# The Firebird Short Guide

## The Firebird by Mercedes Lackey

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Contents

# Characters

The Firebird is not a character-driven novel. Ilya, the protagonist, is a familiar type of Lackey hero. A sensitive young man in a prosaic home environment, his dreams of escape parallel those of many adolescents.

Ilya is clever and his insights into those around him are usually accurate. When he fears for his life from the next beating, he designs a plan to avoid it. His father has failed to name an heir and thus left his successor to be determined by a sort of survival-of-the-fittest contest in the fights between brothers. Ivan will not bother to interfere if Ilya continues to be beaten to a pulp. But the boy knows the Tsar's rudimentary conscience will not let him allow an idiot to be picked on, so he feigns brain damage and acts out the role.

This also allows Ilya to act outrageously and to observe things that would normally be hidden from him. For example, he can settle down in the ladies' parlor wearing a vacant expression, and listen to the dynastic gossip they exchange as they do needlework.

However, his cleverness is not matched by other qualities that one might expect in a hero. The spirit who is stealing cherries from Ivan's favorite trees is a major vexation to the Tsar. Because of Ivan's anger, it is also a problem for everyone else. Yet Ilya plots to see it out of mere curiosity, and because he wants to prove to himself that he can succeed where his brothers have failed. He startles the Firebird, who flies away, leaving only a feather in Ilya's hand and a vivid image in his mind. Not until much later does Ilya discover that she has also given him a curse, and the power to talk with animals.

Ilya needs both to get him on his way, because despite his unhappiness, he does not seem very motivated to change his life. In fact for the first half of the book he has to be pulled into his adventures by chance and magic. Even when he goes to investigate the Katschei's stronghold, he is driven mostly by the same curiosity that led to his vigil for the Firebird. Only late in the story does the plight of others move him. It could be argued that his first moral crossroads comes even after that, when the Katschei teleports him outside the castle grounds and he decides to go back in.

Now, all this is against the conventional wisdom on how a fantasy hero should act. Usually, a hero has a clear goal that impels him or her to take action from the very start of the story. Some writers disregard this rule, but most of their protagonists, even if they initially have to be pulled into action and danger by outside events, are quicker to pick up the challenge than is Ilya. Lackey is an accomplished fantasy writer. Whatever is going on here? It is possible that, in defying all these rules, the author has gone the extra step to create reader identification with the hero. Many of us sometimes dilly and dally and bemoan our present situation, while doing nothing to change it.

Young people are a large part of Lackey's audience. Most teenagers have felt themselves at odds with their families and their hometowns, at least occasionally.

Most teenagers dream of doing great things, but are at a loss as to how to begin. Ilya's story, rather than striking them as unheroic, may speak of how such things can happen even when it seems impossible.

The novel's other characters are two-dimensional at best. Ruslan and Mikail come across as real people rather than stereotypes, but we seldom see them in any role other than aiding and advising Ilya. His brothers and his father are blusterers and bullies with few unique aspects to their psyches. The Katschei is simplya monster who is hardly human anymore.

Almost the entire cast of characters can be classified in one of two ways: either helping Ilya or opposing him.

The Firebird's place in this story is more puzzling. A mythical creature, usually a lovely, enchanted bird, she can also take on the form of a woman. When Ilya sees her, her reaction is fear. Later, she seems to feel a mixture of obligation and a sort of love toward him. Although she is elusive and appears only sporadically in the story, she is the most complex character aside from Ilya. In some fairy-tale versions of the story the Firebird leads the hero into the forest. In the novel, she does not, at least not directly. Whether her magic is at work, unseen, in that and other events is left unclear. Some hints are given that her powers are limited. She is at risk from the Katschei. And she does not realize the beautiful Tatiana's true character; she is as jealous of Ilya's infatuation as any human woman would be. In spite of her jealousy, she helps him to rescue the twelve princesses.

Despite her emotional complexity and her human persona, she is best understood as a character who exists outside the world of men. She represents mystery, the power of random events, and perhaps the unseen spiritual realm.

# Social Concerns

The Firebird's world is far removed from our own. Set in a mythical medieval Russia where sprites inhabit the woodlands and minor-league "Tsars" rule by force and fear, its social context at first seems very alien too. Yet within the story are several concerns that mirror those of the 1990s.

Ilya, the hero, is uneasy and unhappy in his father's domain. As with many of Lackey's protagonists, his problem reflects not only adolescent angst but his failure to fit into a stolid and brutal environment. Ilya's father, Tsar Ivan, is an arbitrary, violent man; he encourages his sons to test each other violently. Because Ilya is less well-muscled than most of his brothers, he usually comes out the loser in their fights. When the brothers start ganging up on him, it is no longer just a matter of bruises and hurt pride; his injuries become life-threatening. Ilya is desperate to escape. But how? The surrounding lands are ruled by men as violent as his father. Besides, he knows his father would send trackers after him. He would not make it far, and once he was brought back, Tsar Ivan's punishment for his defiance would be terrible.

The whole tale is set amid a culture of violence which has uncanny, multiple echoes in our own time. Young people growing up in neighborhoods dominated by gangs or in abusive families may instantly identify with Ilya's predicament.

One can also find parallels with the plight of dissenters in the former Soviet Union, or in small nations still run by dictators.

The brothers' bully-boy tactics are a practice that went relatively unchallenged until the 1980s. Bullies have always existed, but adult authorities used to ignore them, feeling nothing could be done to stop their bullying or protect the victim.

There was sometimes even a covert recognition that they served a purpose in enforcing social conformity, as Ilya's brutal brothers do. Today, in the wake of the women's movement and a wider knowledge of psychology, the bully is recognized as the one who needs to " change his behavior. The Firebird shows this insight obliquely; in Ilya's world, he cannot hope for his brothers to change.

Meanwhile, he believes himself the only one who hates being where he is. Even the less bellicose brothers are content with their surroundings, he thinks, because they are "strong like bull, dumb like ox."

Therefore it comes as a shock when his brother Pietor manages a successful escape. Worse, Pietor had foreseen their father's angry response and cleverly undercut it, by turning the horses loose and tangling their reins. Although Ilya thought himself brighter than Pietor, such a plan had never occurred to him.

In the logic of the story, this teaches Ilya not to underestimate his foes, that he can learn from them, and that both planning and courage may be needed to reach a goal. In his ultimate task, Ilya has to use both these lessons to defeat the Katschei.

The Katschei is a monster whose cruelty and will to control eclipses Ivan's. He has captured many men, including the hapless Pietor, and turned them into stone. He holds twelve beautiful maidens hostage within his castle grounds. And he has put his own heart within a diamond inside a magically protected chest guarded by a dragon. He is the hero's nemesis, and it takes all of Ilya's efforts, plus help from the Firebird who befriended him, to destroy the Katschei.

But the Katschei and most of his minions are artificial beings. Some, like the little weed-eating garden puppets, are simple devices built just to perform their tasks. His major enforcers are more complex, wearing the visages of various fierce animals. The Katschei himself is said to have traded his heart—and soul—for his powers. While his bargain is reminiscent of deals with the devil found in religious lore, the Katschei comes across in the story more as a bionic man. It is doubtful that Lackey was trying to say anything here about the evils of technology per se.

Instead, this story element probably reflects an unease about bioengineering, or about the meshing of human with computer intelligence, a worry common to our era.

One other, minor social trend shown in The Firebird is the relationship between Father Mikail, the Christian priest, and Ruslan, the pagan shaman. These two old men are the best of friends. In Tsar Ivan's household, they provide Ilya his only examples of men who value intellectual and spiritual matters. While they may argue good-naturedly over the need for celibacy or the efficacy of a spell or prayer, they work as one when Ilya needs healing or practical help. Up against violence and injustice in the real world, theological disputes fade. This message is newly relevant to today's readers. In a work place where one's colleagues may be Christian, Muslims, Buddhists, witches, or members of other faiths vastly different from one's own, common goals and interests come before sectarian strife.

# Techniques

Lackey has won many fans for her fantasy novels. Although some of her books have contemporary settings (most notably the Serrated Edge series), her real forte seems to be intricate, invented fantasy worlds. This talent is evident in the present novel. Using medieval Russia for a backdrop, she has built a world where the forests brood, wreathed in mist and magic. Little sprites may inhabit the same sites as humans—but then again, they may not. It all depends on one's angle of vision.

The nobles' landholdings function as small, self-sufficient cities. Despite "Tsar" Ivan's harsh rule, much of his estate's daily life goes on serenely beneath his notice, and it is there that Ilya finds succor and sustenance. From the dairy to the chapel to the wooden bathhouse, the author brings a large premodern farmstead to life in fascinating detail. The presentation of this small realm is expertly done; it offers a vivid, vicarious experience of a world that might exist somewhere else in space and time.

Beyond this setting, Lackey uses good, straightforward narrative and dialogue in the novel. Her prose is several levels above adequate; her images are occasionally memorable, but the style is neither venturesome nor brilliant. With the story told from Ilya's point of view, the reader gets to follow his emotions and thought processes during his adventures. However, there are no sharp, stunning insights into his motives or into the nature of anything else. Perhaps this is to be expected in a novel which employs the tone, as well as the plot, of its fairy-tale inspiration. The hero is an Everyman; he is not required to be a deep thinker.

# Themes

The Firebird is a tale told in the traditional quest pattern, in which the hero is called by destiny into a series of adventures. In Ilya's case the call comes first by accident, through the Firebird's curse, and later the whim of an unruly horse.

He goes into an enchanted forest, where he sees wondrous sights and overcomes a series of tests. Finally he comes to a Castle Perilous where he faces his greatest task, the need to uncover a dark secret and to undo evil. The novel's major theme is thus the universal one of good versus evil.

The evil in this story is not a dark force which is simply horrific by definition, as in many horror novels. Rather, its essence is connected to the desire for power.

Both Tsar Ivan and the Katschei are obsessed with power and control, and it has made them oblivious to other issues and joys in human life.

As Ilya studies the Katschei, he realizes that the only pleasure their captor gets from the twelve beautiful maidens comes in humiliating them. He could have forced them to his bed if he had wanted to, but he did not; he could have had them willingly if he had been kind rather than cruel. This truth which seems so obvious to Ilya is lost to the Katschei; lust for power has driven away his erotic impulses.

Along with the obsession of power comes the drive to perfect it, and the Katschei has done this very well. He has made the castle and his treasures, including his out-of-body heart, so well protected that he feels invulnerable. His tools are what might be called magico-mechanical. Like their creator, they have no real heart, only intricately designed mechanisms.

Because this is a fantasy novel, the methods Ilya could have used against this monster are manifold. Skill with conventional weapons, surprise, trickery, perseverance, by-the-numbers spells similar to the Katschei's, or any of several other varieties of magic—all are theoretically available to him. As it turns out, in the long course of his campaign he draws on most of these. But it is no accident that when he finally recovers and shatters the villain's black heart, it is with the aid of the Firebird, and of a small fox who has become his friend. Their natural magic works against the Katschei's cold spells, and possibly weaves some wariness about technology into the theme.

More surely, it makes Ilya's victory a triumph of spiritual over purely material power—a victory foreshadowed at several points earlier in the book. In one view, of course, this message is hopelessly idealistic and unrealistic (one recalls Stalin's sneering question, "How many divisions does the Pope have?"). But in an era which has seen events like Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, the theme is plausible as well as heartwarming.

Two subsidiary themes are also visible in the novel's events. The first is about planning and the need to control one's own destiny. Some planning and foresight is essential, a

lesson Ilya learns from Pietor's successful escape. Pietor, however, did not realize that things often are not what they seem to be. Thus he was turned into a statue guarding the Katschei's castle. Ilya almost makes a similar mistake when he meets the snow-maiden in the forest. One does his best to make adequate plans, but it is not possible to totally control events. A wise person does not even try. This is a point Lackey has made even more strongly in other novels, such as Sacred Ground (1994; see separate entry).

The other theme is the importance of friendship. Here, the author's treatment is a bit nonstandard. Ilya's brothers would normally be his built-in friends, but (except for some light chatter with Sasha about girls) they are not. His only true friends in his father's household are Ruslan, Father Mikail, and Mother Galina, the dairy supervisor. All three are much older and wiser, and they often serve Ilya as surrogate parents or mentors. Nevertheless, their friendships keep him sane and relatively cheerful. A similar role is played by Yasha, an old hunter whom Ilya meets in the forest. He offers the boy shelter and advice, because of his past friendship with Ilya's grandfather Vasily.

Most fantasy heroes have a friend or sidekick with them on their perilous journey. Ilya does not, except at rare moments when the magical Firebird appears. Even the talking horse who led him into the forest soon dies. When he reaches the castle precincts he makes friends with the red fox vixen. Later, he befriends Sergei, one of the Katschei's lesser monsters, who resembles a sentient rabbit. All these friends keep his loneliness at bay and help him in his tasks. The fact that none are vigorous young men, Ilya's supposed peers, shows that friendship can exist across social boundaries.

# Adaptations

Although there are no adaptations of this novel, The Firebird legend has inspired artists in several different media. One well-known example is the composer Stravinsky's orchestral work The Firebird.

# Key Questions

If group members have read other novels derived from fairy tale or legendary motifs, some interesting parallels and differences will surely be noted. Arthurian retellings, fairy-tale romances issued by romance houses, and even mainstream novels like John Gardner's Grendel (1989; see separate entry) are possibilities.

Looking at The Firebird alongside Lackey's other fiction will raise some different issues. Is Lackey's frequent use of a "misfit" young protagonist done for dramatic purposes, or because it evokes emotional identification in her readers? Or both?

What is behind the astounding popularity of her books, which are seldom praised or even reviewed for the general public?

Is it possible to tell a story in which conflict is settled by violence, as occurs in The Firebird and most other Lackey novels, and still affirm humanistic or spiritual values? How?

1. Does Ilya's stint as the "household idiot" have any influence on his later actions? Is it a role that very many people could play? Why or why not?

2. In most fairy tales, the hero wins the beautiful princess's hand, then they marry and live happily ever after. In The Firebird, Ilya discovers before the wedding that his princess is petulant and promiscuous.

Why do you think Lackey put this twist on the story?

3. Should Ilya have seen Tatiana's character defects earlier? Should the reader?

4. Is the violent way Tsar Ivan and his sons behave typical of medieval Russia or of the medieval world as a whole? Or is this a case of a dysfunctional family?

5. In most traditional heroic quests, the hero has an older mentor and also a companion on his journey. Who is Ilya's mentor? Does he give him good advice?

Why do you suppose he lacks a companion for most of his journey?

6. Does Ilya become wise as well as clever as a result of his quest? Give examples to support your answer.

7. Vanyel of the Herald-Mage trilogy, Talia of the Arrows trilogy, and Kerowyn of By the Sword (1991; please see separate entry) are among Lackey's many young heroes who are desperately unhappy with their family setting. Yet they each manage to find a place where they fit in, eventually. Why does this not happen to Ilya?

8. What does the Firebird represent to the Katschei? To Ilya? To the author?

9. In Russian folklore, specific spirits live and make mischief in specific places.

For instance, the bathhouse has a bannik and a rusalka lives in the river. What are some similar spirits from other mythologies? Could it ever be helpful to blame spirits for mishaps rather than chance or "unknown causes"?

10. The Katschei has built his maze as the outer ring of his palace's security system. Who do you think built the maze in the forest?

# Literary Precedents

The Firebird is based upon a Russian fairy tale. There are many versions of this tale; Lackey has used elements from several of them in building her novel, as well as adding features of her own invention.

Several other fantasy and science fiction authors have written novels based on European fairy tales. Robin McKinley's Beauty (1978), Pamela Dean's Tam Lin (1992), and Joan Vinge's Hugo-winning The SnowQueen (1980; see separate entry), are among the most notable. C. J. Cherryh's Rusalka (1990) and Yvgenie (1991) are other fantasy novels inspired by Russian folklore.

Each book is very much the product of its own author's vision, so making overall comparisons among them is difficult. For example, Tam Lin includes a contemporary setting, while The Snow Queen is the first book of a galaxy-spanning trilogy.

However, all these writers, as well as Lackey, were working within a shared tradition that sees folklore and legends not primarily as children's entertainment, but as a vast storehouse of motifs that illuminate human behavior and the universe's mysteries.

The Firebird fits fairly neatly into the structure of the hero's quest. This archetypal pattern was first drawn from world religions and myths by Joseph Campbell, the renowned religious scholar. In European myth and fiction, after winning his climactic struggle, and being himself changed by his quest, the hero returns to his social world. He has earned the wisdom and credentials for leadership or to bring about needed social change. In American fiction, at the end, the hero more typically "rides off into the sunset" toward the unknown, perhaps in the company of one trusted companion. This is variously ascribed to American individ ualism, distrust of authority, or the influence of the frontier. The classic example, of course, is the Western movie.

In American fantasy and science fiction, both types of endings are found.

Hard science fiction, which is often focused on exploring the "high frontier," tends toward the American pattern, although there are many exceptions. Science fantasy, with its emphasis upon the social order, usually follows the European. Pure fantasy, The Firebird's genre, uses both types of ending in roughly equal numbers. The resolution generally grows out of the author's theme. A prime example is Barbara Hambly's fantasy novel Dragonsbane (1985), where the heroine's refusal to go away with the dragon ratifies all that she has learned about the importance of human love.

What, then, should we make of The Firebird's ending? At the very end Ilya, the Firebird, and their animal companions ride off together "into magic, and legend." Is it because the author is staying true to the story's supernatural tone? Is it because one cannot imagine Ilya settling into cozy domesticity, or even living on a boyar's estate, with a magical creature like the Firebird? Could it be that Ilya, most of whose friends are old men or nonhuman beings, would not get along well in a society of his peers? Or is this finale,

along with Ilya's sudden disillusionment with Tatiana which proceeded it, another example of Lackey's rushed endings?

Although The Firebird seems a relatively simple tale compared to a work like Vinge's Snow Queen, such questions show that it too contains puzzles and is susceptible to more than one level of interpretation.

# Related Titles

Certain of The Firebird's elements are found in other of Lackey's works. Ilya's telepathic conversations with animals and the grotesque chimeras at the Katschei's palace are reminiscent of aspects of her multivolume Valdemar series. Sacred Ground (1994; see separate entry) is built around a Native American legend, and The Fire Rose (1995) is based upon werewolf lore. The sensitive young protagonist seeking to escape from his oppressive home is almost a Lackey trademark.

# Copyright Information

**Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults**

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6



Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994