

The Faded Sun Short Guide

The Faded Sun by C. J. Cherryh

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Characters

Like his fictional predecessor Vanye of *The Book of Morgaine* (1976-1988), Niun is a warrior prevented by circumstance from proving himself as his tradition demands. As the last of the mri Kel remaining on Kesrith, he must avert the extinction of his people by assuming a responsibility for which he has had no training but the Kel heritage that now seems impossible to use.

His growth through *The Faded Sun* as he adapts to necessity and suffering offers a pattern for the survival of the mri, who will serve as the "Face that Looks Outward," "a sharp sword, to part the Dark" for men.

Melein, the she'pan Niun serves, embodies not only Cherryh's concept of leadership; Melein is also a messianic figure born to lead the mri out of their devastating bondage to the regul, through a long initiation voyage home, and finally into a new phase in their destiny. As she'pan of all the People, Melein develops "coldness for a heart" because she must surgically separate the mri from their past in order to assure them a future. Niun is agonizingly caught between his devotion to her, integral to mri life, and his pity for Duncan, who willingly offers himself to bridge the gap between their cultures.

Duncan, because of his pivotal position in *The Faded Sun*, is one of Cherryh's most significant characters. He shares Niun's need to prove himself, but even more difficult, Duncan must accept the strictures of an alien society and a code of honor his own culture has long dismissed as outworn. He chooses to remain with the mri in Kutath, making it possible for men and mri to open a new relationship between their races, one that will allow them both to heal and mature.

As in most of her work, Cherryh enriches *The Faded Sun* with meticulously developed alien races, each with consistent modes of language and behavior. The regul of *The Faded Sun*, beings with total recall but lacking ethics and imagination, suggest the danger of relying solely on pure information, while the dusei, the great empathetic beasts of Kesrith, mark with their devotion those men and mri "who would look longest and deepest into the Dark," the pathfinders without whom no progress, however painful, can be won.

Social Concerns

Cherryh's *Faded Sun* is one long narrative despite the publishing exigencies that required it to appear as three separate novels: *The Faded Sun: Kesrith* (1978); *The Faded Sun: Shon'jir* (1978); *The Faded Sun: Kutath* (1979). The narrative explores profound social concerns through the interaction of three races in the aftermath of an interstellar war won by the Terrans over the trading regul, who expended most of their mri mercenaries in the conflict. In the struggle of the lone surviving mri warrior to preserve his people and their way of life, Cherryh probes eternal questions: the nature of honor and power; the necessity of cultural coexistence; the balance between male and female; the problems of suffering and evil. She weaves them all into the strange rich tapestry of mri society enhanced with the wonders of interstellar travel.

Although reviewers of *The Faded Sun* praised its command of the "alien anthropology" genre of science fiction when it was published in 1978-1979, some expressed reservations about Cherryh's essentially optimistic view of technology and her generally sympathetic treatment of autocratic societies and personal honor. These issues, made hypersensitive during the 1960s when duty, honor, country, the ideals for which the mri exist, became matters of wholeheartedly wrongheaded ridicule, need the saner perspective that years offer. Naive expectations of antitechnological primitivism may also still be clouding a balanced understanding of Cherryh's view of future technology and its importance to the lives of reasoning beings. *The Faded Sun* suggests that success — and survival — depend upon the most severe of disciplines, that of the self.



Techniques

Cherryh's interest in anthropology anchors her creation of fascinating extraterrestrial cultures. The mri of *The Faded Sun* possess religion, history, traditions whose origins are lost in time, practices Cherryh never explains directly; she allows the mri to reveal them only reluctantly and Duncan to grasp them as hesitantly. This twoedged point of view, bought at perilous price, achieves uncanny verisimilitude.

Within the People, Niun sees mri customs through eyes so familiar that he cannot gauge their significance until he is forced to risk Duncan's life to acclimate him to them. Looking on the mri from without, the observer Duncan cannot penetrate their superficially terrifying appearance until he overcomes his fear of them that paralyzes him; he must develop the humility of the Kath and live by the elaborate warrior etiquette of the Kel before he can be accepted by them, or perish.

Cherryh's other academic background, linguistics, also lends intense authenticity to *The Faded Sun*. Humans, regul, mri all have individualized diction and language patterns reflecting their separate cultures as well as the singularities of individuals within them. The tough terse utterance of Terran space fleet personnel contrasts vividly with the ceremonious speech of the mri, the necessary formality of warriors whose lives are "brief and bright as moths," whose glory is single combat, and whose continual test of wits and hands is shon'ai, the Game of the People "played with the rhythm of their hands and weapons, flesh and steel." Shon'ai binds Kesrith, the mri world of service, Shon'jir, their painfilled homeward journey, and their home of Kutath into one entity, *The Faded Sun*. Although not as linguistically demanding as *Hunter of Worlds* (1977), which involves three alien languages and copious vocabularies, *The Faded Sun* requires and deserves at the least a sensitivity to the shades of meaning implicit in an inflected language and an appreciation of Cherryh's congruence of language usage with her constructed cultures.

Themes

One of Cherryh's perseverant themes, the necessity of intercultural cooperation in the face of life-threatening crisis, unifies *The Faded Sun*. In *Kesrith*, Niun, the last mri warrior, must save and protect the human Sten Duncan, although Duncan is his potential enemy. In *Shon'jir*, Niun and his priestess-queen Melein undertake an archetypal voyage to the mri home planet with Duncan, who must become mri or die. Once there in Kutath, mri and men painfully reach a fragile understanding of one another's needs.

That such an accommodation can come to pass is Cherryh's message; how it does so is her art.

The Faded Sun also contains a parallel theme, the exercise of absolute power among the mri by the she'pan Melein.

Mri society consists of three castes, the nurturing Kath of women and children, the warrior Kel, and the scholar-priests, the Sen. Because Melein, one of Cherryh's most intriguing female leaders, has functioned successfully in each caste and learned to rule her own personality with its male and female components, she has won the right to govern all mri, a personal achievement that commands their unconditional allegiance. By incorporating this vision of leadership in a female figure, Cherryh exemplifies not male, not female, but individual potential.

Literary Precedents

Particularly in its complex linguistic development, readers of *The Faded Sun* often find similarities to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, another enormous work conceived as an entirety, not as three related novels of a "trilogy." *The Lord of the Rings* established a now well-worn pattern for subsequent sets of fantasy quest novels, incorporating sorcery, various races of beings, the necessary role of the humble in the affairs of the mighty, a king's assumption of his rightful rank, and above all, the archetypal clash of Good and Evil. While Cherryh's use of language in *The Faded Sun* operates at an effective, if not as extensive, a level as Tolkien's in *The Lord of the Rings*, the two authors differ widely in their attitudes toward technology, which Tolkien associates with the evil that destroys Middle-Earth, and Cherryh celebrates as both the price and the challenge of sentient progress. Cherryh focuses on the future, on what may be, if races of thinking beings can sacrifice their pride and accommodate one another's welfare. Tolkien, in his "myth for England," emphasizes a time now passed with the Elves into the West, its echoes momentarily gladdening a world no longer capable of belief in myth. Tolkien's view of humanity's role in the universe is elegiac, since even Aragorn, the best of men, knew he could not withstand the temptation of power available in the One Ring. *The Faded Sun*, however, demonstrates Cherryh's unquenchable faith that "the myths are as true as history," as Niun and Duncan forge their future through converging paths of suffering; by admitting Duncan to their ring of short'ai, the circular living Game of the People, they merit their place of honor at the sword's edge of expanding civilization.



Related Titles

Cherryh has described her work in progress as "a stage by stage chart of the interrelations of immanent and consequent technological developments in space, with their logical sequence of social development, which is and will be the background of a majority of my books." In this vast scheme, *The Faded Sun* is an early development of one brief human-alien conflict, as the trading regul yield their economic domination of a small corner of the universe to a technologically advanced and expanding Terran culture. The resolution of the problem of the mri in their new service to humanity may form a vital chapter in Cherryh's fictional history of the future, as yet impossible to study as a whole, where her brilliantly-conceived and impressively presented alien civilizations contend against an enervated Terran empire and its rebellious colonies. In its heartbreaking depiction of the mri's lonely justification of their honor and its soaring vistas of interplanetary conflict balanced against reconciliation and even love between members of difference races, *The Faded Sun* fulfills Cherryh's own requirement for fiction: "A tale is made for a hearer, to touch a heart."



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