

A Gun for Dinosaur Short Guide

A Gun for Dinosaur by L. Sprague de Camp

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Overview

"A Gun for Dinosaur" is a thrilling time travel adventure whose action takes place millions of years ago. Reginald Rivers, hunting guide extraordinaire, hears that a time travel machine has been invented and immediately knows what that means: New opportunities to make money! Rivers and his partner Aiyar, hereditary monarch of Janpur, rush to the inventor of the machine only to discover, "There were other hunting guides and no end of scientists, each with his own idea of the right way to use the machine."

Despite this competition they persuade the scientists that the money to be made from guiding hunting trips to the ancient past could help support the expensive studies they would conduct with the machine. Soon they are ready for business; many wouldbe hunters are eager to shoot dinosaurs and add them to their list of kills. "A Gun for Dinosaur" offers a well-researched but thoroughly exciting adventure in the era when Tyrannosaurs and Triceratopsians roamed the Earth.



About the Author

Lyon Sprague de Camp was born on November 27, 1907 in New York City to Lyon and E. Beatrice (nee Sprague) de Camp. He seemed destined as a young man for a career in the applied sciences. In 1930, he received his bachelor's degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the California Institute of Technology, and in 1933, he received his master's degree in engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey.

During World War II he was an assistant mechanical engineer at an aircraft factory, and he served as a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Naval Reserve. Even his first book was a technical one, *Inventions and their Management* (1937 coauthored with Alf K. Berle; revised as *Inventions, Patents, and Their Management*, 1959).

His first short story "The Isolinguals" (1937) gave a hint of the career to come. This began his relationship with two famous periodicals edited by John C. Campbell, the fantasy magazine *Unknown* and the science fiction magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*. Another important influence on his writing career was his marriage in 1939 to Catherine Crook, an English teacher, with whom he has two children, Lyman and Gerard. It is difficult to assess the effect his wife has had on de Camp's writings, but she has collaborated with him on several books, and she has over the years handled most of his business affairs. During the 1940s, de Camp attracted a large following of young readers with his strikingly original plots and situations. He also developed in his fiction at this time the signature lighthearted humor, careful characterizations, and keen attention to details that make even the most outlandish situations vivid and believable. His short stories and the novels *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Incomplete Enchanter* were successful enough to allow him to devote himself full time to free-lance writing after World War II.

Since that time he has written nearly one hundred books, including nonfiction as well as fiction. He has also published about four hundred articles and stories. His works have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Throughout his career he has focused first and foremost on entertaining his readers, and he has succeeded not only in retaining the readership he cultivated in the 1940s but also in winning new readers from each following generation. His nonfiction discussions of literature and science are held in high esteem among science fiction writers.

De Camp's first major literary award came for a book he coauthored with Willie Ley: *Lands Beyond* (1952) which received the 1953 International Fantasy Award for nonfiction. In 1973, his short story "The Fallible Fiend" received the August Derleth Fantasy Award. Those who attended the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy conventions voted on the greatest fantasy stories ever published, choosing de Camp's "Nothing in the Rule" (1939) as one of the twenty-two stories so honored. As a consequence, the story was included in *The Fantasy Hall of Fame* (1983).

In addition to awards for specific titles, de Camp has been honored for his career of achievement. He received the 1976 World Science Fiction Convention's "Gandalf," the



Grand Master Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Field of Fantasy. In 1979, he received the Science Fiction Writers of America Grand Master "Nebula" Award. In 1984, he received the World Fantasy Convention Award in recognition of his lifetime of achievement.

In 1966, he was the Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, and in 1972, he was the Guest of Honor at Boskone IX, a regional science fiction convention held annually in Boston since 1964. He remains one of the best-loved figures in the fields of fantasy and science fiction.



Setting

To the west, you see the arm of the Kansas Sea that reaches across Missouri and the big swamp around the bayhead where the sauropods live.

To the north is low range that the Raja named the Janpur hills, after the Indian kingdom his forebears once ruled. To the east, the land slopes up to a plateau, good for ceratopsians, while to the south is flat country with more sauropod swamps and lots of ornithopod: duckbill and iguanodont.

This is the view from where the time machine lands people in the Middle Cretaceous epoch. It is an exotic place, filled with shrubs, odd trees, and unfamiliar ground cover instead of grass.

Even the climate is exotic, "balmy, like the South Sea Islands, but not so muggy as most Jurassic climates."

The animal life features lizards, pterosaurs, crocodiles, and dinosaurs.

The lizards are very quick, very numerous, and beautiful with bright gemlike skin. The pterosaurs flutter about like bats near the swamp shore.

Not much is said about the giant crocodiles, except that they can take down some of the dinosaurs that browse by the lake. What everyone wants to see are the dinosaurs which come in several forms, some more deadly than others. The great sauropods travel easily on land and in water; their heads rise from the water every fifteen minutes to breathe. They are normally harmless, but Rivers recalls one using its tail to slice off the head of a man who had shot it. Basically, sauropods, such as the apatosaur, are best left alone, partly because they are very difficult to kill and partly because there is nothing that can be done with their carcasses.

The other dinosaurs are either small enough to be eaten by a hunting party before they rot, or they can be claimed for trophy heads. Courtney James wants a Tyrannosaurus skull to show off, proving he killed the most dangerous predator known. Rivers, in his humorous way, explains that Tyrannosaurus rex is overrated; it is a carrion eater.

Much more dangerous is the smaller Gorgosaurus, like the Tyrannosaurus a theropod—animals that walk on their hind legs and mostly stalk their food.

There are no Tyrannosaurus rex in the Middle Cretaceous, but there are Tyrannosaurus trionyches, a bigger animal with the biggest head of the various Tyrannosaurus species.

Mr. Holtzinger wants to shoot a ceratopsian dinosaur, the best known of which is the Triceratops. He wants to mount the head in his home to show that he has done something exciting and interesting in his otherwise dull, mundane, and unadventurous life.



Rivers warns, "You have to think twice about collecting them, because, if you put a two-meter triceratops head into a small living room, there's apt to be no room left for anything else."

Social Sensitivity

De Camp touches briefly on a future when nearly every big game animal is near extinction, and the few remaining ones live in protected parks. That Rivers has been a part of the killing of scarce wild animals is unlikely to endear him to people who are concerned about the modern world's rapid and ruthless destruction of its natural environment. That he takes his deadly skills to ancient eras may also trouble some people. Other than these points there is little in the story that is socially sensitive. The characters are handled well, even if somewhat stereotypically, and no colonial prejudice is evident in Rivers's attitude toward his business partner Aiyar, who is presented with dignity and respect.



Literary Qualities

"A Gun for Dinosaur" derives its humor from the contrast between Rivers's casual tone and the suspenseful events he recounts. The story is carefully thought out and told with a slant toward those concerns that would most interest a hunting guide. Rivers, for instance, notes that dinosaur brains are too small to be good targets so he recommends shooting at dinosaur hearts. He is also an analyst of the game animals: "Their weakness is that, having hardly any minds, they have little memories." Thus the best way to escape a dinosaur is to hide behind something; if the beast can neither see nor smell a person he forgets about his prey, even if he or she has just been seen. Out of sight, out of mind is literally true in this case.

One of de Camp's best skills in his long literary career has been the ability to seamlessly blend factual information with his plot lines so that exposition flows naturally out of the action. In "A Gun for Dinosaur," the plot calls for descriptions of ancient life—there is no story without the scientific details that he tosses into Rivers's relaxed narrative. For instance, the phrase "eighty-five million years ago: the Early Upper Cretaceous or the Middle Cretaceous as some American geologists call it" slips easily from Rivers's tongue, and the information is needed so that readers understand when the events take place. We also learn, almost incidentally, how long ago the Middle Cretaceous was and that there are two rival names for the epoch. Animal names, ecological concepts, and even details about different kinds of rifles all slip into their places easily, adding to the suspense rather than detracting from it. Suspense in the story builds after the reader learns from Rivers about the huge rifles that are necessary parts of the adventure; there must be very good reasons indeed for the coolly professional Rivers to want big guns can exciting confrontations with huge and deadly dinosaurs not be far behind?

The time travel element of the story is also handled well. De Camp has worked out what a room-sized chamber might hold and how materials would be transported through time.

Expeditions must be kept small, and people and supplies must be transferred via multiple time journeys.

Trucks, jeeps, and other large equipment would not fit into the chamber, so adventurers will not be roaring across ancient landscapes in modern vehicles. Donkeys are used to carry supplies. When the time machine arrives at its destination, "The operator looked at his ground-level gauge and turned the handwheel that raised the chamber so it shouldn't materialize underground." This sentence anticipates a good question on the part of the reader: What if one materializes in the ground? The answer is that one will not materialize there because the machine will be adjusted to an elevation that puts it on top of the ground.

Realistic details like this add authenticity to the scientific background of the narrative. Since stories of scientific time travel were first written, the prior-time paradox has always been a central dilemma: "What happens if you change history? What if you meet



yourself? What if you kill your own father; would you never have been born; then how could you kill your father?" De Camp answers this in two ways. The first is that all trips must be made to a period at least 100,000 years ago; the theory is that any potential changes to the past made by people will be smoothed out and lost given enough time. The other way is evidenced by Courtney James's end, "the space-time forces snapped him forward to the Present to prevent a paradox." The physical laws governing the nature of time will not allow something like a person meeting himself in another period; the original pattern is inexorably preserved when James is hurled forward to the present.



Themes and Characters

Reginald Rivers is the teller of this tale; he spins the yarn for a prospective customer who wishes to hunt dinosaurs in the Cretaceous epoch.

But Rivers cautions the man that he is too light to hunt dinosaurs safely; the gun a small man can safely handle is too small in caliber to knock down the predators of the Cretaceous and Jurassic—and being able to knock one down is very important. Rivers, an engaging and clever character, matches perfectly with the time-honored stereotype of the unflappable big game hunter who had once tracked and brought down lions and tigers and other now almost extinct exotic animals. Throughout "A Gun for Dinosaur," he maintains a relaxed, humorous, and mellow tone even when people are being mauled; he conveys with his understated diction the sense that he is a thorough professional—he wants to make money, but there are limits to what he will do to earn it.

Both Courtney James and Holtzinger are themselves close to being stereotypes. Courtney James is a spoiled rich kid grown a little too fat; like a pampered child he does what he pleases while ignoring the rules of the hunt. Rivers takes pains to point out the few good qualities of Courtney James—he has many dirty stories to tell, sings fairly well, and sometimes helps around camp—but Rivers plainly does not like him and regrets needing the money badly enough to take the overgrown brat on a hunt.

The unfortunate Holtzinger, a man with low self-esteem, hopes to find out something good about himself on the hunt, and he does: he proves his courage and saves James's life by valiantly stepping up to a tyrannosaurus and pumping shots into it. Holtzinger's large courage is tragically not matched by his stature. He is too small to safely wield a heavy .600 or .500 caliber rifle, essential for stunning or knocking down a gigantic dinosaur; shooting a large-bore rifle could damage his shoulder and most likely incapacitate him. Holtzinger's .375 rifle only stings the tyrannosaurus, and the creature snaps him up in its jaws, a courageous but unnecessary victim.

Thus Holtzinger and James provide two cautionary lessons for Rivers and Aiyar. The partners learn to be much more careful in judging whether a person is emotionally stable enough to safely hunt in the dinosaur ages; James with his indulged background and unheeding ego was manifestly not. They also learn not to take anyone back to the eras of the largest dinosaurs unless that person is heavy enough to handle a suitably big rifle—to wield "a gun for dinosaur."

The other characters slip in and out of the narrative as they are needed.

Chandra Aiyar, whom Rivers calls "the Raja" because he is the hereditary monarch of an Indian kingdom, worked in a New York tourist agency before he teamed up with the master hunter. He is a big, strong, and levelheaded man whose character is lightly developed. Professor Prochaska is the inventor of the time machine. Courtney James, who wants to ambush Rivers and Aiyar when they first emerge from the time machine, persuades the Professor to send him back in time to one day before the original

expedition arrives. Prochaska lets himself be persuaded by James's nonsensical story about losing a wallet, as well as by his scientific curiosity. He wishes to know what would happen in the case of a crossed time line when someone would have the opportunity to change events in his own life.



Topics for Discussion

1. De Camp offers descriptions of geography, plants, and animals in "A Gun for Dinosaur." Do these descriptions enhance your enjoyment of the story? Why would de Camp devote space to the descriptions?
2. Many writers and critics regard "A Gun for Dinosaur" as a classic; what qualities does it have that would make it a classic? Why would it be widely admired?
3. Would someone who is not interested in dinosaurs like "A Gun for Dinosaur"? What would be its appeal?
4. Are you satisfied with how de Camp handles the time paradox in the story?
5. What is more attractive about "A Gun for Dinosaur," the adventure or the dinosaurs?
6. Why do Rivers and Aiyar not send Courtney James home before he causes a disaster?
7. Did you learn anything from the novelette?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What would North America have looked like during the era that Rivers and crew visit? Does de Camp have the geographical details right?

2. What sort of plants would visitors to the Middle Cretaceous epoch encounter? How would they complicate hunting?

3. "A Gun for Dinosaur" is rich with animal life. What was the mix of animals like in the era it covers?

4. Many, probably most, experts on dinosaurs currently believe that apatosaurs lived on dry ground in large woodlands rather than in water and swamps. How accurate are de Camp's account of other dinosaurs?

5. De Camp mentions other eras besides the Middle Cretaceous that he would be willing to take his prospective clients to. Write a story of the hunt they undertake in one of these other eras. What would they hunt?

How would they survive? What difficulties would they encounter? Would Rivers and Aiyar manage to get everybody home alive?

6. Was the Tyrannosaurus rex really an eater of carrion? What are the views of paleontologists? Which view seems likeliest to be true?

7. De Camp mentions how dino saurs kept themselves warm. Were they warm blooded, cold blooded, or, as de Camp suggests, something else?

What are the major theories about this issue?

8. What are some of Rivers's other adventures in the ancient past? What does he learn? (You will find the stories in Rivers of Time.)

9. The insects in "A Gun for Dinosaur" can be nasty. What insects lived in the Middle Cretaceous? Were there any dangerous ones that the hunting expedition did not encounter?



For Further Reference

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Related Titles

For over three decades "A Gun for Dinosaur" stood alone, an admired classic that blended exciting adventure with time travel, paleontology, and environmental science. It also seemed to cry out for sequels; there were many other ancient eras to visit and explore. Then in the early 1990s eight new adventures were published in magazines and then the book *The Rivers of Time* (1993). Each story features eccentric clients who are sometimes almost more trouble than Rivers can bear. The stories feature issues of animal rights, creationism versus evolution, and a character or two who seem to be trying to reenact old Hemingway safari stories. They are all good fun, and Rivers is humorous, charming, and eager to earn a living in them.



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