The Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser Series Short Guide

The Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser Series by Fritz Leiber

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Characters

Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser share with such other successful series characters as Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and Star Trek's Mr. Spock the appeal of the exotic personality rendered familiar. Neither is particularly deep, but Leiber has gradually given each of them enough quirks and peculiarities to make them considerably more complex than the simplistic barbarian heroes who dominate most sword and sorcery fiction, Robert E. Howard's Conan, for example, or John Jakes's Brak the Barbarian. In the early stories the two characters were little more than likable rogues, good-natured carousers, and sturdy adventurers but, like many long-running series characters, Fafhrd and the Mouser have subtly evolved over the years, becoming more world weary and cynical, perhaps reflecting Leiber's own life experience.

It is perhaps interesting to note that a number of the girlfriends who accompany Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser on their adventures are not entirely human. (Two of them are even transparent — their bones are visible through their skin.) Although Leiber is himself a feminist, the inability of men to understand women, the essential alienation of the two sexes, is a common theme in his work and has led him to any number of portrayals of woman as either literal or symbolic alien, among them the short stories "Coming Attraction" (1951), and "A Deskful of Girls," as well as the novel Conjure Wife (1953).

Social Concerns/Themes

Although many of the Fafhrd stories make a serious point, Leiber's tone is usually satiric. Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser are, above all else, examples of the old "thief with a heart of gold" tradition which dates back at least to Robin Hood, if not to the tricky slaves of Greek and Roman comedy. Although they make their livings by theft and, on occasion, more serious crimes, the two friends almost invariably end up in a morally superior, or, at worst, morally ambiguous position. Their victims tend to be corrupt city bureaucrats, wizards, merchants, or other criminal types who deserve what they get.

If these stories have a single unifying theme it would probably be the virtues of male companionship. Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser are true friends who would quite literally fight Death himself in each other's defense. Although female companions frequently share both their beds and their adventures — Leiber avoids any hint of explicit homosexuality — each man's primary bond is clearly to the other.

Techniques

Several things raise the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories well above the level of most sword and sorcery fiction. One is character development.

Another is Leiber's satire. The most important, however, is style. Leiber is one of the finest prose stylists ever to write fantasy or science fiction, equaled in his generation only by Ray Bradbury and Theodore Sturgeon. Although he is capable of writing terse, actionoriented prose when the occasion calls for it, he is most at home with a kind of elaborate, slightly archaic language which has as much in common with Shakespeare and the King James translation of the Bible as it does with the prose of genre fiction. Leiber has suggested that his love of language comes directly from his having been raised in a theater family and, almost from birth, having heard and seen his father, Fritz Leiber Sr., act in English Renaissance drama. Further it must be remembered that Leiber himself spent time on the stage. The closing paragraph of the award-winning "Ill Met in Lankhmar" contains a fine example of Leiber's most elaborate style: With no more word than they had exchanged back at Mouser's burned nest behind the Eel, but with a continuing sense of their unity of purpose, their identity of intent, and of their comradeship, they made their way with shoulders bowed and with slow, weary steps which only very gradually quickened out of the magic room and down the thick-carpeted corridor, past the map room's wide door still barred with oak and iron, and past all the other shut, silent doors — clearly the entire Guild was terrified of Hristomilo, his spells, and his rats; down the echoing stairs, their footsteps speeding a little; down the bare-floored lower corridor past its closed, quiet doors, their footsteps resounding loudly no matter how softly they sought to tread; under the deserted, black-scorched guardniche, and so out into Cheap Street, turning left and north because that was the nearest way to the Street of the Gods . . .

Amazingly, the sentence goes on for another quarter page before it and the story end. Where a less talented writer would have quickly confused his readers, Leiber uses parallelism, repetition, and parentheses with a sure hand to structure the sentence and attain utter clarity. The occasional use of unusual words and names (Hristomilo, guardniche, Street of the Gods) emphasizes the exotic setting, and these usages combine with the squalor implicit in other phrases (rats, bare-floored corridor, Cheap Street) to make the scene a memorable one. The slow-moving complexity of the sentence's grammar underlines the mental exhaustion and depression of the story's protagonists.

Adaptations

In 1973 Sword of Sorcery appeared, a comic book based on Leiber's characters. It was a very well-written, intricately-drawn magazine, but only five issues were ever produced. Today they are considered collectors' items. Several game versions of the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories have also been marketed, for example an Advanced Dungeons and Dragons module entitled Lankhmar, City of Adventure (1985). In 1991 Howard Chaykin published a two volume Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser graphic novel.

Key Questions

Although Leiber writes stirring ac tion sequences and can be a brilliant prose stylist, the success of the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories rests ultimately on the personalities of his two protagonists. Fafhrd and the Mouser are in many ways typical of the old "thief with a heart of gold" tradition that includes Sinbad the Sailor, Robin Hood, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Pretty Boy Floyd, the Blues Brothers, and countless other characters, both historical and imaginary. In order to convince the reader of the essential goodness of his thief characters, an author must carefully design their crimes, their victims, and the representatives of the law who pursue them.

The author must convince the reader that there is in fact a legitimate reason for those crimes to be committed and that both the victims and the pursuing law officers are morally ambiguous. A discussion of the Lankhmar stories might be profitably conducted within this context.

1. How does Leiber manage to make the crimes of his protagonists acceptable to his readers? Can you provide examples?

2. To what extent are Fafhrd and Grey Mouser equals? Is one or the other clearly the leader? Does the leadership role change from story to story?

What do you see as the basis for their friendship?

3. It is often said that even though a fantasy or science fiction writer sets his story in another world, he's actually writing about our world. How does Leiber connect his stories to our world?

4. The early stories in the series appeared in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Other stories in the series were written as late as the 1980s. Can you trace changes in the series over time? Note in particular the stories "The Curse of the Smalls and the Stars" and "The Mouser Goes Below," which appear in Leiber's last Fafhrd and Grey Mouser collection, The Knight and Knave of Swords.

5. Leiber's writing style is much more elaborate and mannered than is typical of sword and sorcery fiction.

How does this effect his work? Does it slow things down?

6. How does Leiber's sword and sorcery fiction compare to that of other authors in the genre? Robert Howard, or L. Sprague de Camp for example?

An obvious influence on Leiber is the work of Lord Dunsany; what similarities do you see?

7. Leiber's Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories have been enormously influential. Among the current fantasy writers who clearly owe a debt to Leiber are Piers Anthony, Mary Gentle, Sheri Tepper, and P. C. Hodgell. Which of these come closest to Leiber's style?

Who makes best use of Leiber's techniques?

8. The exotic city of Lankhmar, setting for many of the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories, has occasionally been described as a character in its own right. What does it add to the stories?

9. How much do these stories owe to Leiber's love of theater and, especially, to his early immersion in Shakespeare and Renaissance drama generally?

Literary Precedents

Heroic fantasy is humanity's oldest form of literature and if one looks for the earliest precedents for modern fantasy, whether it be the epic fictions of Tolkien or the sword and sorcery of Robert E. Howard, it is clear that one must go back to Homer, Virgil, Beowulf, and the medieval romance. Any critic of Fritz Leiber's stories, however, must add the satirists of that heroic tradition, Lucan, Ariosto, Cervantes, even Lord Byron. More directly, Leiber began writing for the pulp magazines and was undoubtedly influenced by such Weird Tales writers as Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. The great Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany, author of a number of fantasies with thieves as protagonists, was also a strong influence.

Leiber's own influence on other fantasy writers, though perhaps less than that of J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard, is considerable. He, along with L. Sprague de Camp, brought humor into what was otherwise a sober-sided genre, he popularized the thief as a fantasy character, and his city of Lankhmar has become the model for others writing fantasy in an urban setting. Leiber's influence is particularly to be seen in the works of such writers as Tim Powers, Robert Asprin, and P. C. Hodgell. Further, he has had a considerable effect on the many writers producing shared-universe fantasy anthologies, Dungeons and Dragons modules and Choose Your Own Adventure-style interactive children's books.

Related Titles

The seven books in the Fafhrd and Grey Mouser series — five short story collections and two novels — although theoretically chronological, are to a very great extent interchangeable. The mood may vary from story to story and the later works are written with more polish than the earlier ones, but everything in the series is at least readable.

Two works, however stand out. Strongly plotted and rather sexy, The Swords of Lankhmar (1968), it can be argued, is one of the two or three finest swordand-sorcery novels ever written. Equally good is the Hugo and Nebula Award winning novella "Ill Met in Lankhmar," one of the finest exercises in pure language that the fantasy field has ever produced.

Titles in the series include The Swords of Lankhmar, 1968, novel; Swords Against Wizardry, 1968, short stories; Swords in the Mist, 1968, short stories; Two Sought Adventure, 1957, revised and expanded as Swords Against Death, 1970, short stories; Swords and Deviltry, 1970, novel; Swords and Ice Magic, 1977, short stories; The Knight and Knave of Swords, 1988, short stories; several other collections also contain stories in the series.

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