

The Game of Empire Short Guide

The Game of Empire by Poul Anderson

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Overview

The Game of Empire is an adventure story set on faraway worlds in a future in which humanity has not only traveled to the stars but has created a huge interstellar Terran Empire. Diana Crowfeather is a teen-age girl who survives on the streets of Olga's Landing, a bustling city full of beings from many different worlds. She has an adventurous spirit and seizes on the first chance she gets to explore other worlds. She ends up involved in an intricate and menacing plot to subvert the Terran Empire and hand it over to its worst enemies. The action is exciting and the characters are deftly created, making for an entertaining read.

About the Author

Poul Anderson was born on November 25, 1926, in Bristol, Pennsylvania, to Anton William Anderson and

Astrid (nee Hertz) Anderson. In 1953, he married Karen Kruse, and they have a daughter. In 1947, while still a college student, Anderson had his first story published. When he graduated in 1948 with a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Minnesota, he devoted himself to writing. By 1951 he was publishing several stories a year, and in 1952, his first book, *Vault of the Ages*, a novel for young adults, appeared. By the end of the 1950s, Anderson was a well-established author whose works included mysteries, historical novels, and nonfiction articles, as well as science fiction. From the 1950s on, he has remained an industrious writer, publishing scores of articles, hundreds of stories, and about thirty novels.

In recent years, Anderson's productivity has dropped, continuing a trend begun in the mid-1970s. This lower productivity may be partly explained by his writing the large and complex *The King of Ys* quartet. On the other hand, his writing shows greater maturity; his excellent command of language and style is matched by depth of characterization and themes.

The Science Fiction Writers of America have twice given Anderson their Nebula award: once in 1971 for the best novelette, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," and once in 1972 for best novelette, "Goat Song." The World Science Fiction Convention Science Fiction Achievement Award, the "Hugo," which is primarily determined by science fiction fans, has been given to Anderson five times: once for the best novella, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," in 1972; twice for the best novelette, "the Sharing of Flesh" (1968), in 1969, and "Goat Song," in 1973; and twice for the best short story, "The Longest Voyage" (1960), in 1961, and "No Truce for Kings" (1963), in 1964.

In 1973, Anderson's short story "Call Me Joe" (1957) was included in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame (Two A)* by the Science Fiction Writers of America.

This publication is a gathering of what the members of the Science fiction Writers of America believe to be the best science fiction short stories written before 1973. In 1959, Anderson was the guest of honor for that year's World Science Fiction convention. Additionally, the April 1972 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* was devoted to Anderson and his work. In addition to his awards for science fiction, Anderson received the 1959 Macmillan Cock Robin Mystery Award for best mystery novel, *Perish by the Sword*.



Characters

Olaf Magnusson has proven himself to be a great military leader. With inferior forces, he has beaten back a powerful Merseian invasion fleet. Some of the many malcontents of the Terran Empire, weary of the corrupt imperial government, have focused their hopes for a better government on the seemingly incorruptible Magnusson, who has built a power base for himself on the edge of the Terran Empire. His father Erik was a trading captain who felt betrayed by the empire and who eventually gave his allegiance to the rival Merseian Empire. He had Olaf trained and educated by the Merseians in secret; Olaf was made into a "mole" — he was returned to the Terran Empire to live as if he were a faithful subject, to grow up and create a career like other people. His mission was to become a military officer. He was so successful that his Merseian masters decided to use him as their instrument in their ultimate game — the game of empire. The Merseians would give him significant victories in battle that would win him support among the troops of the Terran Empire, and he would use that support to seize the imperial throne. Once he had absolute power, Magnusson would slowly convert the Terran Empire into a puppet state of the Merseians.

Although Magnusson is a complex and subtle character, most readers will guess long before Anderson reveals it that Magnusson is beholden to the Merseians. He shares his father's hatred of the Terran rulers, as well as his father's belief that the Merseians are noble rulers, worthy of his loyalty.

Outwardly a man of simple courage and incorruptible honor, Olaf Magnusson is in fact a treacherous schemer of considerable ability. For instance, he outwits Dominic Flandry, a master of intrigue and political maneuvering.

The outward show of straightforward honesty is a well-conceived disguise; his enemies underestimate Magnusson's ability to scheme, and his supporters see him as a powerful leader with undiluted integrity who will be able to forthrightly deal with the enemy Merseians and bring honorable peace between the rival powers. Magnusson's betrayal of his followers is shown in some detail. Anderson devotes space to his followers, showing them loving, planning for the future, and hoping for better days under a good, caring leader. They die horribly in pointless battles for Magnusson, a leader who callously sacrifices them in his own schemes for power.

He is handsome, robust, and has commanding eyes — traditional attributes of stereotypical heroes. People see him and believe such a fine-looking man must be a good man; his looks are false, a reminder that good looks do not speak truly of what is inside a person. He wins momentous battles that turn out to have been deliberately lost by the Merseians in order build Magnusson's reputation of invincibility; reputations are no substitute for good hearts. Magnusson talks of how the Terran Empire does not take care of its own soldiers; his followers believe him when he implies that he would do better. Early in the novel a cruelly injured trooper blames the imperium for his lack of medical care, asserting that Magnusson would do better if he could. Yet fine words, even when they come from a charismatic leader, are no substitute for deeds; his



followers believe Magnusson's words even though he is responsible for their hardships. It is he who is in charge of his sector of the Empire; if anyone is to see to it that the injured trooper is cared for, it should be Magnusson. However, Magnusson creates the suffering in order to build resentment against the emperor; his fine words are empty ones because they are not backed by deeds.

The complex character of Magnusson adds depth to the novel through its intertwining with the theme of political power. But *The Game of Empire* is not an intricate study of political ambition and betrayal. It is primarily an entertainment. Its main character is Diana Crowfeather, a pretty teen-ager. Her father is Dominic Flandry, a powerful advisor to the emperor, but she only knows him from afar. Her mother and he had a love affair, but he left her mother before she was born. Her mother's premature death left her alone on her world. She circulated among the many different sentient creatures who lived in her city or who came to it as traders or tourists. She became a particular favorite of the Tigeries, a species whose very existence was saved by the Terran Empire and who therefore feel indebted to human beings. They befriend Diana and help her to survive.

Bright, clever, and good-hearted, Diana is an attractive figure. Her handiness with weapons is attributable to her growing up in the streets of a tough, rough-and-tumble city. Even so, her ability to chop up bigger and better-armed men, who also outnumber her, seems unbelievable; but she is like a fairy-tale hero — she courageously faces great odds and performs great deeds in overcoming them. Her genuine charm, love of adventure, and loyalty to her friends serve to contrast her with Magnusson and others such as Flandry, who are preoccupied with the intrigues of political power, and who cannot be trusted. Adding to her appeal is her loneliness; she never pities herself, but she seemingly without really knowing it wants the security of love. This touching trait makes her a victim of the handsome Kukulkan, a Zacharian, who like all Zacharians, is a racist who believes all other human beings to be genetically inferior to themselves. He lusts after Diana, but there can be no question of love on his part; Diana is after all an inferior being. The vulnerability of Diana enriches her portrayal, making her personality realistic; she lives the adventures many people would like to have, but she has the universal yearnings for love, security, and a stable life.

For her most exciting adventures, Diana has two companions. One is Targovi, a Tigery traveling salesman who is also a part-time spy. Quickwitted and stealthy, it is he who uncovers Magnusson's plot to betray the Terran Empire. He is motivated by gratitude to the Empire for saving his people from destruction. This gratitude ennobles him because it makes him act selflessly rather than selfishly. He is also a loyal friend to Diana; he comes to love her — even to momentarily wish he were human. His actions to save the Empire give direction to the novel's narrative. Diana is not just on a wandering adventure; through Targovi she ends up in a suspenseful search to uncover and thwart thwart the plans of the Terran Empire's enemies.

The second companion of Diana is Father F. X. Axor. He is a giant being, a Wodenite. Befriended and educated by Christians, he has adopted the Christian faith. Through him, the novel implies that many nonhumans have adopted the faith, believing that God meant for all sentient creatures to have their souls saved for heaven by God's



incarnation in Christ. He comes to Diana's world in search of remnants of an ancient and long-lost civilization which may offer bits of evidence to support his belief in Christ's universality. Diana sees him wandering in the city and quickly adopts him as her own prize; she earns money by guiding tourists through the city. The tourists pay her, and the owners of the establishments she guides them to also pay her. Her good heart warms to the honest and sincere Wodenite, although she sees him as offering a chance for adventure on other worlds. Axor's quest serves as the excuse Targovi uses for traveling to the planet that has Magnusson's headquarters. There is no escaping the theme of political power: Axor serves as the cover story for Targovi's trip to Daedalus; Targovi is himself a schemer, determinedly seeking out the threat to the Terran Empire; and Diana participates in all the important action on Daedalus, courageously living up to her father's own achievements by helping to capture a Merseian ship and then by persuading the Terran military commander on Daedalus of the genuineness of the Merseian threat.



Setting

Most of the action takes place on the planets Imhotep and Daedalus. On Imhotep is the city Olga's Landing, where Diana lives in a deserted old fortress from early colonial days. She is close to the Tigeries, a catlike people.

They are grateful to the Terran Empire for saving their entire population from destruction in a calamity that made their original world unlivable. Olga's Landing is a frontierlike place, with many different kinds of people jostling each other about as they pursue many kinds of business, not all of them legal.

Diana knows her way around the city's underworld and makes her money by guiding visitors to various tourist traps. Daedalus holds most of the secrets she will uncover after she takes up adventuring with Father F. X. Axor, a visitor in search of the remains of an ancient culture that thrived eons in the past. They visit villages, ride a boat, and dodge villains as they unravel Magnusson's dark secret.

Other important scenes take place on spaceships and other planets as Anderson shows the ominous preparations for war of Magnusson and his followers. These scenes show the human cost of Magnusson's treachery, as faithful followers are atomized in a war that is meant to subvert their culture. The efforts of Diana and her friends become essential to ending a treacherous civil war that is based on lies.



Social Sensitivity

Although many, perhaps most, of Anderson's writings have notable social themes, *The Game of Empire* does not. Diana is an orphan who was abandoned by her father, the famous adventurer Dominic Flandry, but the novel does not dwell on the hardships Diana may have endured because she had to shift for herself while still a child. Her involvement in political intrigues would seem to provide ample opportunity for social commentary, but unless one were already familiar with the major social themes of Anderson's other writings, one would likely not notice that *The Game of Empire* reflects Anderson's usual distrust of big government and his usual championing of individual initiative to solve life's problems.

Perhaps Diana does not reflect much about her difficult life as an orphan because she is a typical Anderson hero: She is self-reliant and resourceful. The novel's narrative repeatedly asserts that self-pity is contemptible. Therefore, Diana does not see herself as a social victim; she concentrates her thoughts on ways she can better her lot in life.

Christianity receives some coverage in *The Game of Empire*. One of the principal characters is Axor—a gigantic being called a Wodenite. He is a convert to the Christian faith who believes that God manifested himself in the flesh on Earth so that the sins of all beings, not just human beings, would be atoned for. He has been on a long journey about the Terran Empire in search of evidence to support his thesis that Christ's mission was supposed to be a universal one. Axor represents an interesting handling of the issue of how a seemingly human race-centered religion might appeal to extraterrestrial beings. Although Axor's religion is not one of the novel's central themes, it is handled sensitively and creatively, and is not in the least facile. The Wodenite is a noble being whose search for evidence to support his religious beliefs reflects the search for meaning in life that thoughtful people in many ages have pursued; it adds emotional depth to the novel, and by contrasting with the naked quests for power and revenge of other characters, shows both those quests and those characters to be shallow and ignoble.



Techniques

Anderson borrows from history for the framework of his novel. In the waning years of the Western Roman Empire, a general named Maximus used his power base in Britain, then at the western edge of the Empire, to wage war against the Roman emperor, having declared himself emperor. Like Magnusson, Maximus seemed to many to be a strong leader who would protect the Empire against its enemies.

Modern-day interpretations of the personality of Maximus differ, with some showing him to be an ambitious but courageous and honest leader, while others suggest that he was motivated only by a lust for power that resulted in chaos in the Empire, the deaths of thousands, and the fatal weakening of the Empire's border defenses. The name Magnusson reflects his source: Both max and magnus are Latin words suggesting large or great.

Like the historical Maximus, Magnusson builds a power base on the edge of his Empire, and like Maximus, he attacks his emperor after having declared himself the new emperor. Anderson adds twists of his own, such as having Magnusson's instigation of civil war be a cover for an ominous effort by the Merseians to take over the Terran Empire.

Worthy of note is Anderson's mastery of prose style in *The Game of Empire*. Anderson is a conscientious writer who strives to create vivid scenes with descriptive words. In *The Game of Empire*, he has further refined his art so that narrative pacing shifts as the novel's focus shifts from scene to scene and character to character. For instance, when Diana is the center of attention, the story moves along at a quick pace, reflecting her energetic personality, but when Magnusson is at center stage, the pace slows; Diana's chapters are full of sprightly conversation because she is an open-hearted teenager, Magnusson's chapters are darkly reflective because he has much to hide, even from his own family (Chapter 4).

Themes

The title of *The Game of Empire* suggests what it is about: the building and destroying of empires. Its central theme is that of political power. The agents of the Emperor of the Terran Empire seek to preserve the emperor's supremacy; the Merseians seek the Terran Empire's destruction; and Olaf Magnusson seeks the Terran Empire's throne for himself. It is in the character Magnusson that the theme of political power reaches its full complexity, for Magnusson simultaneously seeks to make an empire for himself and to destroy that empire.



Topics for Discussion

1. How successful is Diana's characterization? Do you believe that she could do what she does in the novel?
2. What do you think of Father F. X. Axor's ideas about Christianity? Do they make sense in the context of the universe imagined in *The Game of Empire*?
3. How would the story have to be changed if Diana were a boy?
4. Who is the most interesting character in the book? Why?
5. What do you make of Diana's relationship to her father? What does this tell us about Dominic Flandry?
6. *The Game of Empire* is primarily meant to be entertaining, yet its plot has a background based on the ancient Roman Empire, and it pointedly shows nice people being hurt by the ambitions of others. Do these elements add depth to the story? Do they enhance your enjoyment of the novel, or do they detract from the pleasure the book gives you?
7. Would you like to live the way Diana is living at the start of the novel?
8. Do you think a far-future, interstellar culture like that in *The Game of Empire* would be ruled by an emperor? What sort of government would be likely for such a culture?
9. How does Anderson make it clear where the events are taking place as he shifts from scene to scene?
10. What are Anderson's attitudes toward self-pity in *The Game of Empire*? Are these attitudes valid?
11. Is entertaining readers a good reason for writing a book such as *The Game of Empire*?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Study Maximus's effort to make himself emperor of the Roman Empire. How are his real-life efforts paralleled in *The Game of Empire*?
2. Compare Dominic Flandry's characterization in *The Game of Empire* to his characterization in other of Anderson's novels. Is his characterization in *The Game of Empire* consistent with the earlier ones? Is anything new about him revealed in *The Game of Empire*?
3. In *The Game of Empire*, Christianity seems to be thriving. What would be the effect on the world's religions (focus on one or discuss several) of the discovery of sentient extraterrestrial life?
4. Science fiction was for a long time stereotyped as literature for boys but not girls. Have female protagonists like Diana changed this image? Did writers of science fiction ever agree with the stereotype? What has Anderson done to defy or reinforce the stereotype?
5. Diana and her companions could have many interesting adventures. Father F. X. Axor's search for religious truth alone could provide many fantastic settings and suspenseful situations. Write a short story about the further adventures of Diana and her friends.
6. Draw pictures of Diana and other characters in the book. Be careful to match your drawings to the description Anderson provides.
7. How scientific is the science in *The Game of Empire*? What laws of nature appear in the book? Does Anderson defy any laws of nature? In the book, does he provide any explanations of why he does or does not follow natural laws as scientists presently understand them?
8. Why would people be so trusting of a leader like Magnusson that they would believe his words and not their own common sense? Why would they follow him to their deaths? Do psychologists have any explanation for such behavior?
9. Are there any historical parallels for the rivalry between the Terran and Merseian empires? If so, what are they and how might they help us understand what happens in *The Game of Empire*?
10. How does Anderson pace the narrative of *The Game of Empire*? Is the pacing even throughout, or is it rough and jerky, or does it sometimes move swiftly and other times slowly? How does Anderson achieve his pacing?

For Further Reference

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Amazing Stories 63 (January 1989): 4349. Anderson here discusses how the past may be used to suggest possible futures.

Beetz, Kirk H. "Poul Anderson." In *Beacham's Popular Fiction in America*. Edited by Walton Beacham and Suzanne Niemeyer. Washington, DC: Beacham Publishing, 1986. Vol 1: 2735. Discusses Anderson's career, his books *Trader to the Stars* and *The Avatar*, and his novelette "The Queen of Air and Darkness."

Clute, John. "Anderson, Poul." In *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*. Edited by Peter Nicholls, et al. Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books (Doubleday), 1979: 31-32. Summarizes Anderson's career, and discusses his publications and how they figure in his development as an author. No great insights, here, but the information is sound.

Platt, Charles. "Poul Anderson." In *Dream Makers: The Uncommon Men & Women Who Write Science Fiction*.

New York: Berkley Books, 1983. Vol. II: 151-158. Platt profiles and interviews Anderson. He finds Anderson to be hesitant and noncommittal when speaking. Anderson offers some thoughts on the future of civilization (will it run out of raw materials?) as well as the publishing industry ("idiotic distribution and increasingly idiotic management").



Related Titles

Diana's father is Dominic Flandry, the main character in other books about the Terran Empire. The Terran Empire works are part of a larger series dubbed by critics the "Technic History." The first part of the Technic History focuses on the Polesotechnic League, a group of traders and entrepreneurs who search the galaxy in search of business opportunities. The second part of the Technic History focuses on a period that follows about three hundred years after the first—an era in which the Terran Empire that followed the Polesotechnic League is corrupt and in decline.

Although Anderson's *Roma Mater* (1986) was published after *The Game of Empire*, it seems as if its research came before the writing of *The Game of Empire*. The subject matter of *Roma Mater* requires its inclusion of the rebellion of Maximus; there would be no such requirement for a science fiction tale that takes place hundreds of years in the future, yet the history of Maximus provides the background for the rebellion of Magnusson. Like Magnusson, the Maximus of *Roma Mater* appears to people to be a strong leader with simple soldierly virtues: courage, concern for the well being of his troops, and straightforward honesty. The main character of *Roma Mater*, Gratilloni, eventually learns through the harshness of torture that Maximus is a hypocrite who is less concerned with justice and the welfare of his people than with gathering power to himself. The gradual unveiling of the true personality of each leader is a significant element in each novel.

An important distinction between the two renderings of the Maximus/Magnusson rebellion is that *The Game of Empire* includes more detail of just how miserably ruinous the rebellion would be for ordinary people. In the science fiction novel, Anderson makes a special effort to show how lust for power, no matter how well disguised as beneficial for people, results in misery and lives unnecessarily cut short. *The Game of Empire* implies that full lives for ordinary people are more important than power games of the mighty.



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