

Eon Short Guide

Eon by Greg Bear

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Characters

In this idea-driven novel, the characterizations receive less attention than speculation or science. Nonetheless Eon has hosts of characters, major and minor, most of whom dot the pages as mere names or functionaries, types both human and nonhuman. Among the latter are such beings as the Frants and Talsits, interesting mainly as curiosities. Bear acknowledges some sixtyfive speaking parts.

Among the handful of highly visible characters, Patricia Luisa Vasquez stands foremost. She is twenty-four years old, brilliant, and possesses a doctorate and publications in mathematics and physics. At Patricia's first arrival on the Stone, she represents her countrymen's hope to forestall by scientific means the nuclear war on Earth, recorded in the Stone's archives. It is mainly through the eyes of Patricia that the reader comes to know the Stone and its enigmatic seventh chamber, the infinite Way.

Patricia reacts with appropriate wonder as she tries to calculate alternate time-lines, universes, the Stone's origin. The reader shares her emotional investment and urgency as she learns the libraries' awful secrets. The reader can sympathize with Patricia's confusion at learning about her future research's role in the Stone's development, and with her efforts to cope with the loss when all her loved ones back on Earth perish. Patricia later devotes herself to finding her way home via a link with an alternate universe, which is possible in the altered physics in the Way. Patricia's eventual failure is a warning about the limits to human intelligence.

Garry Lanier is the calmly competent, observant, and responsible scientist/administrator. As coordinator of science, engineering, and communications, Garry shows Patricia around the Stone and goes after her when she is taken to Axis City by an intriguing homorph. For the reader, Garry's perspective serves both to interpret the Stone and balance Patricia's surprise and shock at its nature and destructive role in Earth's history. His own sense of anxiety, though tempered, resonates with hers. Garry's character underscores the struggle with alienation that pervades the novel. "We are completely out of our element," he tells the Hexamon's ruling chamber, the Nexus, as he pleads for aid to his group and the now-devastated Earth.

Besides serving the theme of change and adaptation, Garry represents the perspective on healing social ills often found in Bear's fiction. "Perhaps we can rewrite history," Garry tells the Chamber. He also tells Pavel the Russian, another sympathetic character, that "We're here to break the pattern of the past, not continue it."

Pavel Mirsky is a key figure to the novel's themes of forsaking the past. At the time of the invasion attempt on the Stone he is a lieutenant colonel, but he soon receives a field promotion to the rank of general. After the Russians' defeat, Pavel's advocacy of peaceful abandonment of revolutionary ideals arouses the ire of some of his own highly indoctrinated men, who shoot him. He only survives when the building he is in, equipped with automatic medical capacity, rebuilds his damaged head and brain. Thus Pavel also serves the theme of potential mental and physical healing through advanced



technology. Pavel represents the capacity to adapt completely, to find his identity in total separation from homeland. At the novel's end he is one character who declines to return to Earth, choosing instead to cast his lot in Axis City.

The extent of the body reconstruction of Pavel is eclipsed by that of another major character, Olmy, the human "corporeal homorph." At the time he meets the visitors, his body, rebuilt for his third incarnation, is self-contained and needs little fuel, running as it does on a power supply installed in his abdomen. His return to life was made possible, as with any of his people, by a device that kept his experience and personality on record. He is engaged at the novel's outset by Axis City's Presiding Minister to investigate the reoccupation of the Stone.

Olmy is an enigmatic person, mystifying the reader by kidnapping the grief-stricken Patricia and secluding her in Axis City, far from her friends.

Later Olmy reveals his personal agenda, which is to copy Patricia's soul-like "super-pattern," or "Mystery" on certain partial personality elements in his possession, thus returning to active life Konrad Korzenowski, the engineer responsible for developing the Stone and the Way.

The encounter between Patricia, whose scientific treatises Konrad used in his work on the Stone, and Konrad himself is one way Bear plays upon the theme of time. Hundreds of years after the novel's era, Konrad had used Patricia's published mathematical concepts to construct the Way. When the two meet, Konrad is confronting his intellectual ancestor. As the novel concludes, Konrad and Olmy stand ready to force the people on Earth, whom they have joined, to undergo Hexamon mental purging for social health. This raises the ominous theme that human strife may in the future be lessened by methods which curtail self-determination.

Secondary but notable characters include Lawrence Heineman, Lenore Carrolson, and Karen Farley, who at one point join Garry's search for Patricia. Lawrence, a brave pilot, flies the Earth party's aircraft along the Way.

Lenore is a senior science supervisor and Nobel laureate. At the novel's close Lawrence and Lenore are back on a devastated Earth, married, and engaged in a debate that involves an important social theme. Lawrence has concluded that his kind, the engineers, scientists and technicians, are "the very tools of Satan." Lenore counters with the view that "engineers were as much responsible for saving the Earth as for destroying it."

Karen Farley is a member of the Chinese science team, who eventually pairs off with Garry. Like him, she exemplifies adjustment to change. Another minor character is Prescient Oyu, a female homorph with artificially heightened gender and leadership traits. At a site along the Way her father, Ry Oyu, teaches Patricia the working of the "clavicle," the instrument by means of which gates may be opened to alternate universes — hopefully one that will lead Patricia home.



Social Concerns

Eon is a complex novel of wide scope, in which Bear explores a multiplicity of social issues, some painted with a broad brush, others dealt with subtly as background. The first social concern presented is that of rivalry and distrust among nations on Earth, primarily the Soviet Union with its Eastern Bloc versus the United States and its allies. In Eon the Cold War is still going on in the year 2000.

When a huge asteroid from space drifts into an orbit around Earth, the United States takes the lead in putting an international team of scientists aboard.

After several years of being denied full access, the Soviet government seeks militarily to seize the asteroid, by now dubbed "the Stone." On Earth, the heated situation erupts in sudden, all-out nuclear war, and within hours the advanced nations on both sides lie in ruins.

This situation is prelude to a long, cold, radiation-laced aftermath for the survivors. The concern of international conflict, which is fueled by long-standing tensions and wrong-headed national leadership, gains additional poignancy from the fact that aboard the Stone — an artifact from the future — there exist historical records of the nuclear war. Since in the Earth team's time frame the war back home is still a few weeks off, American characters try to avert it, although unsuccessfully.

Other major social concerns emerge when the newcomers trapped aboard the Stone meet its inhabitants. Several of the Stone's vast chambers contain deserted cities, in good repair and with electric power operational. The inhabitants who left things this way are humans, although they do not always appear as such because of various body enhancements that resulted from adapting to a future environment.

The people of the Stone dwell in Axis City, which lies far up the infinitely long corridor formed centuries earlier by manipulating space and time. Numbering 100 million, either in corporeal or incorporeal form, the people are descendants of survivors of Earth's nuclear war of 2005 — people who built the Stone for intergalactic travel but who abandoned that idea later. Now calling themselves the Hexamon, they are divided into two political parties. One is called the Naderites (after twentieth-century consumer-advocate Ralph Nader) and the other is called the Geshels, who oppose the Naderites' conservative stance and unstintingly embrace science as the key to advancement and lifestyle. Members of both parties enjoy a high level of technology — the means to travel at fantastic speeds, have the decor of their homes changed instantaneously, enter alternate universes, overcome death.

Yet they squabble incessantly over matters of government, and many individuals are denied self-determination.

Technology is seen to have disadvantages as well as advantages. Also war is harsh reality, thanks to the Hexamon's enemies, the nonhuman, warlike Jarts.

Techniques

The narrative approach of Bear in Eon consists of rapid-fire alternation of scenes and point-of-view characters.

The quick shifts also help to lend urgency to a plot about worlds in crisis, where races against time prevail. The breakneck pace not only frames races against time, but helps make up for the fact that most of Eon's characters are not fully rounded.

Critical commentary on Bear indicates that he typically has his characters embody his thematic concerns.

Eon's characters invite the reader to share their sense of awe about the Stone, of the impending doom and alienation after the various abrupt changes. Another way Bear conveys the immensity and wonder of the Stone is through the use of huge numbers. The inhabitants of the way number 100 million. Their vehicles propel them at speeds upward of 4,900 kilometers per second. Access is available to billions of alternate universes. Finally and significantly, well-worked-out science informs almost every page. The world created by Bear is filled with imaginative wonders.

Themes

The themes dealt with in Eon include alienation, change, the hope for adaptability and survival. The interior of the Stone is at once familiar and alien, with its seven chambers containing forests, lakes, cities, the machinery that generates power and that at an earlier time developed the infinite corridor called "the Way." The corridor defies the laws of physics as known to the new arrivals from Earth, who must adapt to all the unfamiliar phenomena.

Time is another important aspect. As characters move from the first to the seventh chambers and beyond, they travel by stages into the future until their own era is the distant past.

Another important theme relates to possibilities for social healing when there is willingness to forsake the past.

Repressive ideology is responsible for bad decisions by the Soviets, who attack on Earth and attempt to invade the Stone. Yet when Pavel Mirsky, a Russian officer, sees the wisdom of casting aside Leninist ideals, he faces trouble from Communist die-hards within his own ranks. The value of casting off the past is communicated strongly in the novel's close, when Axis City's ruling Geshels prefer to send the city down the Way at one-third the speed of light rather than confront their foes, the Jarts.

The theme of human destiny pervades the novel, frequently interwoven with its technology-based elements. For example, dwellers in Axis City virtually attain eternal life, since their personality patterns can be altered, copied, and after several legally permitted reincarnations, stored indefinitely in "City Memory." However, identity is less free and more a product of scientific determination. Also, for all of Bear's characters individuality seems less important than the historical process, always subject to change. Protagonist Patricia Vasquez — the mathematician sent to unravel the laws of physics that govern the Stone — fails to find the identity she seeks in a parallel universe, an Earth that has undergone no nuclear holocaust. Thus Bear implies that although technology may yield staggering advances in the physical realm, it can only provide limited personal and social solutions.



Key Questions

Although the Soviet Union and the communist threat are no longer the factors in world politics they once were, Eon presents issues of international conflict which have contemporary relevance. The novel's focus on contemporary issues of international conflict and nuclear threat should provide ample opportunity for discussion.

In general, Bear's fiction treats themes of humankind's future prospects. Another aspect of Eon in this regard is the use of technology to change human life for the better.

A factor in Eon is the scientists' problem of getting politicians to understand the significance of the great scientific discovery, the Stone. The novel is not Bear's only work to reflect concern about ignorance of science on the part of politicians and the public. This, too, can be a fruitful topic for discussion.

1. Do you find the science in Eon too intrusive? Would you enjoy seeing more of the traditional approach of literature, more emphasis on characterization, plot, style?
2. At the beginning of the novel, Patricia Vasquez is glad to embark on a job assignment that takes her away from Earth. By the novel's mid-point she is working hard to get home, and by the end that is her one goal. Trace Patricia's shift in viewpoint.
3. If Patricia represents the brilliant, intuitive scientist, and Garry Lanier the able, caring administrator, what is suggested by Bear's pairing of the two?

Does he believe that productive science must match both types, or something else?

4. Irony figures strongly in Eon. Patricia's ambitions are turned around.

Pavel, once a staunch Soviet, "defects."

Nobel laureate Lenore Carrolson pairs with Heineman, the daring pilot — who at the end embraces Christianity, which he once scorned. What is Bear conveying?

5. Discuss the Soviet Russian characters. Pavel is fascinating, but consider also the other soldiers from the invasion force — their mentalities, their attitudes, their burden of history. What does Bear think of Russia and its history?

6. In Eon, hosts of technological advances are available to the future people called the Hexamon. Yet has the character of politics been improved?

Are the Naderites and Geshels comparable to real political parties you know?

7. How are readers persuaded to suspend disbelief when reading Eon?

Take into account such improbable sites as the Stone, the Way, Axis City.



Consider such alien beings as Frants, Talsits, homorphs; and gates opening to alternate universes.

8. Good science fiction is said to be predictive. To what degree does Eon pose plausible scenarios for the future?

9. As Eon draws to a close, the reader, instead of receiving resolutions, is presented with new characters and new situations. For example, the conflict between the Hexamon and the Jarts heats up, and the potentially strong character Korzenowski appears. Do these efforts to "set up" the sequel Eternity mar the ending of Eon?

10. Much goes on throughout Eon. Is it too much? Is the novel difficult to follow?

Literary Precedents

Science fiction authors typically share the stock motifs of alien contact, time travel, life and battles in space.

Eon falls within the conventions of hard science fiction. The novel follows precedents established by such hard science fiction pioneers as Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, H. G. Wells, and Olaf Stapledon.

The awesomeness of the strange world called the Stone is standard science fiction fare, developed from Stapledon's depictions of the universe in his *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937). Eon's "spaceship" the Stone and its off-Earth battle draw from "space opera" pulp adventure stories of the 1930s by authors such as E. E. Smith and John W. Campbell. Like Asimov, however, Bear tones down the sensationalism and explores ideas.

The nuclear war in Eon and efforts afterward to assist victims bears some resemblance to a plot in Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), by which people return home to Earth to face a similar situation. Eon also employs a time-travel motif used before, such as in Heinlein's story "By His Bootstraps" which, in turn, is indebted to Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895). Wells is understood to have established the precedents for subsequent stories which explore problems associated with time travel. Bear cleverly revises the "alien invasion" motif and theme of evolution conceived by Wells in *War of the Worlds* (1898), which involves Europeans and Martians. The "aliens" of Eon are really evolved humans.

Additionally, critical commentary suggests some kinship with *The Time Machine's* division between Eloi and Morlocks and Bear's Naderites and Geshels. Also, Bear has acknowledged the influence of Joseph Conrad, an author outside science fiction. Critical commentary points to Bear's use of Conrad's real last name for the character Konrad Korzenowski [in Polish, spelled Korzeniowski], although the significance is not really clarified until Eon's sequel *Eternity* (1988).



Related Titles

The short story "The Wind from a Burning Woman" (1978) first posed the concept of a seven-chambered asteroid and a conflict between parties called Naderites and Geshels. In the story a vengeful young woman steers the asteroid toward a collision with Earth.

The novel Eternity is a sequel to Eon which continues the unfinished story lines. The Hexamon's enemies the Jarts appear and interact with characters familiar from Eon. Pavel explores the distant future. Patricia's granddaughter Rhita Vaskayza searches for a way to Earth. Legacy (1995) is a prequel, which considers the mysteries of the Way.

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