

Conjure Wife Short Guide

Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber

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Characters

Norman Saylor, a young professor of sociology at Hempnell College, finds more than he bargained for when he goes through his wife Tansy's dresser drawer. Saylor is an expert on African American magic, though, of course, he doesn't believe in such things in the slightest, and he's shocked to discover that Tansy has collected fingernail parings, locks of hair, bits of dirt and other items that can be used in various magical ceremonies. Confronted by Saylor, Tansy admits that she and in fact all of the other university wives practice witchcraft in order to further both their husband's careers and their own standing in the community. Naturally, Saylor is outraged that such nonsense is going on and insists that his wife stop. As soon as she does, of course, her husband's career takes a serious turn for the worse.



Social Concerns/Themes

Most writers who have been forced to make ends meet through college teaching have eventually published a university novel; *Conjure Wife* is Leiber's unusual entry into the subgenre. Hired to teach speech and acting at Occidental College in Los Angeles in September of 1941, Leiber quit after only one year despite having earned a reputation as a competent teacher. That he disliked the politics of university life can be inferred from the basic premise of his novel. Various biographers have argued that Hempnell College is either Occidental College or Leiber's alma mater, the University of Chicago, though it probably partakes of both.

Saylor does not at first believe that Tansy's magic has protected him, even after things start to go wrong for him.

Eventually, however, he begins to realize that women's magic is not only real, but ubiquitous. He and the rest of male society have spent their entire lives immersed in the supernatural, all unaware. The scientific and skeptical male mindset is in fact a result of a sort of selective blindness. Women as a group have never accepted a mechanistic view of the universe and have been secretly manipulating their menfolk with magic since the beginning of time.

Although Saylor eventually does accept the legitimacy of his wife's powers and those of the other faculty wives who nearly destroy him and in fact encourages Tansy to renew her efforts in his defense, the novel demonstrates the somewhat ambiguous and paranoid attitude toward women that marks much of Leiber's fiction.



Techniques

Conjure Wife was originally published in John W. Campbell Jr.'s fantasy magazine Unknown. Campbell had made his name as the editor of Astounding Science Fiction (later Analog) and had a strong preference for hard, nuts-and-bolts science fiction. Even the stories he published in Unknown were expected to reflect this approach to writing. Ignoring many of the Gothic trappings typical of supernatural fiction, Leiber sets his story on what is recognizably a contemporary (circa 1940) American university campus and writes what is, at least in part, a realistic and very witty modern novel. His characters, the university professors and their wives, are adequately individualized, but are also clearly types — the stuffy full professor, the snobbish matron, the idealistic and naive assistant professor — that anyone who has spent time on a college campus will recognize. The book does contain an eclectic mix of accurately depicted "real" magic, from Haitian voodoo to Australian bullroarers, and a number of scenes are truly terrifying, but Leiber's goal is to depict magic as a natural if poorly understood part of the real world, as something very like science.

In this he succeeds admirably.

Adaptations

Conjure Wife has been filmed three times: first, as *Weird Woman* (1944) starring Lon Chaney; second, as an episode of NBC's *Moment of Fear* television series (1960); third, as *Burn, Witch, Burn* (1962), starring Janet Blair and Peter Wyngarde, with a screenplay by Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont. The earliest production is fairly mediocre and leaves little of the original novel intact. The television version has been widely praised. The later film version, although causing confusion because it borrows its title from an A. Merritt novel (which itself was filmed as *Devil Doll*), is a solid piece of work.

Key Questions

Both H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King have argued persuasively that there is a radical difference between fiction which frightens the reader and fiction which repulses the reader, although it should be noted that they came to somewhat different conclusions over the relative value of the two methods. Although *Conjure Wife* is a fine novel, and at times very scary, it includes little in the way of gruesome detail of the sort we associate with the work of contemporary horror writers such as Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Anne Rice. Any book group whose members are familiar with recent horror fiction, might want to center their discussion on the difference between what Leiber is doing and the current practice of most best-selling horror novelists. They might also want to look into the work of other genre writers who avoid the gruesome, among them Robert Aickman and Shirley Jackson.

1. Does Leiber's lack of gory details detract from *Conjure Wife*? Does the book seem too tame compared to more contemporary horror fiction, or does it still work on its own terms?
2. Although it has since become common practice, Leiber was one of the first writers to depict witchcraft as occurring within a contemporary, everyday setting. How does this add to or detract from the story?
3. *Conjure Wife* was first published in 1943. To what extent has it dated, particularly in its portrayal of married women who do not work outside the home but who carefully cultivate their husbands' careers?
4. Consider Norman Saylor's gradual discovery that his wife, Tansy, is a practicing witch? How believable is Norman's gradual shift from somewhat patronizing skepticism to a clear realization of the truth?
5. To what extent does Leiber attempt to deal with magic in *Conjure Wife* as if it were a form of poorly understood science?
6. Try to locate the 1962 film version of *Conjure Wife*, entitled *Burn, Witch, Burn*, or one of the two earlier film versions for that matter. How does the film version of the novel compare to Leiber's original? What changes are there and are they for better or for worse? Why do you think the changes were made?
7. *Conjure Wife* is a horror novel, but it is also a university novel, part of a tradition that includes such works as Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), May Sarton's *The Small Room* (1961), and, more recently, Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995). What does it have in common with those novels?



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