

Cobra Short Guide

Cobra by Timothy Zahn

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Characters

Cobra is not a strongly character-oriented book, but Jonny Moreau is a protagonist whom the reader is likely to remember. His mixture of physical strength with vulnerability and occasional pigheadedness, and his moral strength in tight situations, give him an appeal beyond and different from that of the Rambo-type warrior figure. He suffers and grows and learns, but he never abandons the ideals that led him to join the Cobras as a young man.

The people surrounding him are drawn well enough to make a plausible story, but none becomes truly memorable. Strangely enough, the next most notable character is one whom Jonny does not meet until the very end of the book. But his acts influenced Jonny's life long before this scene. Vanis D'arl is a powerful Central Committee member, who competently bears the burden of decision-making for the multiple worlds under his jurisdiction. If D'arl seems removed from the flesh and blood concerns of ordinary citizens, it is because his very position isolates him. Nevertheless he carefully studies the situations he is dealing with, and takes steps based on "the greatest good for the greatest number." He serves as a thematic balance to Jonny; both men make decisions that influence the fates of whole planets, but on different political levels.



Social Concerns

Cobra is the story of a bionically enhanced soldier. Like most of Zahn's novels, it is set in a future interplanetary society. The Trofts, sapient aliens who resemble giant insects, have already taken over two human worlds and are menacing other planets. A desperate solution is devised by the Dominion of Man: to create and train supersoldiers whose physical and perceptual abilities are multiplied by hightech alterations of their bodies. These Cobra soldiers will then infiltrate the invaded worlds and work with their undergrounds against the Trofts.

Jonny Moreau knows nothing of this plan when he enlists. He simply feels a call to patriotic duty — and possible adventure. But he is put into the first full class of Cobra trainees. After surgery and training, the Cobras are sent to the subjugated planet Adirondack.

Despite casualties and misfires, eventually they drive the Trofts out. Jonny's welcome on returning to his home planet is ambivalent. Most people fear the Cobras' powers and programmed hair-trigger responses. Jonny does his best to fit, uneasily, into civilian life. A few years later, as part of a grand strategy to build two fronts against a renewed Troft threat, the Dominion settles new planets on the other side of the Trofts' region of space. The Cobras are called up to provide defense forces for the new colony.

On this colony, Aventine, no new Troft threat materializes. Jonny spends his first years there patrolling for spine leopards and other dangerous native animals. He also quenches a warlord movement by some other Cobras who want to take the government into their own hands. Eventually Jonny is elected to political office himself. Near the end of the book, armed with his past experience, he tries to persuade the Dominion Central Committee to abandon their plan to transfer Cobra training to Aventine. His efforts fail, but he returns to his responsibilities as part of an independent and newly isolated Aventine government.

The entire novel is an extended study and metaphor on the soldier's role in a democracy. It was written in an era when the readjustment problems of Vietnam veterans still loomed large in public consciousness. Jonny, like many American soldiers, had fought in a messy war out of patriotic duty. He returned home to find himself feared and avoided by the very people he had fought to protect. Cobra does not take any specific political stance, but its message about the soldier's trials and situation is unmistakable.

Both Jonny and the Central Committee sometimes make wrong decisions.

The need to react immediately to a threat is one reason; limited knowledge is another. This reflects the nature of democracy as well as of individual decision making. One uses the information and strictures that one has at hand, and one hopes for the best. Finally, Jonny's struggle to get a hearing about Aventine's future shows the inevitable problems of hierarchy. Theoretically any citizen has access to the Committee. In practice even

Jonny, by this time a provincial governor, gets the chance to speak with a Committee member only because his brother Jame has become a Committee member's aide.

Techniques

Most of the story of Cobra is told in chronological sequence and from Jonny Moreau's point of view. Interspersed with the main narrative are short sequences set in Dome, the Dominion capital. These deal with political maneuvering which decides the fate of worlds and of the Cobra soldiers. It is an effective way to show how remote events and unrelated factors can have lifelong consequences for ordinary citizens.

Themes

Cobra's themes are tightly interwoven with its plot and social concerns.

Its cover blurb extols the excitement of high-tech weaponry and seems to promise a heroic battle saga. Despite this, the book's themes are deeply humanistic. Actual battles take up only a few pages. Jonny's heroism does not stop with his odds-defying breakout from a Troft stronghold on Adirondack. It is also evident when he takes on the challenge of proving himself anew to his neighbors upon his return, when he defies the planned military coup on Aventine, and when he returns to work for his new home world's prosperity, even at the price of being cut off permanently from the rest of the human worlds.

The overarching theme is more complicated than "war is hell," although it includes that message. Yes, war is hell, Zahn seems to be saying, but it will probably still be with us in the future.

Societies will need the best soldiers they can get and train. The toll on individual soldiers' lives is huge and partly unpredictable. (In creating supersoldiers no one foresaw the anemia and arthritis that develops from their body alterations.)

Cobra's other theme is the importance of family ties. On Adirondack, Jonny was billeted with a family who served as a substitute for his own; their trust kept him going as he lost his fellow soldiers one by one. When he returned home, his own family's support never wavered in the face of prejudice. On Aventine, he married the fiancée of his buddy MacDonald, who was killed in the attempted coup. They have a long and mostly happy life together, although Chrys never becomes wholly reconciled to Jonny's involvement in politics. The theme of family ties and continuity carries into the sequel books, where Jonny's children and grandchildren follow his example of military and public service.

Key Questions

Because its subject matter includes warfare, political decision making, veteran's concerns, family ties, and bionic alterations, a discussion of Cobra could go in many directions. One way would take the three books of the Cobra trilogy as a unit. This would allow readers to trace motifs of family and cultural continuity, as well as the changing nature of political alliances and the soldier's tasks.

Another approach might compare the Cobra situation to that after a real-life war. Some post-Vietnam novels, such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) or Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1986), could provide contrasting insights.

The advanced weaponry built into the Cobras' bodies may especially fascinate young people. Discussion of this topic could include the practical and technical problems involved, as well as where soldiers with such skills would be most effective. Bionic soldiers would also make a good starting point for role-playing games or fiction writing projects.

1. Although recruits in Jonny's class were warned in general terms — "as part of the first wave of Cobras you'll take the full brunt of any design glitches that may have slipped by" — no one knew yet about the anemia and arthritis that would plague Cobras in their later years. Would knowing have made any difference in Jonny's eagerness to volunteer? Why or why not?
2. The Cobras were created to work with an underground freedom movement, where they could blend into the population and not draw attention from the ruling Trofts. Other settings where they are very effective include dangerous frontier regions and guerilla warfare. What are the advantages of these soldiers in such situations?
3. In what situations would they not work out well?
4. Even after he saves many people from a burning building, Jonny's neighbors do not trust him when he returns home from war. Is this simply because he accidentally killed two teen-agers who were hassling him? Are the neighbors right in regarding him as a bomb just waiting to be set off?
5. Jonny's father (and the author) seem to view his short-lived plan to attend a distant university as a cowardly attempt to escape "who he is."

Do you agree, or is there another way to look at it?

6. In this book, the central government copes with the problem of unadjusted Cobra veterans by sending them to a newly settled planet millions of miles away. Their skills will make them assets there. In our own world, we did not have such an option for veterans who could not readjust or find a useful place back in civilian life. Or did we?



7. On Aventine, Jonny almost singlehandedly averts a coup by a group of Cobras frustrated with civil government. In later years, what most people remember about this episode is that a murdered Cobra (MacDonald) "came back to life" long enough to avenge himself. Is this a useful myth?

8. After this, the Cobras are given a double vote in recognition of their importance — and potential power — in the new colony. Jonny rises from Cobra team leader to become a Syndic and later a Governor. By all accounts he does these jobs well, and the new world of Aventine remains democratic.

What — if anything — does this say about the relationship between military and civilian power in a democracy?

9. Jonny misunderstands D'arl's motives from start to finish and almost forces the Committee into hearing his new information about the Trofts. The policy change that follows buys peace, but at the terrible price of isolating Aventine from the home worlds, perhaps forever. Was it the only viable option?

10. Jonny's sister Gwen eventually moves to the Cobra worlds, working as a botanist. In later books of the series, his son Justin and granddaughter Jasmine also become Cobras, while another son, Corwin, is a governor of Aventine. What accounts for the family's closeness and strong ethic of public service?

Literary Precedents

Future warfare in interplanetary settings is a staple of science fiction.

However, in the Cobra novels Zahn explores a relatively new twist on such scenarios. In these, and in *The Blackcollar* (1983) and its sequel *Blackcollar: The Backlash Mission* (1986) — novels about a band of chemically-enhanced warriors — he made the technologically improved soldier a new feature of the genre. Previous supersoldier figures had been, like Superman, closer to fantasy figures, with little explanation offered for their powers. Zahn's novels not only give details of their built-in weapons, but make them believable in human terms as well.

One notable precursor — although in a contemporary setting — was the television show *The Six Million Dollar Man*, which aired on ABC from 1973 through 1978. Its hero, astronaut Steve Austin, injured in a jet crash, was given nuclear-powered artificial parts and thus superhuman skills, which he used against various threats to humanity.

Related Titles

Cobra is the first of a three-book series. *Cobra Strike* (1986) tells of the danger-filled exploration of neighboring planets a generation later. Jonny, now a distinguished but ailing former governor, leads a survey mission to uninhabited planets. His sons Joshua and Justin — the latter also a Cobra — investigate the secretive human inhabitants and strange ecology of Qasama.

In *Cobra Bargain* (1988), Justin's daughter Jasmine becomes the first female Cobra. As the sole survivor of a shuttle which crashes on Qasama, her skills and bravery expose an alliance threatening both that planet and her home world.

Cobras Two (1992) is a reprint of *Cobra* and *Cobra Strike*, published together in one volume.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994