

The Furies Short Guide

The Furies by Suzy McKee Charnas

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Characters

One of the most interesting things about *The Furies* is the way in which Charnas has allowed her characters to grow in the years that have intervened since the action of *Motherlines* (1979). Alldera still bears the physical and mental scars of early abuse, but is now clearly a middleaged woman. Although a competent and confident leader, she is more given to introspection than she was in earlier years and less given to seeing things in absolute terms. In *The Furies* we also see Alldera struggling to develop new relationships with three of the most important people in her life, her former master Eykar Bek, her former lover, Daya the pet fem, and her longtime competitor, the Riding Woman Sheel Torriner. All three of these people have changed over the years. Eykar has been humbled, rendered more human by his fall from power. Daya, still as intense and irrational as ever, has been alienated from Alldera by jealousy. Sheel, who has always seen herself as superior to Alldera, is still struggling with the idea of the Free Fern as a leader of women.

Social Concerns

Published some fifteen years after *Motherlines*, *The Furies* recounts the triumphant return of the now middle-aged Alldera to the Holdfast at the head of a small army of women, all of them former slaves. Although she began work on *The Furies* soon after *Motherlines* was published, Charnas has said that she found herself unable to finish the book until recently because it was first necessary for her to gain perspective on the earlier books in the series, on the world in general, and on her own anger. Alldera ran in fear from a civilization that was clearly near to collapse. She now returns to the Holdfast, in part out of curiosity, in part to seek revenge, and in part out of a burning desire to free the female slaves she had left behind many years ago. What she discovers is a surprise.

The horrific society of the Holdfast has continued to degenerate and now seems merely pathetic, its few able-bodied men no match for the hardened warriors the Free Ferns have become.

The very men who lorded it over Alldera have themselves fallen from power.

Although in no way condoning the horrors perpetrated on herself and others by the warped patriarchy of the Holdfast, Alldera is now able to see that the men of that society are in a sense themselves victims of their own sickness and prejudice. Further, she begins to realize that the women slaves who have chosen to stay in the Holdfast when they could have escaped just as she did, must bear some of the blame for accepting their fate. Alldera's companions, however, are not as willing to see the moral complexity of the situation; the Free Ferns are virtually unanimous in their desire for revenge.

Women Alldera has known and loved for years are revealed as being capable of committing atrocities and stupidities every bit as bad as those perpetrated by the slaveowners of the Holdfast.

Some women even argue, self-destructively, for the death of all men. Alldera, however, has sickened of the killing and yearns for compromise. She has no desire to exterminate half of her own species or, for that matter, rule over a new Holdfast, one where women dominate men. She is even capable of contemplating reconciliation with one of her former masters who, long fallen from power, has now learned some humility.

Techniques

The return of the hero to his place of origin is, of course, one of the oldest and most widely used plot devices in literature, and it almost invariably involves a number of standard elements. The hero, traditionally male, must have achieved success on a level that those who knew him as a child would never have predicted. Returning home, he must feel a need to prove himself to those who hurt him before he left and is likely to be motivated to some extent by the need for revenge.

Upon catching sight of his home, he must feel some fear of returning, but he must overcome it and go forward.

He must be recognized by those who hurt him and they must be suitably impressed by how far he has risen.

Simultaneously, however, he must see them as much smaller and shabbier than they are in memory. He may take appropriate revenge, but in general will realize that he has outgrown his demons and no longer needs to fear them.

This, basically, is the plot of *The Furies*, but with one major twist. Alldera, and the other returning Free Fems, are women playing what are, in traditional literature, men's roles.

Charnas uses this reversal to examine the relative moral development of the two genders. Alldera, a morally superior human being, does indeed rise above the need for revenge. Many of the other women, however, most prominently Daya, have not achieved much in the way of moral development and do indeed prove themselves to be little superior to their male former masters.

Eykar Bek, however, despite having grown up as an alpha male in the twisted patriarchy of the Holdfast, has learned something important from his life and has grown into a more ethical human being.

Themes

Much of the success of Charnas's first published novel, *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), lay in the book's sheer ferocity, its willingness to depict the patriarchal rulers of the Holdfast as perverse, one-dimensional, genuinely evil monsters. The book's power was that of a young writer, a woman capable of great anger at the evils of our world.

The author of *The Furies*, however, is no longer a young woman and no longer sees the world in terms of black and white. There is real evil in the world, Charnas tells us, and we must combat it, but it is not merely "over there." It does not merely reside in "those others." It is all around us; it is even in us.



Key Questions

In the years since the publication of *Walk to the End of the World* and *Motherlines* the feminist movement has had its share of triumph, but it has also had its share of failure. On the one hand, the number of women attending college, graduate school, even medical school, is at an all time high. On the other hand, the gap between what women and men are paid for comparable work has hardly narrowed at all. More women now serve in Congress than ever before, but the Equal Rights Amendment never made it into law.

Many older feminists say that they feel alienated from younger women, most of whom seem unable to understand the trials and pain their elders went through to secure them the rights they now enjoy. A number of younger women writers, from Camille Paglia to Christina Hoff Sommers, appear to have rejected, in whole or in part, the feminist message of the 1970s. Any discussion of *The Furies* must occur within the context of the sexual politics of the mid-1990s. *The Furies* is in many ways a triumphant novel, but it also has its share of bitterness and that bitterness clearly reflects Charnas's view of the current state of the feminist movement in America.

1. As *The Furies* begins we realize that many years have passed since the actions of *Motherlines*. What changes have occurred in the society of the Free Ferns during this time? In the society of the Riding Women?
2. *The Furies* appeared approximately fifteen years after *Motherlines*. To what extent might the changes that Charnas portrays in Free Fern society, and for that matter in Holdfast society, be seen as symbolic of changes in our world?
3. The early scene with the corpse of the Holdfast male is rather gruesome and seems almost calculated to offend some readers. Why do you think that Charnas chose to begin her novel in this fashion?
4. What role does the eunuch Setteo play in the novel? Do you see any similarities between Setteo and the various fools and clowns who people Shakespeare's plays, particularly *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*?
5. As you read *The Furies*, to what extent did you find yourself agreeing with the Free Ferns' desire for revenge?

To what extent do they achieve the revenge they seek?

6. Daya is at the center of a new women's religion, but it's very clear that neither Alldera nor Charnas think very highly of it. What exactly is wrong with Daya's faith?
7. How believable do you find Alldera's reconciliation with Eykar Bek?
8. The Riding Women truly have no need for men because they reproduce parthenogenically. The Free Ferns, however, do not have that option.



Without men they will die out, yet some of them still advocate the extermination of the entire male sex. What do you make of this?

9. One of the great debates in gender studies involves the question of whether or not those traits traditionally seen as either male or female are innate to the sexes or merely a product of the environment. The male propensity for violence is, of course, one of the major topics of concern. Does Charnas appear to believe that men are innately more violent than women? Beware of yes/no answers.

10. The title of Charnas's novel is obviously a reference to the Furies of classical mythology whose job it is to pursue sinners and punish them for their crimes. They are best known, perhaps, for their pursuit of Orestes after he kills his mother Clytemnestra.

What connection can you see between the classical Furies and the women of Charnas's novel?

Literary Precedents

The tradition of the return of the hero can be traced back at least as far as Homer's *Odyssey*. Joseph Campbell discusses it at length in his classic work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and it also receives some attention in most critical studies of the bildungsroman. Within the context of science fiction and fantasy literature, two of the most famous examples of the return of the hero tradition may well be seen in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). One of the major plot threads in that novel involves the transformation of the disreputable Ranger, Strider, into Aragorn, rightful ruler of the greatest kingdom of Middle Earth. The final volume of Tolkien's trilogy, after all, is entitled *The Return of the King* (1955). Echoing this traditional heroic return, however, is a similar, though more humble return home that occurs late in that third volume. In the chapter entitled "The Scouring of the Shire" Frodo Baggins, sadder and wiser, transformed by his adventures among the great, returns to his humble home, finds it corrupted by the evil wizard Saruman, and quickly cleans house.



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