

# Cyteen Short Guide

## Cyteen by C. J. Cherryh

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## Characters

In Ariane Emory, Cherryh reveals for the first time a female protagonist's motivation for her sadism — Emory herself was raped as a child. After her successor Ari II was "reborn," her surrogate parent performed the same kind of ruthless parenting that the first Ari endured. Emory's exploitation of Justin Warrick is explained as a psychological intervention necessary to furthering his role in shaping future Expansionist policy.

Cherryh also employs her trademark male-female role reversal in the relationships between Ari II and Justin Warrick and between Emory's azi bodyguards Catlin and Florian. Catlin is cool, merciless, and expert in hand-to-hand combat, while her partner Florian's nurturing capacity makes him as proficient at gentling a skittish filly as well as high-tech military operations. The doubling of the pattern underscores Cherryh's point that capability and talent, not gender, ought to determine an individual's social status and responsibilities.

Cyteen's villains are defined in Cherryh's usual manner — bureaucrats who are self-absorbed to a fatal degree and careless of their constituencies, and military men who are drunk with nearlimitless budgets and blind to humanitarian issues. Cyteen also has its terrorists, a few fanatics who prey upon the decent majority they cannot win over by peaceful process or honest debate.



## Social Concerns/Themes

In her Alliance-Union novels Cherryh moves away from her early preoccupation with depicting alien psychologies through brilliant linguistic and anthropological creations, such as the mri of *The Faded Sun* (1978). Her 1989 novel *Rimrunners*, for example, deals solely with human members of merchant and Fleet crews. In *Cyteen*, a dense, complex investigation into the economic and social ramifications of startling discoveries in psychology and sociology, the "other" perspective is never quite alien and yet not entirely human. It belongs to the azi — artificially gestated, genetically-engineered humans that are indoctrinated from birth by specially designed types. The azi are the crux of *Cyteen's* interlocking themes.

Ruling the planet Cyteen are the born-men, or "CITs," who led a successful revolt against the planet Earth and founded their own nine-planet Union. They have established a grid of star stations that allows interstellar trade and promises enormous profit through expansion. The scientists of Cyteen's premier bioengineering complex — *Reseune* — have developed the azi in order to populate the expanding Union federation more efficiently.

When the novel opens in the year 2401, Cyteen's Expansionist Party is headed by *Reseune's* Ariane Emory, a "Special," or government-certified genius. She is a dominant, highly gifted, yet sadistic female protagonist.

Emory's party is locked in conflict with the Centrists, who oppose expanding the Union's influence into uncharted galactic areas; they also oppose the azi that make this expansion possible.

*Reseune* has also pioneered other biotechnological advances, such as drug therapy, or "rejuv," which extends human and azi lifespans to an average 140 years, and psychogenesis, an enormously expensive and highly experimental process that can clone the dead.

By developing the relationship between Ariane Emory and young Ari (Ari II, who is cloned to replace Ari I after her assassination in 2404), Cherryh explores more generally the problem of the genius in society. Ariane Emory's powerful intellect far outstrips her contemporaries, but at the same time, it apparently deprives her of human compassion and corrupts her sense of sexual propriety. These negative traits make her the target for others' political antagonism and personal hatreds. Like *Downbelow Station's* (1981) Captain Signy Mallory, Emory has a well-known fondness for hurting men who are her subordinates. She sexually abuses Justin Warrick, a seventeen-year-old "parental replicate" of scientist Jordan Warrick. Jordan long ago refused Emory's sexual advances and now plots with the Centrists to depose her.

As more of Emory's mind is revealed to young Ari through her recorded journals, however, Cherryh clarifies the part of genius that transcends the ability of ordinary minds to grasp. Emory's implacable drive to launch another wave of expansion into the



universe is based on the conviction that "sociogenesis" is the only way to ensure the continuation of the human race for the next million years. She has designed the azi and programmed their tapes to disperse genetic material to other planets in the same ratio as that of ancient Earth. It is a goal for which she makes ruthless sacrifices. By the end of *Cyteen*, her victim Justin Warrick realizes through young Ari that his seduction was part of the price that Emory was willing to pay to secure humanity's future.

Cherryh uses the azi to explore the theme that humanity needs other-than-human companionship. In previous novels, Cherryh's aliens teach humans patience and the value of life, for example, the mri of *The Faded Sun*, whose painfully short lifespan and blameless fidelity to their masters recall gallant dogs, and the felinoid hani of the Chanur novels, who are as clever and complex as the great cats they resemble. The azi, who are free of the innate flaw in CIT behavior (described as a schizoid hatred for the alter ego), help humans define their boundaries; and their long-suffering ability to conceal their reactions sheds light on the genius' need for equilibrium. As Ariane Emory tells Ari II, "Ordinary people will teach you the truest, most sane things in the world. Thank God for them."



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

Cyteen is Cherryh's most complicated fictional structure to date. It is both a murder mystery and a coming-of-age novel, in which Ari II as child and adolescent must learn to use the talents and master the destructive impulses of Ariane Emory before Cyteen's whirlpools of political and scientific intrigue swallow her up as well. In *Visible Light*, a 1986 collection of short stories and commentary, Cherryh observes that each of her stories is "a moment of profound examination of things in greater reality and sharper focus than we usually see them. . . a sharing of perception in this dynamic, motile universe." In this light, *Cyteen* encompasses a vast range of perceptions, satisfying another of Cherryh's precepts that art does the opposite of filtering out what is confusing. While her early works concentrated on individuals, *Cyteen* analyzes the complexity of human government, an exemplification of Cherryh's concerns with the opinions of the classical author Virgil, who described government as an art form.

On the individual level, features of a psychological detective story emerge in the search for the motivation behind Emory's murder, but the galaxy-wide political-social-scientific-economic entanglements of *Cyteen* suggest Cherryh's increasing concern with the social sciences, reflected in her use of psychoscientific jargon as a virtually alien language that the reader must master as the novel progresses.

*Cyteen* is a more difficult reading experience than Cherryh's other novels.

Here, she does not deal with figures who, as she says, "pass from world to world in some lightning-stroke of an understanding," but with forces that represent "the slow erosion and reconstruction of things [my characters] thought they knew." Because of the enormity of Cherryh's canvas and the complex interlocking grid of its many political plot lines and characterizations, *Cyteen* seems to lack the flashy pace and rapid-fire action of *Downbelow Station* and the empathetic alien color of her *Faded Sun* or the Chanur novels.

However, *Cyteen* provides an exhaustive and indispensable rationale for the events in Cherryh's Alliance-Union universe, illustrating her view of the daring intellectual adventure that she equates with her art: "to let the thoughts run backward and forward and wide to the breadth and height of all that's ever been and might yet be."



## Related Titles

With *Inheritor* (1996), it is not clear whether Cherryh extended her future history of the Alliance-Union Universe, or began a chronicle of an entirely new one with *Foreigner* (1994), a novel of first contact between human colonists marooned on a far-off planet by the crew of their starship Phoenix and the inhabitants of that world, the magnetic, inscrutable atevi, with whom the humans, segregating themselves strictly to their enclave on the island of Mospheira, have uneasily coexisted for some two centuries.

The only contact allowed between the two races occurs through the person of the human paidhi, a translator-diplomat charged with living among the atevi to dole out morsels of Earth's technology in return for raw materials the humans must have to survive. The atevi society uses registered assassination to maintain law and order; they live by shifting alliances defined and contracted by a psychological makeup utterly foreign to human emotional processes, and both species are constantly conscious of the brutal war and its aftermath which occurred at the start of their relationship.

In *Foreigner*, Cherryh pits the just-installed paidhi Bren Cameron against the humans who want to exploit the atevi and their planet for selfish purposes. When Cameron is nearly killed by an unregistered assassin's bullet, the tenuous peace between the two species is shattered, and Cameron has to search out new ways to bridge the vast gulf between atevi and humans.

Cherryh again spins her story through her strong suit, alien psychology and language, in shaping a conflict that echoes the premise which animates most of her writing, the question of the uses of technology as opposed to the force of culture upon its individuals. In *Invader* (1995), which continues the story of Cameron's struggle to carry out the paidhi's obligations, obligations to which he alone seems to have any honorable commitment. Cherryh adds a wild card: the Phoenix returns to orbit around the planet and sends two of its crew to the atevi, not the humans on Mospheira. Cameron has to choose sides, and he opts to stay with the atevi, a desperate and totally illegal action that threatens to destroy the balance of power completely.

In *Inheritor*, Cameron has to untangle the intricate relationships, shifting associations, and convoluted motives of the atevi, the human colony, and the spacers, disconcertingly realizing that while his linguistic competence grows, his heart is going out less to his own species than to individual atevi for whom he has come to feel great affection, even though they are beings incapable of friendship or love. Cherryh's trademark is her ability to craft nonhuman linguistic systems as the basis for alluring alien psychology, here superbly resolved through meticulous attention to culture-shaping detail. She proves throughout these novels that no one knows his own language, or his own people, or even himself, until he masters at least one tongue thought and spoken by others.



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