

Enchantress from the Stars Short Guide

Enchantress from the Stars by Sylvia Engdahl

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Overview

Enchantress from the Stars is a fable for the space age. It tells a stirring story about a handful of people who manage to turn back a powerful invading Empire. The novel has other dimensions of meaning beyond the plot, however. It evokes questions about the responsibilities of more advanced societies toward primitive ones, about the ability of individuals to grow and to make a difference in their world, and about the many possibilities the universe may hold.

About the Author

Sylvia Louise Engdahl was born in Los Angeles, California, on November 24, 1933. She attended several colleges and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1955. Following graduation she taught elementary school for a year and then became a computer programmer and systems specialist for the SAGE Air Defense System, a position she kept for more than ten years. She has borrowed extensively from these career experiences to enhance the fictional worlds that she creates.

In 1968 Engdahl turned her attention full-time to writing. *Enchantress from the Stars* was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1971, and all of Engdahl's novels have had a strong popular reception. Engdahl has edited two anthologies of science fiction stories—*Universe Ahead: Stories of the Future* (1975) and *Anywhere, Anywhen: Stories of Tomorrow* (1976)—and has also written several nonfiction books for young people on scientific subjects. In 1980 Engdahl returned to computer programming and has recently developed and promoted software for home computers.

She pursues her interest in social evolution through the study of anthropology.

Setting

The novel takes place on Andrecia, the "third planet of a medium-sized yellow star." Its further location in time and space is not specified, but it is clearly one planet of a universe that includes many inhabited planets in different star systems. The action of the story unfolds within a relatively small area on Andrecia—a forest bordered by a river, some surrounding land which holds a village, and the new colonists' settlement on one edge of the forest.

The planet has earth-type vegetation.

Unlike the settings of some science fiction novels, neither the cultural nor the physical background are very strange.

Nor are they evoked in extraordinary depth or detail. Andrecia could be the medieval earth of song and story, although the presence of intruders from two far-off planetary systems makes this seem unlikely. The opening and closing sections of the book show Elana, the protagonist, on a starship above Andrecia, with the rest of the galaxy waiting beyond.



Social Sensitivity

The characters of *Enchantress from the Stars* come from three different planets and differ in physical features and cultural background. All are human in their essential traits. A few "bad" individuals among the Imperial troops treat the Andrecian natives as subhumans who can be killed with impunity. The text deals at length with the error of such an attitude. By bringing this topic into sharp focus, Engdahl invites the reader to consider a wide variety of similar problems—from the United States government's past treatment of Native Americans, to humanity's possible reaction if ever faced with an intelligent, extraterrestrial race very different from itself. The weaving of such issues into the story lifts it above the average adventure tale.

Enchantress from the Stars was written in 1970, at a time when issues of gender and language were just beginning to be widely discussed. Although the text consistently features terms now viewed as sexist—"man" or "men" when the meaning is "humanity" or "people"—the author cannot fairly be blamed for usage that was almost universal at the time. Engdahl's announced aim is to make space and science fiction more interesting to women, and *Enchantress from the Stars*, with its engaging female protagonist, serves this purpose well.

Literary Qualities

The novel begins in true fairy-tale fashion: "At the edge of the Enchanted Forest there lived a poor woodcutter who had four sons ... " Before this opening, however, the reader receives a signal that Enchantress from the Stars is more than a book-length fairy tale. The prologue opens with an image drawn from space-age deeds, not legend: "The planet shines below us, cloud-flecked, dazzling against the dark backdrop of space." Much of the sense of wonder and delight in this book comes from the skillful way it combines the world views of three characters. Throughout the story, scenes alternate between Elana's, Georyn's, and Jarel's point of view.

Georyn, like his people, sees the world in mythical terms. When Elana appears to him, naturally she seems like an Enchantress. Around her neck she wears a magic Emblem. Her words too are full of magic, because although she does not speak his language, he can understand her clearly. The whole of Georyn's story is told in an archaic style.

"Fell dangers" lurk just beyond his vision, and the dreadful menace of the dragon always looms up ahead.

Elana's experiences are related as first-person narrative—a technique that enables the reader to understand what is going on in the larger plan, because Elana plans to incorporate her narrative into a later report for her Federation.

Elana provides the reader with a straightforward account of her work with her father and Evrek, but also reveals her inner thoughts. Her thrill at seeing a totally new planet comes through vividly, and the reader shares her fright as she is thrown into dangerous situations where she cannot use her telepathic powers.

Jarel's story is told in an ordinary third-person manner, but is no less vivid. He too walks outdoors reveling in the vistas of a wooded countryside. But knowing that this terrain, along with its inhabitants' lives, must be wrecked to accommodate the colonists' needs, he finds his enthusiasm turning to irritation as the story progresses.

The triple-viewpoint approach reveals other subtle truths. For example, only the outsiders Jarel and Elana appreciate the sheer beauty of Andrecia. Georyn simply sees the planet as his daily environment, full of natural and supernatural hazards that he must overcome as best he can.



Themes and Characters

Elana, a young woman from a civilization incredibly advanced beyond our own, has grown up with high ideals and plans to follow in her parents' footsteps as a field agent in the Anthropological Service, which protects less developed peoples from outside interference. Her studies have barely begun when she is thrown unprepared into a field mission.

She stows away in a shuttle ship, expecting only to have a look at a new, unspoiled planet, but random events plunge her into a central role in a scheme to save Andrecia from disruptive colonization. All her talents—from the telepathic powers held by her race to her own emotional sensitivity and courage—are called upon in what follows.

Also important to the story is Georyn, who sets out with his brothers on the high quest of dragonslaying. His brothers, motivated by the King's promises of riches and glory, soon fail. But Georyn seeks knowledge, and his openness to experiences beyond the usual prepares him to tackle the "dragon" with some chance of success.

The third significant character is Jarel, a young physician assigned to the troop contingent of the colonizing Empire. Jarel seeks both adventure and a role in his Empire's manifest destiny of expansion. But almost from the moment he arrives on Andrecia, he sees the less uplifting aspects of colonization—the destruction of the planet's balanced ecology, and the cavalier treatment of its natives. Yet he is under military discipline and must consider the effect any shrinking from his duties would have on his future career.

Two other characters play a significant part in the story. Elana's father, known to Georyn as the Starwatcher, and Elana's friend and future fiancé, Evrek, work with Elana to prepare Georyn for his assault on the dragon. Additional characters also enter into the story, but their motives and actions are not explored in detail.

One central theme unites the experiences of the three major characters.

Each has to reach beyond his or her previous abilities to attain a worthwhile goal. This requires not only bravery and faith in the goal, but a willingness to cope with the seemingly impossible.

Elana's last instruction to Georyn is that "in the end he must lose that which he deems most necessary to the triumph of good." In different ways, all three go through just such an ordeal. Georyn loses both his Stone of Power and the girl he has come to love. Elana gives up her illusions that problems can be solved painlessly and agonizes over breaking a solemn oath to accomplish a higher good. Jarel jeopardizes his career prospects to obey his conscience. The message of all these events is clear. Both individuals and cultures grow only through such testing.



The novel builds on the underlying assumption that, barring outside interference, all societies evolve according to a similar pattern. Ethical and social progress is shown as an inevitable consequence of technological progress. This view is explicitly and repeatedly stated in conversations between Elana and her father, the "wise man" of the story. The device of technological civilizations manipulating or overrunning more primitive ones appears frequently in science fiction. It is used here with much attention to the problems that might accompany such cross-cultural contact.



Topics for Discussion

1. Suppose Elana was stranded on Andrecia. Would the other Andrecians accept her as a good enchantress as Georyn did? Or would they be frightened and believe her to be an evil witch? Is there any chance Elana and Georyn could marry and live happily ever after?

Do you think the Federation would try to rescue her?

2. Which of the three main characters—Elana, Georyn, and Jarel—do you think shows the most courage? Why?

Which of them is likely to have his or her life changed the most by the events in the novel?

3. What evidence is there that Elana's Federation is more technologically advanced than Jarel's Empire? What evidence is there that the Federation is more morally advanced?

4. The book shows a highly developed civilization, with telepathic powers, that keeps itself hidden from other human races. Do you think Elana's civilization is right to do so?

5. In the end Elana must lose "that which she deems most necessary to the triumph of good." What does she lose?

Why? Do you think she is justified in what she does?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. At one point Elana's father assures her that the Imperials have outgrown barbaric punishments and unrelieved poverty, and in time will outgrow other social evils, too. This implies that social or ethical progress always accompanies technological progress. Do you think this is true? Support your arguments with examples both from the novel and from human history.

2. An important part of *Enchantress from the Stars* is the way people interpret what they see according to what their culture has taught them to see. To Georyn, the rock-chewer is a dragon, while to Elana and Jarel it is simply a machine. To Jarel's people, belief in telepathy is a sign of mental illness, while both Elana and Georyn accept telepathy easily. How would someone from a world like Georyn's describe a computer or an aircraft? How would someone from a Federation without crime or war explain a violent television program?

3. Not every advanced civilization in science fiction operates as highmindedly as Elana's Federation does.

Read another science fiction novel about an advanced civilization and compare it with the Federation.

4. What do you think Elana's home planet is like? Describe some features of its landscape and its culture. How do you imagine its citizens who are not members of the Anthropological Service spend their time?

5. On many old maps, certain areas were marked "There be dragons here," a message that warned people of danger or of unknown conditions. Are there explanations for the presence of so many dragons in folklore? What about such creatures as mermaids, unicorns, elves, and werewolves? Do these other creatures symbolize abstract concepts, as the dragon represents danger or evil in this novel?

For Further Reference

Engdahl, Sylvia, and Rick Robertson, eds. *Universe Ahead: Stories of the Future*. New York: Atheneum, 1975.

Engdahl's introduction and her selection of stories highlight her unique view of what science fiction is all about.

Le Guin, Ursula K. "Review." *New York Times Book Review* (May 3, 1970): 2223. A short review by a renowned writer with whose work Engdahl's has sometimes been compared.

Metzger, Linda, ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 14.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. Contains biographical information, along with a section explaining Engdahl's intentions in her writing.

Related Titles

Elana, the young woman in *Enchantress from the Stars*, is also the central character of a second novel by Engdahl, *The Far Side of Evil*. In the latter book Elana has become a fully trained field agent. Sent as an observer to a world on the brink of nuclear self-destruction, she is soon plummeted into danger and further ethical dilemmas.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996