

Dragonsong Short Guide

Dragonsong by Anne McCaffrey

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Overview

Dragonsong, one of the novels in the Pern series, is both an adventure tale and the story of a young woman finding a place for herself in her world. The overarching theme of the series is the strength of love, most dazzlingly embodied in the telepathic bond between a dragon and its rider. Scarcely less important is McCaffrey's portrayal of the seamless web of a society; one's talents and desires must be realized in the context of social responsibilities. Failure here can bring consequences as dire as destruction of the planet's life forms.

But the world also provides ways for an individual's dreams and gifts to blossom in whatever social setting will best nurture them.

All these themes are present in Dragonsong, which relates the story of Menolly. She has grown up in an isolated seahold, whose practical fisherfolk see no value in the music she loves so much. Before she discovers her destiny, she is battered again and again—by her own mother's indifference to the hand injury which makes it impossible for her to play music, by hunger and isolation, and threat of death from Threadscore.

She finally sees a more accepting way of life among the dragonriders, but she fears she can never aspire to join them.

Menolly's escape from her restrictive life forms the basis of her adventures.

Readers cringe as she tears her feet on the rocks fleeing Thread, and share her sheer delight as a flock of fabulous fire lizards adopt her as "their" person.

Along the way, Menolly learns important lessons: that the first adult to tell her what to do may not be the wisest and that small deeds of kindness or bravery can have great results.



About the Author

Anne McCaffrey was born on April 1, 1926 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Her father, George Herbert McCaffrey, a city administrator and a colonel in the U.S. Army, served as political advisor to General Mark Clark. Her mother, Anne Dorothy McElroy McCaffrey, was a copywriter and real estate agent as well as the author of several unpublished mysteries. Anne McCaffrey began writing during her childhood in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. She created and produced a fantasy play at camp and wrote two short novels during her school years.

McCaffrey graduated from Radcliffe College in 1947 with a degree in Slavic languages and literature. After graduation she worked in New York City with World Trade Intelligence, Liberty Music Shops, and Helena Rubenstein. In 1950 she married H. Wright Johnson and moved to Wilmington, Delaware, where her interest in music and drama led to her involvement with the Wilmington Opera Society. Between 1958 and 1965 she directed and performed in a number of musical plays. Many of McCaffrey's later novels, including the Harper Hall trilogy. *The Crystal Singer* (1982), *Killashandra* (1985), and *The Ship Who Sang* (1970) make use of her strong musical background.

During the 1950s McCaffrey's three children were born and her first science fiction stories were published. "Freedom of the Race" appeared in *Science Fiction Plus* in October 1953, and "The Lady in the Tower" was published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in April 1959. In the 1960s she published a series of stories in various magazines; these were later expanded into the novel *The Ship Who Sang*. Analog published two stories, "Weyr Search" and "Dragonrider," each of which won a top science fiction award: the Hugo for the former and the Nebula for the latter. These two stories, incorporated in the novel *Dragonflight* (1968), marked the beginning of her acclaimed Pern series. Other books by McCaffrey which appeared in these years include *Restoree* (1967), a science-fiction gothic, and *Decision at Doona* (1970).

In 1970, following a divorce, McCaffrey moved to Ireland and bought a home which she named *Dragonhold*, where she still resides. Her Irish heritage and her activities there, including involvement with animal care, the knitting of Aran sweaters, singing, and the study of meteorology and geology, are woven into her fiction. Her steady craftsmanship over the past two decades has produced a major body of science fiction. This includes the nine Pern novels, the *Crystal Singer* novels, *Dinosaur Planet* (1978) and *Dinosaur Planet Survivors* (1984), and several edited anthologies and collections. She also has written several contemporary novels: *A Stitch in Snow* (1984), *The Year of the Lucy* (1986), and *The Lady* (1987).

In many of McCaffrey's books a small paragraph appears in which the author says: "I have green eyes, silver hair, and freckles—the rest changes without notice." This is a fair description of the woman whose novels continue to delight and surprise a large and varied readership.

Setting

Dragonsong takes place on the planet Pern, which was settled by colonists from Earth some centuries earlier. Like medieval society, Pern is divided into three interdependent estates: the Weyrs of the dragonriders; the Holds which shelter the majority of the population and produce crops and other basic resources; and the Crafts, where technical and artistic skills are practiced. The planet's ecology is very unlike Earth's.

Because of the erratic Red Star which orbits its sun, Pern is subject to periodic attacks of Threadfall—streams of spores falling into its atmosphere from the Red Star, which devour all organic matter they touch. The indigenous animal life is different too. Long ago genetic scientists from the colony ship bred huge sapient dragons from the native fire lizards. These dragons, with their ability to breathe out flame, form the primary defense against Threadfall. Perhaps because of this planetwide menace as well as a shared cultural heritage, Pern is not divided into warring nations.

Human nature is much the same on Pern as anywhere else. The planet has its share of ambitious Lord Holders seeking to extend their lands by any means possible, as well as those who disregard duty to pursue their personal desires.

No amount of description, however, can convey the full magic of the setting.

Some readers have been so taken with Pern that they "adopt" replicas of the mischievous fire lizards to wear upon their shoulder and organize local fan clubs along the line of a Craft, Weyr, or Hold. The books' paperback editions have drawn some of the best science fiction and fantasy artists as illustrators. Michael Whelan's covers for the Dragonrider trilogy, and Rowena Morrill's for the Harper Hall books, evoke the wonder of this world.



Social Sensitivity

McCaffrey's disdain for violence subtly structures the content of *Dragonsong* and the other Pern novels. Excitement and daring deeds abound, but natural phenomena supply the menace. Dragonriders fight against Thread, not human antagonists. In *Moreta* an epidemic plays a similar role. Occasionally an angered character pulls a knife.

Usually he is swiftly disarmed, as all three estates prefer to settle conflicts by discussion and consensus. The meetings of Weyrmen and of Lord Holders illustrate how issues can be settled by open and peaceful—if heated—conversation.

No point is made of the physical traits of the inhabitants of Pern. Character and behavior matter more than appearance. Indeed, McCaffrey shows a sensitivity far beyond most contemporary writers in the diversity of her major characters. Lessa is short, wiry, self-assured, and assertive. Menolly is tall, rangy, modest, and shy. Neither woman's looks nor personality bars her from achievement, or from attaining a fine romance.

The only feature which seems insensitive is the situation of the drudges. They are backdrop characters who labor in the kitchens and stables, devoting their lives to routine dirty work. It might help the reader's understanding to know that drudges are not indentured servants, much less slaves. Rather, their presence shows a society which provides a secure and useful role for everyone—the slowwitted and unambitious as well as the gifted and heroic.

Literary Qualities

Menolly's story is told from a shifting viewpoint. McCaffrey presents actions not involving Menolly, such as the search for her along the seacoast by her brother and the new Sea Hold harper, Elgion. This episode highlights the irony and deepens the readers' understanding. The harpers don't care that the singer of such splendid songs is female.

But Menolly has no way of knowing this; her father's obstinacy has delayed Elgion's arrival until after Menolly has fled.

The planet colonized from Earth is a common device in science fiction. It enables writers to show recognizably human persons reacting to totally new conditions. The cultures that evolve may be very different from those the colonists left behind on Earth. Only a few writers, however, have matched McCaffrey's skill in combining these science fiction premises with the motifs of myth and fantasy. Dragons breathe fire in many tales, but McCaffrey's novels give an explanation of how they do it—by ingesting phosphine-rich firestone which turns into a pulpy, hot mass in their second stomach. Human-animal rapport is another frequent element of fantasy.

McCaffrey elaborates the emotional component of such bonds. At the same time she contrasts the steady, protective affection of the huge dragons with the flighty intelligence of the little fire lizards.

Ireland, which is now McCaffrey's home, provides much of Pern's imagery.

One critic has traced Yeats's influences upon the novels. The very name "Pern" may be derived from Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium," which contains the phrase "perne in a gyre" to represent the cycles of history. Timekeeping on Pern is also marked by Turns, and the cyclic reappearance of Thread in the skies allows for both a cyclic and a progressive view of history.

Likewise, Weyr leadership follows a Celtic model. In many ancient Celtic tribes, royal heritage descended through the female line. The king or chief attained his office by marriage to the queen. In the Weyrs, the golden queen dragon is the most important, since she lays eggs which hatch into the next generation of dragons. The queen dragon's rider, always a female, serves as Weyrwoman, overseeing the general management of the community. The Weyrwoman's mate then becomes the Weyrleader, who directs dragonriders' tactics in battling Thread. The Weyrwoman's choice is pivotal. She is unlikely to choose an ineffectual man as Weyrleader and mate, just as the ancient queens, aware of their responsibility, would choose a husband for his battle valor and leadership qualities.



Themes and Characters

Menolly of Half-Circle Sea Hold is the primary character of *Dragonsong*. As the book opens she is only fourteen, the youngest child of a Sea Holder father accustomed to hard work on the fishing fleet but limited in his imagination.

Moreover, Menolly is tall and big-boned, and she feels herself to be entirely too strong and awkward for the role of a daughter in this tradition-bound family.

She carries out the expected female duties, from cleaning slimy fish to caring for infirm older relatives, but her heart soars elsewhere. Inner songs bolster her spirit as she goes about her tasks. In the slivers of time between duties, she steals up to her sleeping cubicle to compose ballads. Menolly is a misfit in her home—an artist in a community of stolid folk—and even worse, a female dreamer.

Dragonsong's theme centers on a woman artist developing her own voice.

Everything Menolly does during her adventures—fleeing her home when her father forbids her to "tune" at all, using her skills and intelligence to survive in a cave along the seacoast, finding baby fire lizards who surprise her by appreciating her songs—leads to the climax when the Masterharper of Pern accepts her as his apprentice. He chooses her even though, as she gasps in wonder, "But I'm a girl."

The theme is not intrusive—one can read Menolly's adventure without noticing any "feminist" elements—but nonetheless her plight recapitulates that of many other women. In her home she is effectively silenced, first by housekeeping tasks and then by actual edict. Only in the solitude of her seaside exile does she find the time and self-esteem to accept her own talents. Yet the fire lizards' enjoyment of her songs is not enough. It takes a supportive human group, which she finds when recuperating at the Weyr, to ensure that she will grow and flourish in her craft.

Many other characters throng the pages of *Dragonsong*. They all function as supporting characters who affect Menolly's life. Her brother Alemi's highspirited curiosity about the wider world contrasts with her dour parents' disapproval. The dashing dragonrider T'gran rescues Menolly from Threadfall and takes her to Benden Weyr. The weyr-folk surround her with kindness. Among them are major characters from the other Pern novels: imperious Weyrwoman Lessa; her mate, the upright Weyrleader F'lar; sensitive Brekke who has suffered the inconsolable loss of her own dragon; droll Masterharper Robinton, a man who almost serves as the conscience of Pern. All these people welcome Menolly and help her find her place, but the story centers on Menolly.

Supporting themes are woven through the entire series. The life-giving quality of love is exemplified by Menolly's link with her fire lizards. The interdependence of society's parts is shown by the dragonriders' protection, the harpers' part in education, and the holds' provision of foodstuffs to the other estates.



Topics for Discussion

1. Petiron, the old harper at the Sea Hold, recognizes Menolly's talent. Why doesn't he simply tell Menolly's father that she is cut out to be a harper?
2. Do you think baby dragons and fire lizards know what they are doing when they "impress" one person? Or do they act out of blind instinct and chance?
3. Menolly's father honors the dragonriders, yet he will not let any other member of his Hold talk to them. Why?
4. Many fantasy stories show dragons as fierce, evil creatures whom the hero has to slay. Why do you think this author makes her dragons so different?
5. How does Menolly's self-image influence her attitudes and actions?
6. Dragonsong takes place during a time in the planet's history when many things are changing. What are some of the signs of social change in the book?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. People's problems in science fiction frequently have parallels to those in our own world. Explain how some of Menolly's problems resemble those faced by young people today.

2. The legends and landscape of Ireland influenced the author's design of the planet Pern. Describe some of Pern's geographic, occupational, and social features which have an Irish "feel." In what ways have they been changed to create a unique setting?

3. Imagine how you would make *Dragonsong* into a movie. Would you use live actors or animation? If you were photographing it, where would you film the scenes of Menolly's stay along the sea-cliffs, and of the dragonriders' Weyr? Who would play the main characters? How would you show the bond which develops between Menolly and her fire lizards?

4. Pern's society is divided into three "estates": Holds, Weyrs, and Crafts.

Describe how each operates to provide a living for its members and at the same time to furnish needed goods or services for the other two groups.

5. Compare Pern with another world created by a science fiction or fantasy author, such as Frank Herbert's *Dune*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Middle-earth*, C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*, or another of your choice. What methods do the authors use to give vividness to their portrayals?

To make the world believable and "livable"? How do the authors show their characters as related to their environment?

For Further Reference

Barr, Marlene. "Science Fiction and the Fact of Women's Repressed Creativity: Anne McCaffrey Portrays a Female Artist." *Extrapolation* 23 (1982): 70-75.

This scholarly article examines *Dragonsong's* theme from the perspective of recent feminist thought.

Brizzi, Mary T. *Anne McCaffrey*. Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1986.

(Starmont Reader's Guide 30) The only book-length study on McCaffrey gives an in-depth analysis of all her major fiction. In addition to considerable biographical information, it traces literary influences upon her work, discusses various interpretations of her fiction, and provides a list of primary and secondary sources.

Contemporary Authors. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, New Revision Series, vol.

15. The entry on McCaffrey gives biographical data, further sources, and a good overview of her Pern novels.

Searles, Baird, et al. *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction*. New York: Avon, 1979.

A short summary of her published work through 1979. For those who find McCaffrey's style and themes especially appealing, the article suggests other authors whose approach and "feel" are similar.



Related Titles

Dragonsong is the first book of a trilogy about young musicians. Its sequel, Dragonsinger, tells the story of Menolly's apprenticeship at Harper Hall. The third book, Dragondrums, shows the difficult first year of a younger drummer apprentice, Piemur, whose impulsive ways continually lead him into trouble.

The adult dragonrider trilogy, Dragonflight (1968), Dragonquest (1971), and The White Dragon (1978), complements the Harper Hall set. These novels focus upon the lives of dragonriders rather than those of musicians. The dragonriders' mobilization against the longabsent threat of Thread provides stirring action in Dragonflight, the first book of the series. F'nor's dangerous journey to Thread's source on the Red Star dominates Dragonquest. The White Dragon brings together almost all the characters from the other books, as social and technological change coincides with discoveries about the planet's history.

The adult novels are more complex in plot and theme than the Harper Hall books. They cover a longer span of time, and introduce considerations about the claims of custom, authority, and society.

A small amount of tastefully-handled sexual content forms an integral part of the two sub-plots. This trilogy, however, contains nothing beyond the understanding and appreciation of mature teenage readers. Seeing secondary characters from the Harper Hall books take a prominent place in the Dragonrider series is a particular delight for the reader.

A seventh novel, Moreta, Dragonlady of Pern (1983), describes the tragic mission of a heroine whose deeds become celebrated in the legends of the later dragonriders' era. Nerilka's Story (1986) is a short novel in the gothic romance mode about some of Moreta's secondary characters. A ninth Pern novel, Dragonsdawn (1988), relates the battle against the continuing threat of Thread, which begins to fall faster than the dragonriders can control. Only the fire-lizards appear to be able to fight it; they are too small to hold humans, however, so the characters must find a way to genetically restructure these creatures.



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