

# The Dolphins of Pern Short Guide

## The Dolphins of Pern by Anne McCaffrey

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# Characters

Most of the characters in *The Dolphins of Pern* are familiar to McCaffrey's readers. The main families in this story are Jayge and Aramina from *Renegades* (1989), who are the Lordholders of Paradise Cove. Readis is their oldest son. Their closest neighbors are Alemi and Kitrin, the Masterfisher of the hold. Alemi, introduced in *Dragonsong* (1976), is Menolly's older brother. The newest character is T'lion, a bronze dragonrider from Southern Weyr. He has responsibilities for transporting various people, and is drawn into the investigations of the dolphins.

One of the essential plot complications of the novel is the difficult relationship between Aramina and Readis.

Their relationship is loving and respectful, as should be between mother and son. However, Aramina has some specific aspirations for Readis: to be both Lord Holder after his father and to be a dragonrider, as she was too afraid to be. She is quite upset by Readis' seven-year-old fascination with the dolphins and requires him to stay away from the ocean. Readis, as a teen-ager, is willing to inherit the Lord Holder's position and sees no contradiction with that position and that of Dolphineer.

This difficult relationship is one of the few weaknesses of the novel, as it poses Aramina as a forceful, manipulative mother while her behavior as a girl in *Renegades* belies either of these qualities. Nevertheless, her animosity towards the dolphins may be representative of the planet's potential response to the intelligent animals. In fact, Readis is eventually given authority to be the Dolphinmaster — and given his mother's blessings to the post — only at the persuasion of another new character, The Tillek.

The Tillek is the griot and wisest of all the dolphins of Pern. Her honorable title is after James Tillek, a colonist leader and master sailor, who was revered by the earliest dolphins. She remembers the history of dolphins of Pern, remembers all the names, and sings all the songs annually. The Tillek initiates the dolphins into adulthood and reminds all the pods of their duty to the humans, although the humans have long forgotten their duty to the dolphins. The Tillek, also known as Theresa, has the clearest speech and a clear understanding of her responsibilities. As a liaison, she asks Jayge, Aramina, and the human leaders for the service of Readis as a dolphineer and undertakings his training. She is almost imperious in her requests but is also gentle and sensible.

McCaffrey's characters also explore relationships with others, especially siblings. Remarkably enough, while McCaffrey has ruptured the traditional barriers of the traditional, adolescent male audience of science fiction and has created female characters that do more than look good in the hero's arms, she has not, to this point, depicted women together, except a few kitchen servants as backdrop to the main action, or the services of an obedient daughter to her mother. One of her firsts, then, is a "woman's" scene, with Menolly, Aramina and Kitrin wading and swimming together. They all are significant women, with influential husbands, all mothers (two are pregnant)



in a rough-and-tumble colony; they swim together and discuss the homier aspects of life, marriage and children.

However, in depicting sibling relationships, McCaffrey comes up with a remarkable variety of possible interactions. One of the more interesting relationships she explores is that of Menolly and Alemi. As related in *Dragonsong*, their parents were critical of Menolly's musical talents and made life unbearable for her, so she ran away. Alemi respects her talents, but is too young to intervene; he is happy when Menolly is apprenticed at the Harper Hall. In *The Dolphins of Pern*, their relationship continues, as a harper is requested to teach a growing population of children.

Taking advantage of the opportunity to "enjoy" her pregnancy in a warmer climate, and the opportunity to spend time with her other brother, Menolly comes herself to teach. Their relationship is one of growing mutual respect for each other's interests and trust in their individual strengths.

On the other hand, T'lion, the younger brother, is harassed by his brother, K'din. T'lion is the subject of the culture's third unusual Impression of a dragon: He was too young to be a candidate but was attending his brother's Impression ritual. His brother impressed a brown; T'lion was unexpectedly chosen by a bronze. K'din, whose pride has been injured by this "insult," spends much time tattling on T'lion regarding the care of his dragon (which is never neglected), and spying on T'lion's visits with the dolphins.

However, his spying backfires when the dolphins give the Weyrleader and the Weyrwoman some long-awaited good news. Certainly, this has added fuel to the fire of conflict; this sibling rivalry will certainly be further featured.

## Social Concerns

This novel is the first full novel of the second generation of Pern, the Transition Phase. Because of the discovery of the Ancient's settlements on the Southern Continent, and more importantly, because of their discovery of Aivas (Artificial Intelligence VoiceActivated System) and this mega-computer's knowledge of Pern's history and lost technologies, the foundation of Pern is challenged. This challenge will be the basis of future "contemporary" Pern novels.

This novel raises a question that contemporary society is wrestling with, a question popularized by Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990): Is knowledge always good? What kinds of disciplines or controls are needed on scientific research? Because we can do a thing, are we required to do it — do we acquire knowledge for knowledge's sake? What are our responsibilities as leaders and teachers and scientists to the following generations? For the people of Pern, whose colonial charter emphasized minimal technology and specialization beyond essential services, the discovery of Aivas and its ready offer of scientific knowledge significantly alters its technological demands, its social order, and its future.

Another postmodern issue that McCaffrey takes up is the role of language in constituting and perpetuating a society. The harpers are already aware of their contributions to Pern's culture, but a new culture offers a new perspective. Dolphin culture on Pern is dependent on language given to them by genetic alteration — and they are aware of the gift of language to keep a history, to communicate with their companion-colonists, and to establish traditions as self-aware beings, rather than instinctive, unaware creatures.

McCaffrey's examination of these topics are timely and insightful.

# Techniques

The novel begins with a prologue set 102 years after landing. A pair of dolphins rings the dolphin's bell but no one answers. There are references to a great illness that has killed many animals: This appears to be contemporary with Moreta and Nerilka. It would appear, then, that humans lost contact with dolphins when the dolphineers died in the pandemic. This is not apparent to the people of Pern for whom the ocean rescues by "shipfish" are folklore and rumor.

The novel proper covers seven years of Pern life, with a jump of four years in one chapter, and three years in the next chapter. During this time, the characters grow up from impetuous youths to young men and women capable of fulfilling some serious responsibilities. Each chapter consists of four to seven sections of varying lengths and from varying perspectives. These are usually connected with a smooth transition from one person's thoughts and conversations to another's. The first five chapters have paragraphs at the end or at the end of a section; these paragraphs are in italics, depicting the dolphin pod's reporting to The Tillek of their successful contacts with the humans. It appears that, as the humans remember their former duties, the necessity for reporting and council lessens. The novel ends with an Epilogue that takes place shortly after Readis leaves for his apprenticeship with The Tillek, as the Pern leaders speculate over the meaning of the sad tune they heard, realize they have their own music to explain the events of the past few months, and look forward to getting to know the dolphins better.

Another first in this novel is the amalgamation of maps in the front of the novel. While the Northern Continent retains the familiar names, the Southern Continent has the names given to it by the original colonists, as recalled by Aivas. Except for a few unexplored areas and for the places that were named by its latest inhabitants, the residents have restored the old names for the places they now inhabit.



# Themes

The regaining of lost technology has had a radical impact on crafthalls, including: the introduction of computers, the transcription of information stored on disks, the inaugurations of a new crafthall dedicated to studying and repairing the machines, the creation of electric generators using wind and tides, the idea of surgery on humans and animals (most of the healers are too squeamish!), a communications device that resembles a cellular phone, more mining and additional smelting techniques to create silicon chips and stainless steel, a need to rediscover plastics, and a new school system designed to use Aivas' memory as well as to prepare young people to cope with future problems. The number of these rediscovered tools is quite overwhelming to a careful reader of McCaffrey's series; this planet is reeling with culture shock. Additionally, not all find this new information equally useful or desirable — a potential source of future conflict. Yet, the leaders of Pern are aware of the possible changes precipitated by Aivas' discovery and its input into the society.

Aivas' program is to stop Threadfall forever, a plan that occupies the time and attention of the Weyrleaders F'lar and Lessa, as the plan is dragon-labor intensive. The actual preparation and culmination is detailed in *All The Weyrs of Pern* (1991). Nevertheless, the elimination of this great planetary threat raises a host of questions that are repeatedly mulled over by various characters: what will happen to the dragons? As detailed in *Renegades* and *All Weyrs*, the weyrs claim a portion of the Southern Continent for themselves, since they will no longer function in their primary capacity and will no longer claim tithes of the other holds.

Clearly, the dragons are capable of a variety of other tasks — the transition will require dragonriders to recognize their versatility and to break with tradition.

While the human relationship with dragons is of cultural concern, the discover of another intelligent species on the planet raises the question: What do we do with the dolphins? McCaffrey adds an additional facet to this new relationship that puts it beyond the stereotypical "boy-and-his-dolphin" story; the dolphins have an independent and sophisticated culture. Interestingly, she draws a comparison between the dolphins and Menolly. Both have an affinity for music, and communicate their most heartfelt experiences through song. Additionally, Menolly has been where they are: ignored for their talents, neglected, even discriminated against. For many, the dolphins are fish, nonentities. Yet McCaffrey clearly rejects that position, underscoring the theme of a lost relationship between dolphins and humans, represented by the restored Dolphin Bell.

The theme of rediscovery and restoration has been sounding through the series almost since the beginning.

Aivas tells them the original charter and intention of the Pern colonists.

There is a growing sense, with the elimination of the threat of Thread, that somehow the culture has to return to create the society that was intended by its founders, the society

that got sidetracked by Thread. Clearly, the interpretations of intention are tricky at best, but the study of history may be a fruitful new avenue of study for this planet.





# Key Questions

While history allows us to look back at massive cultural and social changes with 20/20 hindsight, science fiction and fantasy allow us to explore our own transitions while in the middle of them, projecting possible outcomes based on current circumstances, unexamined assumptions, and probable human motivations. However, the greatest science fiction/fantasy texts bring with them their own history and culture. McCaffrey's first Dragonrider novels had a sense of a civilization that had faded from a more glorious past.

This depth allowed for greater embellishment for McCaffrey both of the characters and Pern, and of our character and earth. As you examine *The Dolphins of Pern* and these questions, consider the novel's ability to create Pern's history while exploring the implications of the reader's "future" history.

1. What do you make of Aramina's objections to Readis' interest with the dolphins? Does it seem real to you?

What points do her objections make?

2. Menolly, Sebel, and F'lessan have been schooled together. How do they represent the next generation of Pern?

How do Readis and T'lion enlarge the picture?

3. What kind of threat does Toric represent to Pern? How do the dragonleaders' goals for the Southern Continent differ from Toric's?

4. What does language mean to the dolphins?

5. What are the possible long-term implications of the information disks being utilized by the hold, weyr and crafthall leaders?

6. How has Alemi and Menolly's upbringing shaped their attitudes to change?

7. What does McCaffrey indicate in the social structure of dolphins? How does this compare and contrast with known dolphin behavior?

8. How does Master Robinton's death affect Pern? How does it affect the narrative of *Dolphins*? Does his funeral have any symbolic meaning?

9. How does McCaffrey use the details of aquatic life give dimension to dolphin culture?

10. What is the range of Pernese attitudes regarding the future of the dragons? The dolphins?

11. What new avenues of life have opened up by the impending elimination of Thread?



12. McCaffrey has been criticized by some readers for not providing a religion for the Pernese culture. The closest she comes to eschatology is in this novel, shortly before and during the state funeral of Master Robinton. What does she say about life after death on Pern?

## Literary Precedents

The Pern series appears to have taken a major turn in its history; this seems an imperative in a science fiction series of such scope. In this sense, McCaffrey's Pern is comparable to J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Frank Herbert's Dune, and Isaac Asimov's Foundation. All of these alternate worlds have been elaborately constructed, undergone many changes, and kept readers fascinated at every turn. This sweeping view of an entire world provides a perspective that is unique to science fiction readers, a perspective that offers insight into our own paradigm shifts.

All of these alternate worlds have been elaborately constructed, undergone many changes, and kept readers fascinated at every turn. This sweeping view of an entire world provides a perspective that is unique to science fiction readers. While history allows us to look back at paradigm shifts (drastic changes in world views of nations, cultures and belief systems, such as the divinity of kings, the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society, and the knowledge that the earth is not the center of the universe), science fiction and fantasy allow us to explore our own paradigm shifts in medias res and project possible outcomes based on current circumstances, unexamined assumptions, and probable human motivations. Thus contemporary science fiction/fantasy consistently explores our dilemmas stemming from our god-like power to save lives through better medicine or to destroy the world through more destructive weapons while hampered with our human faults of greed, pride and desire for power. As the range of McCaffrey's work has grown, so her position among the luminaries of the science fiction/fantasy worlds has also been assured — and comparison is inevitable.

On a smaller scale, The Dolphins of Pern is rooted in both mythology and popular fiction. Stories of dolphins saving sailors are as old as Greek legends and eighteenth-century American whaler's yarns. In a more contemporary vein, this story is perpetuated in marine shows all over the country, and television brings dolphins into the home, with friendly, doglike Flipper (of the 1960's Flipper) and useful Darwin of Seaquest DSV (1993+). Movies like Day of the Dolphin (1973) also warn how dolphins may be used for more malicious human purposes.

## Related Titles

"The Dolphin's Bell," a novella in its own right and reprinted in *The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall*, details the arrival of the first dolphins to Pern and their magnificent efforts to help save colonists during a terrible storm as they left the Southern Continent. In the same book, the short story "Rescue Run" explains the unique origins of the expansive murals in the new Honshu Hold.



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