

The Second Chronicles of Amber Short Guide

The Second Chronicles of Amber by Roger Zelazny

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Characters

The growth of the protagonist — or his failure to grow — is at the heart of virtually all of Zelazny's fiction. In most genre fiction the protagonist solves a problem or defeats an enemy.

If there is any hint of moral, emotional, or psychological growth, it may seem merely formulaic or simply incidental to the plot. In Zelazny's best work, however, the development of the protagonist is both central and problematic. His heroes are always attractive, but they are usually morally flawed or psychologically stunted. Their problem is not only to complete a quest or defeat an enemy, but to deepen their own humanity.

Merlin, despite the fact that he is a sorcerer, a warrior, and a prince of two magical realms, faces some rather prosaic problems. He is a young man trying to come to terms with his family: a famous (and absent) father who is a stranger yet intimately familiar; a protective mother who hates his father; and a jealous and resentful step-brother. In addition, Merlin's former lover now bitterly resents him because (as he is beginning to understand) he was unable to trust her or confide in her.

Merlin is also trying to discover himself, to learn who he is and what he believes. Zelazny has transposed these common human problems to the level of high fantasy.

Merlin's step-brother Jurt and former lover Julia are both actively engaged in trying to kill him, using assassins, supernatural creatures, and a variety of magical spells. His mother saddles him with a guardian spirit which can temporarily possess any handy body to save Merlin from harm. And his father, though never actually present, still seems hauntingly near at hand. His family difficulties, moreover, involve concerns over the succession to the two major thrones of the universe. His own choices are apt to affect countless lives and the political and ontological balance of that universe. Nonetheless, the problems with which Merlin has to deal are recognizably human ones: Can he be true to others and remain true to himself? Will his level of moral maturity match his power? Will he grow to meet the challenges he faces?



Social Concerns/Themes

The first Chronicle of Amber ends at the Courts of Chaos, where Corwin, Prince of Amber, meets for the first time his son Merlin. Indeed the reader learns that the whole five-novel sequence has been a story told by Corwin to Merlin — a kind of autobiography and apologia. The second chronicle is Merlin's story.

Merlin is the son of Corwin and Dara, Princess of Chaos, Corwin's onetime lover and more recently his bitter enemy. Thus he is a son both of Amber and Chaos and a pivotal figure in the ongoing struggle between those two opposed realms. While the plot defies easy summary, it turns on Merlin's attempt to discover who is trying to kill him, a quest that involves him in a dizzying array of political machinations, family feuds, and lovers' vendettas. The struggle culminates in what appears to be an ultimate conflict between the powers of the Logrus and the Unicorn, the rival metaphysical entities underlying Chaos and Amber.

If this sounds confusing, it is, and Zelazny further complicates the plot by adding characters and plot twists at virtually every turn.

The reader has the strong sense of a writer delighting in making up his story as he goes along, but at least one reviewer has unflatteringly compared the novels to a television soap opera, with the frequent cliffhanger endings, the discovery of new relatives every few episodes, and the general sense of an author writing himself in and out of corners.

The principal theme of the first Amber sequence is the need for a dynamic balance between freedom (or chaos, energy) and pattern (or law, order, form), which are represented by Chaos and Amber. Chaos is the primordial condition of existence; Amber, long thought by its inhabitants to be the original world, is an offshoot of Chaos, the product of the genius of a rebel Lord of Chaos who created a Pattern.

Zelazny is here playing a variation on numerous creation accounts which portray the beginning of the universe not as a creation from nothing, but as the triumph of order over chaos. What makes Zelazny's version different is his celebration of balance. There is no suggestion that he regards order as morally or metaphysically superior to Chaos; it is a mistake to regard Chaos as evil and Amber as good. More precisely, his pairs are freedom and law, energy and pattern. None of the Amber books offers the opposition between good and evil seen in Christian-based fantasies like J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). On the contrary, the ideal requires a continuous balance between opposites, not the triumph of one over the other.

While it is impossible to make a definitive pronouncement on the themes of a novel sequence still in progress, Merlin's parentage is perhaps suggestive of the main thematic line.

As a child of both Chaos and Amber, one whose sole allegiance has been demanded by each side, Merlin plays a critical thematic role. Through the fourth novel he has resisted



efforts of the Logrus and the Unicorn to recruit him, insisting upon his dual allegiance to Amber and Chaos. It is likely that the ultimate resolution of the plot will revolve around Merlin's choices and that the precarious balance of Chaos and Amber will depend upon his ability and willingness to be true to both sides of his heritage, to both poles of his being.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

The second Amber sequence, like the first, is structured in part as a mystery story. Merlin attempts to discover who is trying to kill him and learns that there may be more enemies and more plots than he first imagined and that there are threats to more than just Merlin himself. Again, as in the first series, the hero spends a good deal of time listening to the stories of other characters — friends, enemies, and those who switch sides — as he tries to piece together a coherent account from their partial and contradictory tales.

There is less reliance on the epic techniques of the first sequence and a greater concentration on magic and court intrigue.

Zelazny's wide reading is reflected in his highly allusive style. Echoes of dozens of other works permeate the novel's texture. For example the name Merlin for a young sorcerer is at the very least suggestive, though it is not yet clear how much Zelazny will exploit the Arthurian parallel. There is a sustained allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), especially in a lengthy dream passage, and perhaps the invocation of Carroll suggests something of the novel's playful and often satiric tone.

Related Titles

Zelazny's principal precedent is his own first sequence of Amber novels.

Although he introduces new elements, Zelazny mainly elaborates on his previously created universe. Amber/ Chaos/Shadow are not as fully realized as Tolkien's Middle Earth or Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Land*, for example.

One has the sense that while there may be a good deal of vivid action going on in the foreground, the rest of the stage is decked with rather flimsy and illassorted props dredged from a theatrical company's archives. And yet there are hints, especially in the recent *Knight of Shadows* (1989), that Zelazny intends to explore the underlying significance of Amber and Chaos in much greater depth. Zelazny's fans may well hope so, for Amber has lost much of its original freshness and excitement.

Another problem with the second series is the fact that thus far Merlin is a less interesting character than Corwin. He lacks Corwin's maturity and painful experiences; as yet his emotional and psychological growth is more anticipated than real. Thus far, Zelazny seems to be capitalizing, admittedly in a generally entertaining way, on a previous success. Up to this point, the new Amber novels share the fate of most sequels: to be compared to the original and found wanting.



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