuries as an exile, deprived of his memory, on our earth). He no longer kills gratuitously; he no longer denies the reality and the value of other lives. Corwin's growth is slow — often others are more aware than he of a change in his behavior — but the very slowness of his development makes his final enlightenment more plausible. Corwin's moral maturation is paralleled by (and is perhaps one cause of) a similar growth in at least some of his siblings. And, as in *Lord of Light*, the enlightenment of the individual precedes and makes possible the restoration of society.

But the novels do not conclude in a sentimental reconciliation of the whole family. That would be too neat, too orderly an ending for Zelazny, who prefers, after all, a balance between form and chaos, not some final, unchanging answer that precludes the possibility of new developments. Corwin does come to a new understanding of his relations, but some die without reconciliation, and others, including the mother of his son, remain estranged. And at least one character, Brand, dies unrepentant and unredeemed. Brand is the evil genius of the story (significantly he is described with images that tend to recall Satan and his name may be intended to suggest the fires of hell). Brand seeks power; he seeks to dominate the world and impose his own image upon it. To rule, he is willing to kill his family and even destroy Amber itself — so that he can literally recreate it in his own image by establishing a new Pattern. Brand is Corwin's opposite, what Corwin might have become had he not been shocked into growth. In fact Brand stands in opposition to all of Zelazny's Promethean heroes. Like them he would steal the power of the gods, but he would do so only for his own gratification. Unlike Corwin he does not and cannot grow, and thus he is doomed to sterility and defeat.



## Social Concerns

The surface of the Amber novels suggests just another sword-and-sorcery epic — battles, intrigues, and magic set in some fantastic landscape — an unoriginal work redeemed, to some extent, by Zelazny's wit and gift for characterization. A closer reading, however, reveals a more thoughtful work in which spectacle is actually subordinated to concept and character development.

Amber is, for its inhabitants, the only real world — the source of an infinite number of "Shadows," worlds (including the earth) which reflect some aspect of Amber and have their own histories and mythologies. The rulers of Amber can manipulate these "Shadows," traveling from one to another and even creating new ones, but ultimately all these "Shadows" depend on Amber for their very being.

Or so it seems. The crux of the five novels is the growing recognition on the part of the princes and princesses of Amber that Amber is not the "real" world at all — that it is merely an offshoot of Chaos, created by their ancestor, a rebel lord of Chaos. In fact Amber and the whole universe as they know it is imperiled by a growing imbalance between the forces of Chaos (which seeks to resume its ancient sovereignty) and the forces of Amber.

What Zelazny has done is to take the old myths of the creation of the world out of primeval chaos and cast them in a modern form.

Amber represents "form" or "order" or "pattern" — indeed it was formed by the creation of a "Pattern" in the midst of Chaos, a Pattern that is inscribed in the genes of all of the Lords of Amber. For Zelazny the Universe (and any microcosm of the Universe — a society or an individual) must maintain a dynamic balance between form and chaos (or law and freedom); one must never overwhelm the other. It is important not to equate form with goodness nor chaos with evil, for then one would desire the total victory of form over chaos, which Zelazny believes would be as destructive as the absolute triumph of chaos. An excess of form would result in the kind of static, repressive, lifeless society against which Sam rebels in *Lord of Light* (1967). Zelazny's is a philosophy that celebrates balance and creative tension and rejects final answers and absolutes.



## Techniques

The five Amber novels comprise, in one sense, a single mystery story. The first book opens with Corwin awakening in a hospital on earth, unable to remember his past, and the initial action recounts his attempt to regain that past. Once his memory is restored, the novels are concerned with Corwin's attempt to solve a series of mysteries: who ordered his disappearance and the numerous attempts on his life; what caused the disappearance of Oberon; what threatens Amber; what is Amber's real place in the universe? Corwin is as much detective as he is quest hero.

Like a good detective Corwin listens to conflicting stories and tries to piece together a coherent, truthful version of events. And as critics have observed, the novels' emphasis is not on swashbuckling action but on the telling of tales. Nearly all of Corwin's relatives have a story to tell; each has a piece of the puzzle Corwin is trying to solve.

Thus he must weigh all of the rival stories — including Brand's — with all of their omissions and biases before he can learn the truth. And the five novels themselves are revealed, in the end, to be the story Corwin tells to the son he never knew, as they meet on the brink of Chaos.

# Themes

In many respects the Amber novels represent a more detailed and elaborate exploration of the themes embodied in *Lord of Light*. Corwin, the protagonist, and his siblings are immortals (at least they do not die of natural causes; although incredibly tough, they are not immune to violent death), but their long lives and extraordinary powers have bred in them an arrogance and capriciousness which make them an amoral, manipulative elite. The disappearance and presumed death of their father Oberon has touched off a vicious battle for the succession between rival factions of the family — a display of intrigue, betrayal, and counterplots that recalls the Borgias family at its most Machiavellian. Yet within this drift to moral anarchy, a counterforce begins to emerge, as some of the siblings, notably Corwin and his brother Random, begin a slow growth to maturity (one of the novel's ironies is that it seems to take immortals a long time to grow up). Their ambitions, jealousies, and lust for vengeance gradually give way to a sense of duty. Amber ceases to be a prize to be fought over and becomes instead a place of beauty and order to be preserved even at the cost of one's life.

The novel's plot, which at first appears to be a tale of ambition and revenge, gradually reveals itself to be a quest to heal a wounded land. The primal Pattern, which created Amber and upon which Amber's continued existence depends, has been damaged by Corwin's brother Brand, who has shed the blood of a kinsman on the Pattern to disrupt it. The break in the Pattern is growing, threatening the very existence of Amber. At this point Corwin renounces his desire for the throne and seeks to restore the Pattern.

It is not he who in fact will restore it, but his willingness to sacrifice his life in the attempt suggests how much he has grown and does aid in the restoration of the land.

## Literary Precedents

While Zelazny does not borrow a whole mythos for the Amber stories, as he did in *Lord of Light*, his eclectic borrowings from a whole range of mythic and literary sources add much to the richness and moral weight of the five books. Critics have observed, for instance, that Zelazny draws heavily on the Grail legends — which in essence tell of a quest to heal a broken land — and from the vegetation myths underlying those legends. Zelazny makes considerable use of the symbols associated with the Grail, especially as they have been incorporated into the Tarot.

Indeed the princes and princesses of Amber are all portrayed on Tarot like cards which provide them with a magical means of communication and travel.

The novels' allusiveness frequently enlarges the reader's response to characters or situations. The King of Amber, for instance, is Oberon, the name of the King of Faerie in medieval legend (and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, c.1591-1596) and the suggestiveness of the name reveals much about Oberon's character — mysterious, powerful, manipulative — and much about his family and his world. In a key scene, Corwin is linked with the Jester or Fool of the Tarot deck. The Fool is linked with the cycle of life, death/chaos, and resurrection; and with the journey through experience to Wisdom. All of this has clear resonance for the character of Corwin. One need not recognize all the allusions to enjoy the Amber novels, but the greater the reader's familiarity with myth and literary tradition, the greater his appreciation of the story is apt to be.

Zelazny's Amber series is one of the few recent fantasies to betray little or no debt to Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* (1954). Unlike Tolkien and his imitators, Zelazny seems uninterested in creating an imaginary world complete with history, mythology, languages, vividly realized geography, fauna, and flora. As critics have observed, Zelazny's worlds tend to be little more than stage sets. There are some dazzling special effects, some lovely descriptions, but for the most part Zelazny tells the reader no more about the socioeconomic realities of Amber than he absolutely needs. Again one might see the influence of Jacobean drama — vivid characterization, heightened action and language in a deliberately stylized and artificial setting.

## Related Titles

In *The Trumps of Doom* (1985), Zelazny resumes the story of Amber in the next generation, initiating the conflict between the sons of Corwin and Brand.

Like the five books that make up the original Amber series, *The Trumps of Doom* is not really a novel by itself, but the first installment of a novel in several parts.





# Copyright Information

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