

City of Sorcery Short Guide

City of Sorcery by Marion Zimmer Bradley

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Characters

The members of the sister-team are united in their identity as Darkoverian Free Amazons or as members of the Bridge Society. Darkoverian Free Amazons have joined together in communal houses to resist the increasingly patriarchal structure of Hasturian society and its restrictive roles for women. The central pair in the questing team (and familiar from Thendara House) are the free-mates Jaelle and Magda, one Darkoverian and the other Terran. They were united in the Forbidden Tower by a quartet of idealistic psychics who broke from the traditional hierarchical patterns and hope to share the advantages of psi power with all who possess the necessary sensitivity and motivation. They are further united by their motherhood since, as free-mates, they hold guardianship and spiritual parenthood of one another's daughters.

Both Magda and Jaelle are regarded as ground-breakers and adventurers.

Magda's reputation, in particular, becomes a source of trial, as an ambitious young intelligence operator, Alexis Anders, the pilot of the downed plane, undertakes a search for the hidden city to enhance his own status. He is accompanied by Rafaella, a former lover of Jaelle. Thus a buried resentment and competition, affronts to sisterhood, are present at the beginning of the quest.

The responsibility for a trial itself and for Jaelle's ensuing death in the final battle rests on Magda's shoulders, as she seeks to confront her own identity without the mask of legend. She must learn to accept her roles of leader, nurturer, and mentor. This done, she resists the temptation to remain safe, and, with Camilla, accepts the challenge of the final ascent to the city.

This will take her to new heights of knowledge and connectedness. Jaelle, on the other hand, takes a different path to free herself of the tendency to deny her own powers. She has denied her own psychic laran, and takes action in defense of wider goals by her self-sacrifice at the last battle, where even her role as a mother becomes secondary to her loyalty to the sisterhood.

Camilla, who was raped and sexually mutilated during childhood, has refined her spiritual powers of strength, selflessness, and sustenance without healing her own inner pain and loss. Of the entire sister-team, only Camilla and the Terran senior member, Cholayna, are judged worthy to go on the city itself. Camilla, questioning the purpose of her own life and suffering, and searching for answers from a Goddess who brings suffering to the innocent as well as the guilty, undertakes the final assault.

Cholayna is a black woman isolated not only by her race but even more by her age and her Terran identity, which make her less able to bear the rigors of the mountain trek. She emerges as a leader and worthy initiate due to her patience, wisdom, and foresight, which she demonstrates by renouncing the final quest to return to her duties and commitments on the mainland. Vanessa, the Terran mountain-climber whose purely human and physical skills often help the team avert disaster, scorns the metaphysical

notions of Icarus and utopia, and is the novel's tribute to the enduring qualities of the purely natural and material world.

Lexie and Rafaella, initially the rebels whose discontent breaks the sisterhood and necessitates a quest for healing, turn in the final moments to serve the powers of life rather than of death, and Lexie herself is killed defending Cholanayna. The quest reveals to each woman her own limitations and strengths. The strengths are transmuted within the sisterhood and can be brought back to rejuvenate the active world or used to move ahead along the spiritual path.



Social Concerns/Themes

The publication of *Thendara House* in 1983 and its 1984 sequel, *City of Sorcery*, mark the highpoint of the Darkover series for many readers. Set during the Golden Age of Darkoverian development, the period of friendship between Darkover and Terra, the two novels depict the partnership of Darkoverian and Thendaran women on Darkover, where their search for intergalactic harmony parallels a quest for bonding and self-knowledge, which can be brought about only by fusion of the two systems. This transcendence, however, is fleeting; shortly afterwards Darkover and its ruling Hastur dynasty are plunged into a period of conservative forgetfulness in which this promise is forgotten.

As a team of Terran and Darkoverian women seeks a fabled lost city where a perfected individual and human community is realized, the visionary ideal of a Utopian sisterhood becomes a possibility. In this city, glimpsed sparkling in the frozen wastelands beyond the Wall between the Worlds by a Terran intelligence plane, the union of Terra and Darkover is to be transmuted into a permanent ideal manifested in its presiding deity, the goddess Avarra, a symbol of sisterhood, wisdom, and previously hidden powers and meaning.

In *City of Sorcery* the quest motif integrates the search for individual identity and meaning with the search for sisterhood, community, and bonding, presaged in the questor's dream of a robed circle of women and the calling of crows. The dark aspect of this quest is the question of power — empowerment of the self or power over others — a democratic and egalitarian sisterhood or an authoritarian hierarchy. If the goddess Avarra — a Great Mother sorceress, priestess, and wise woman — represents the positive aspect, the "dark Sisterhood," another circle symbolized not by crows but by hawks, represents the negative aspect of power. They are destroyers of the living, their ideals displaced by a lust for control and the attendant demons of jealousy and resentment. In the novel's climactic battle, the dark Sisterhood, led by the false sorceress, Acquilara, is finally defeated by the Searchers, who are then left to make their own choices about the final ascent to the city.

After a "dark night" of capture by Acquilara, the team is purified, tested, and cleansed of their attachments to illusion, ego, and the self-indulgence of their earlier life. As a result, the women are empowered either to go on to the eternal city or to return to the world of duty, responsibility, and ethical commitment. In Bradley's vision, however, the calls of the community and the individual's responsibility to others are not set in opposition but are instead synthesized as Magda recognizes her attachments to her community and her daughter.

Techniques

The setting for the search — a land of eternal snow, forbidding mountains, and wailing banshees — allows new metaphysical insights into the Overworld, the region of communicative "psi" power. In the Overworld the individual consciousness can interact not only with others, but also with a united past, present, and future. For example, in one of Magda's psi dreams, she, her daughter, and her daughter's infant co-exist in a Ioran-inspired World Soul. This state expresses not only the power of motherhood, but the ability of the child to mother itself, and likewise to nurture its own mother. In the three-day blizzard during which the team arrives at an earthly gateway to the city, devotees rescue them from freezing and communicate the moralethical knowledge required in the final ascent.



Key Questions

Like others in the Bradley canon which use the Amazon motif, whether in the fantasy world of Darkover or the historical settings of Greek and Roman times, *The City of Sorcery* would be a good read in a feminist study group whose members enjoy science fiction.

Especially when read in a sequence which includes *Thendara House*, this novel is a culmination of the Darkoverian Free Amazon quest which allows readers to discuss the final goals of the Renunciates' value system. Its mythic and other-worldly atmosphere creates a powerful backdrop for its apocalyptic struggle between positive and negative female forces, represented by the goddesses Avarra and Acquillara, and for the spiritual quest which refines and unites the team members.

1. One of the elements of the quest motif requires the various seekers for the holy city to be tested, both spiritually and physically, recognize, and overcome their flaws in order to advance to the holy city. How is the quest experience different for each member of the team, and what special things does each one learn? How is each one changed?
2. Of all the seekers for the Holy House of Avarra, only Camilla and Cholayna are allowed to undertake the final steps of the journey. Why are they the appropriate ones to enter the Holy House, and why must they be a pair?
3. Bradley's familiar themes of friendship and female bonding are very prominent here. What attitudes towards power, love, and leadership are necessary for the team to be successful?

How do the dual goddesses, Avarra and Acquillara, personify these different attitudes?

4. How does psi power help or hinder the development of the special kind of consciousness or sensitivity which help the team? How is it different from or the same as other kinds of extrasensory perception or psychic power you've encountered in science fiction or fantasy? How does sorcery, or magic, fit in?

Literary Precedents

City of Sorcery is organized around the archetypal theme of the quest.

Here, the goal is a city of promise and perfection. In the prologue to *City of Sorcery* Bradley cites Talbot Mundy's *The Devil's Guard* as her model, but the theme is common in epic and heroic literature, and is one Bradley herself used in an Arthurian romantic epic, *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), where the final approach of the Grail unites the good and evil, female and male. Identifying a city as the goal of the quest is familiar in classical, medieval, and Renaissance literature, such as Compostella's *City of the Sun*, William Morris's *Well at the World's End* (1896), and William Blake's the golden and bejewelled Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion (1818).

The concept of a perfected sisterhood, or a community of women united in a struggle that transcends individual differences and changes the identity of each participant, is familiar in the feminist tradition as well. The idea of women warriors, or Amazons, permeates the Darkoverian series, and Bradley uses it again in *The Woman Warrior* (1985), a tale of a female gladiator, and in *The Firebrand* (1987).



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