

The Garden of Rama Short Guide

The Garden of Rama by Arthur C. Clarke

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Characters

In the first two sections "Nicole's Journal" and "At the Node," *The Garden of Rama* follows the lives of three characters: Nicole des Jardins Wakefield, Richard Wakefield, and Michael O'Toole. In their years of travel together aboard the enigmatic and massive alien craft, Nicole and Richard live as husband and wife and produce daughters Simone and Katie.

Michael, an older man who had married and raised a family on Earth, proves a gentle, attentive co-parent for the girls.

The main character Nicole embodies the most serious and most successful venture into female characterization in Clarke's science fiction. The novel's acknowledgments credit two women as consultants on the female attitudes and responses to events in the plot. Part I of the novel is posed as Nicole's diary.

Chapter One of Part I moves readily to describe the birth of Simone in sufficient clinical detail to bring readers of either gender intimately into this defining female experience. Since Nicole's role in the prior novel, *Rama II*, was that of medical officer for the *Newton*, a spacecraft dispatched to evaluate the nature and purpose of the alien craft dubbed "Rama," there is good logic to Nicole's preparing her two male companions for the delivery of the child. She certainly holds her own as scientific professional and as biologically successful female. To pose her as joining Michael in the stitching of her own episiotomy after exhausting hours of labor, though, pushes the "capable woman" image to the limit of credibility. Such extremity aside, Nicole usually carries the role of a professional woman, wife and mother well through the various mysteries and challenges of the novel's plot. Her concern for relationships, her ability to see not only rational alternatives but intuitive alternatives to life's problems also, give her much greater substance as a character than most of the women populating Clarke's solo and coauthored works.

Given the birth of her second girl, Nicole ponders the children's future from a scientific perspective. If they continue in space flight away from the home world for decades, they could remain isolated from all other humans. They could become the seed group for human life in another part of the galaxy. But Nicole recognizes that, to reduce the risks of recessive genes bringing out physical and mental deficits in potential grandchildren and succeeding generations, she and Michael should try to produce male children who could be mates for the girls.

Given different fathers, the children would carry a wider variety of genetic possibilities. From the scientific perspective, Richard and Michael concede the validity of the argument. The psychological realities of changing mates, though, create extreme stresses in the family group.

Jealousy overpowers Richard Wakefield. The notion of Nicole sleeping with Michael evokes memories of his disastrous first marriage to Sarah Tydings in his student days.



Sarah's trips to London for work in theatrical productions became prolonged as she began sleeping around with young men also involved in the plays. Unable to control his anger, Richard disappears into some other portion of the alien habitat, remaining away for four years.

Michael O'Toole can concede the genetic logic of Nicole's idea, but as a devout Catholic, he struggles with his sense of sin. Given Michael's moral scruples—and the fact that he is sixtythree and has not been sexually active for several years—Nicole struggles emotionally and physically to achieve the conception of Benjy. Since Richard remains out of contact with the others for so long, Michael and Nicole eventually live as husband and wife and conceive a second boy, Patrick. Nicole and Michael do search for Richard, yet the family settles into a nurturing routine as best they can in the alien environment. Michael considers religious tradition as important as literacy in raising the young. Although a nominal Catholic herself, Nicole lives a syncretism of Catholicism, scientific rationalism and—when dream visions arise in times of high stress—African tribal mysticism. She sometimes objects to Michael's more dogmatic representations to the children. In time, Michael moderates his religious activity, although Simone takes the religious perspective very seriously—even if her mother and the other children do not.

When alien creatures bring a comatose Richard back to the family's living quarters, Michael and Nicole return to living in separate rooms. After enough time for emotional healing has passed, Nicole and Richard resume life as a couple and Ellie, the last of the children born in deep space, results. Richard, skilled in computer science and robotics, has a hobby of building mini-robots or dolls twenty centimeters high. A devotee of Shakespeare, Richard has figures such as Falstaff and Prince Hal in his collection. At times the family entertainment consists of watching the mini-robots enact scenes from a play or spout soliloquies. In crucial events, however, the mobility and communication capacities of the robots help solve a serious problem, thus reinforcing Clarke's and Lee's premise that technology should serve humanity.

In the latter three sections of the novel, the normal shortsightedness and selfishness of the colonists sent to Rama on the ships *Pinta*, *Nina*, and *Santa Maria* overwhelm Nicole and Richard Wakefield's leadership and knowledge of the alien environment. The first year of the colony, Nicole serves as acting governor.

Later she is appointed a judge for one district. While she stands for rational and humane measures in government and for justice tempered with mercy, Nicole and her family cannot withstand the baser impulses controlling most of the colonists. At the wedding of Ellie Wakefield to cardiologist Dr. Robert Turner, a robot shoots Kenji Watanabe and others in one of a set of coordinated attacks on democratic leaders. Nicole narrowly escapes death. The losses allow Toshio Naka-mura to move Ian MacMillan, former commander of the *Pinta*, into the governorship and later, to succeed MacMillan himself.

Despotic and militaristic, the Nakamura influence on the colony turns attention and spending away from medical research and toward building another settlement outside New Eden's walls in which to house the outcasts—RV-41 patients, Benjy O'Toole and any other mentally challenged persons, the disabled or disfigured, along with low-paid



workers for an arms factory. The Wakefields' advice to remain within the alien's boundaries and guidelines for managing the environment are ignored. In part with Richard's help, the government learns how to alter the programming for the colony's weather control. Skeptical of the Wakefields' admonitions, the aggressive government sets crews to drill through the walls of other habitats, then wages war on the beings found inside. Richard flees New Eden and learns slowly about the alien creatures in one of the threatened habitats. Son Patrick is drafted and kept "at the front," away from other family members, while Nicole is imprisoned on charges of sedition. Thus, in an ironic parallel to the biblical Eden story, the Wakefield/ O'Toole family members who have actually had contacts with "higher intelligence" enact some forms of loss of innocence while being cast out of the New Eden populated by normal human beings.



Social Concerns

The third of four Rama novels, *The Garden of Rama* includes Arthur C. Clarke's and Gentry Lee's continuing speculations into human contact with extraterrestrial intelligence. The novels depict an advanced civilization reaching for contact with human spacefarers, during which time various forms of governments on Earth are inconstant in sustaining new technologies both on the planet and in space, which ultimately would be of great benefit to humanity.

Sexism and racism within human society, the inability of humans to grow past lusts for money, power, sexual gratification, and the prideful assumption that humans hold superiority to different or "alien" societies even when they are obviously highly advanced in technology and culture are all salient issues in the novel.

The authors' use of characters highly trained in computer science, robotics, medicine, and astrophysics, shows emphasis on discipline and creativity in rational, scientific inquiry and practical application of technology. The social successes and failures within the young colony of New Eden illustrate the value of emotional support that humans can provide each other, the high costs of a lack of such care, and the need for education and rational thought in a society if reasonable democracy is to survive crime and despotism.

A protagonist who is part French and part African, and who is both a highly trained physician and cosmonaut, and a woman occasionally alerted to future events or situations through dreams or visions presents the reader with the mystical and intuitive aspects of personality as alternative "ways of knowing and being."

The persistence of human traditions—for good and for ill—even light years away from the home planet is illustrated in characters organizing and interpreting aspects of life from traditional Catholic attitudes and behaviors (with some characters devout and some nominally observant) to tribal mysticism/shamanism of the Senoufou tribe of the Ivory Coast of Africa (the protagonist's maternal heritage), to Thai Buddhist meditation, to one of the antagonists' traditional Japanese Samurai warrior fixation—in this novel, warped by a gangster's will to tyrannize his society. In summary, the authors present the reader a group of space travelers en route to an astounding new world, but perpetuating the familiar wrongs of the old.



Techniques

Segmentation of the novel into five major parts is significant for characterization and for the cumulative symbolism of "New Eden." Since Part One is overtly titled "Nicole's Journal" and is rendered in first person, the feminine perspective dominates the work. Also, many of the chapters within the first part are short, as diary entries often may be (although chapters in the other sections are usually not much more than ten pages long, and may also be subdivided internally as well).

They are also dated, as journal entries tend to be, charting in uneven fashion the passage of time. As mentioned above, Clarke and Lee had two women review their work for realistic rendering of female actions, attitudes, and feelings. *The Garden of Rama* gives far more attention to interpersonal relationships from a feminine perspective than does the rest of the Clarke canon (although *Rama Revealed* [1994], last in the Rama tetralogy and also featuring Nicole des Jardins Wakefield, runs a close second).

The other four parts employ thirdperson narrative, sometimes with limited omniscience that allows the reader into the minds of several characters. In "At the Node," the reader follows the actions of all the members of the Wakefield/ O'Toole family group—adults and children alike, although the primary attention remains with Nicole. The rationale for naming the habitat that humans will occupy on Rama "New Eden" is explicit in the second part, chapter six: "That first Eden was rich in life forms but devoid of technology . . ." while "New Eden is a technological miracle without any life forms at least initially, except a few human beings."

The time-honored method of flashback combined with the use of short chapters allows the reader countless opportunities to fill in more details on the lives of Nicole and the other characters.

When the colonists are to be selected and assembled, the narrative follows Nai Butong and Kenji Watanabe in the recruitment process on Earth. Several of the characters from the penal institutions become involved in the novel's plot action before one or more flashbacks clarify these individuals' strengths, weaknesses, and position in the story development.

As is common in Clarke's work the juxtaposition of religious world views —Catholicism and Buddhism in this case—with scientific rationalism or humanism, and with hedonism, is played out through both the opinions and actions of individuals. Michael O'Toole and Simone Wakefield follow a devout Catholic perspective. Nai Butong Watanabe observes Buddhist traditions of prayer and meditation. Richard Wakefield believes in a rational approach to life and action, sometimes disparaging religious beliefs and practices, sometimes acquiescing to Michael O'Toole's wish for prayers in their family group in times of particular stress. And while he functions frequently as a rationalist, he is also subject to bouts of depression and withdrawal and is not easily "reasoned out" of his irrational behaviors while depression grips him.

Although characters may at times criticize another's belief structure, the cumulative effect in *The Garden of Rama* is to leave the reader to choose among ways to view the vast universe and the mysteries of life, with the observation that a person is at risk of limiting personal and group freedom to learn and grow if any belief system is held too rigidly.



Themes

Late in the adventures of his family among the Earth colonists of New Eden, Richard Wakefield states the major premise of *The Garden of Rama*: ". . . transport them to another world and give them a paradise, but they still come equipped with their fears and insecurities and their cultural predilections." Earth authorities responded to the aliens' expectation of 2000 colonists to travel in the Rama spacecraft with a cover story, attempting to recruit people trained in various occupations and professions for a supposed five-year stint on Mars.

Falling short of the desired quota of applicants from the world's general population, the authorities directed recruiting efforts to inmates of various prisons and penal colonies. As a result, the inhabitants of the New Eden colony included a large number of convicted felons. Some made good on the chance for a new start in life, but others simply plunged into more of the felonious behaviors that had gotten them into prison on Earth. Thus, the colony began with "bad seed" in the mix.

And lest the reader view the protagonist's children—who had been born and lived all their lives in the alien environs with no 5544 other humans than their parents—as innocents risking corruption by exposure to the evils of their former-convict companions in space, Katie Wakefield is presented from birth as a headstrong child, contrary and frequently disobedient. For her to wind up as a casino "hostess" (prostitute) and drug addict in the Vegas sector of New Eden is less an enactment of corruption than it is a illustration of "nature over nurture."

Other signs of shortsighted "cultural predilections" include the colonists' habit to disbelieve the testimony of Nicole and Richard Wakefield about the human habitat within the Rama spacecraft, as well as about the alien intelligence which built and controlled it. Having been deceived about their actual destination and purpose in the recruitment for the Rama venture, the colonists assume that the Wakefields are either space crazy or parties to some obscure plot. Only occasionally do they heed the Wakefields' counsel.

Although Nicole urged colonists to settle in the four prepared village areas in evenly integrated distribution to promote intercultural relationships and understanding, most gravitated to familiar or similar groups—European and lightskinned Americans together; Africans, African-Americans, and dark-complected Latin Americans together; Japanese, and Chinese from Singapore and Taiwan and other Asians, too, together. Naturally, with the comfort of residing among "familiar" people came for too many the suspicion that people from "unlike" groups should be avoided, feared or scorned. Mariko Kobayashi's charge that her erstwhile boyfriend, Pedro Martinez, raped her leads to a near riot by young Japanese from Hakone village who insist Martinez be given lynch-mob "justice."

As the exchange between the crowd and the handful of representatives of the law grows bitter, one young man insults Nicole with a racist epithet. Infuriated, the middle-aged and usually dignified judge Nicole slaps the youth, a reflex action she

subsequently regrets because it wounds her own expectations of self-control and damages her public image as an officer of the court.

Despite warnings to keep the atmospheric control system as originally set, the colonial government sets programmers to work to adapt the alien computer controls and induce more extreme variations in the weather system. Rather than devote funding to research to find a cure for Retro-virus 41, an AIDS-like disease afflicting nearly 100 colonists, the colonial government (dominated by crime boss Toshio Nakamura) sows fear in the population and devotes money to breaking through their own habitat's walls and into the adjacent habitat, using a location outside New Eden for "Avalon"—a village in which the RV-41 patients, Benjy—the Wakefield's moderately retarded son—and other putative "undesirables" are confined in less-than-desirable housing, away from the greenery and amenities of the New Eden's first four villages. In summary, the colonial government exercises typical tyranny—rhetorically demonizes the alien "enemies," suppresses thinking and compassionate advocates of justice and responsible freedom, and crushes or puts aside the weaker members of its own society.

The importance of educated women in modern and future society is upheld via several characters. Nicole des Jardins Wakefield, physician and cosmonaut, mother of five children, serves a year as governor of New Eden and is subsequently appointed one of the judges.

While several of the ex-convict women slip into degraded life styles, Eponine becomes a teacher in the high school; Nai Watanabe devotes time to tutoring the Wakefield/O'Toole children so they can catch up with their peers in the newly formed colony. The historical characters Eleanor of Aquitaine and Joan of Arc feature in the protagonist's memories of childhood studies and in her dreams as models of women who, though facing great opposition from the male-dominated culture of Medieval Europe, accomplished notable deeds.



Key Questions

Feminist critics in the latter years of the twentieth century have faulted many male writers for perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes in their stories and novels, even when the writers are attempting to depict women as significant characters.

Popular sociology, psychology, and linguistic views widespread in the media in the 1980s and 1990s view women as more concerned with cooperative relationships and expression of feelings than men are likely to be. Males, according to the popular view, tend to be more capable of focused analytical thought, more competitive, more given to dominance through physical strength, less able to perceive and manage feelings, and less able to communicate effectively with others. At times, critics have judged women writers more capable of depicting male characters effectively than male writers are able to portray female characters.

The popular wisdom would portray male readers as more interested in the science and mechanics of science fiction space travel, and less concerned with details of characterization or amorous relationships. When love matches are given, male readers would be expected to respond more to the traditional pattern of "boy gets girl" through some form of abrupt macho conquest, and less to a step-by-step process of building a love relationship. Group discussion of the Rama novels could include consideration of the current audience for science fiction and whether the ratio of males to females in the readership is balanced, and whether the present day expectations and tastes of male and female readers fit traditional stereotypes.

1. Clarke and Lee, as males, credit consultants Bebe Barden and Stacy Lee with great assistance in shaping the appropriate feminine perspectives in the main character, Nicole des Jardins. Have they succeeded in putting across a wellrounded character who is both fully professional and fully female? Are there passages in which Nicole's reaction seems more "masculine" than feminine? If so, what would be a "more typically" feminine response?

2. How believable are the male characters in the story? Do Clarke and Lee have Richard Wakefield and Michael O'Toole responding to the problems they face in ways that seem normal for men, or are they posed as responding in ways that seem more feminine?

3. Is it right for the humans to go along with the demands of the aliens controlling the Rama spacecraft and the survey of life forms? Should the humans try to destroy the entire spacecraft or themselves in order to block the plans of the mysterious controlling intelligence?

4. While the novel is set over two centuries into the future, Earth's inhabitants still are quite ethnocentric and nationalistic—sometimes crudely racist. The colonists brought to the Rama spacecraft include professionals such as doctors, teachers, and lawyers who are currently viewed as middle to upper class in western societies, but there are



shopkeepers and others who may be considered lower class as well. Are Clarke and Lee too pessimistic in the portrait of the New Eden colonists? Given such a "fresh start" in the Rama habitat, and having the many "biots" (biological robots) available to do many routine tasks, should the colonists not be able to rise above race and class differences?

5. In posing the problem of RV-41 infection among the New Eden colonists, Clarke and Lee provide a close parallel to the problems associated with HIV infection in the twentieth century. What measures does the colonial government take to prevent the spread of the disease?

How do Nicole and her family react to the official policies? Explain what parallels exist between the novel's portrayal of government response to the health problems linked to RV-41 and twentieth-century governments' responses to HIV infection.

6. How well does democracy work in New Eden, and why does it succeed or fail?

7. Why do New Eden government leaders want to control weather patterns for their habitat?

8. Why do New Eden government leaders want to break through the walls of their own and other habitats?

9. Since the colony has been provided with many biots to assist the humans in their daily lives, why are human laborers needed in a weapons factory in Avalon settlement?

10. When Nicole encounters highstress challenges, she sometimes has dreams which seem prophetic or which lead to some resolution of a problem.

How believable is such an intuitive or nonrational aspect of her character? Does the mystical approach to "knowing" undermine the reader's view of Nicole as an educated professional?

11. Who are Nicole's role models?

When did they live (according to the novel's time lines)? What does Nicole admire in them? Does Nicole really face situations as extreme as her various role models did during their lives?

12. What personages are replicated in the biots that serve the New Eden Colony? Why were they chosen to look and function as they originally did?

13. If Nicole (a medical doctor), Richard, and Michael had the knowledge bank from the Newton available to help them clarify to the alien computer system the elemental nature of foods, wines, medicines, furniture, toys, tools, and so on, why did they not have the alien system synthesize some drug to give prenatal treatment to Benjy to correct his genetic defect and prevent his lifetime deficit of being "slow" or "retarded"?



14. In travel back from the Node to the Mars orbit, Nicole, Richard and the children return with them are kept in a special "somnarium," sleeping for years.

The adults' aging process has been slowed, but the children have moved through adolescence during the hibernation. What problems do the children have in adjusting to the New Eden colonists?

To what extent do their problems come from the isolation of their childhood, and to what extent do they derive from the usual hormonal and psychosocial changes of adolescence?

15. The technical term "antagonist" may be applied to a person or to some social force or natural force that "opposes" or "creates conflict" for the main character of a story. How many antagonists does Nicole encounter in *The Garden of Rama*? Are the antagonists all human, or are some situational? Are the alien creatures in the other habitats on Rama "opponents" of Nicole and her family group? If change occurs, when and how does it come about?

Literary Precedents

From the biblical Genesis, through medieval English romances such as "The Knight's Tale" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387-1394), and countless other stories in the Western tradition, betrayal or fall from innocence in a garden has been a recurrent theme. Within the Rama tetralogy, *The Garden of Rama* plays most directly on the theme with the colony named New Eden and the Wakefield/ O'Toole family being driven from it. New to the motif, however, is the gathering of two other alien species within the Rama ship who are also contained within their own "gardens" and also dealing with their own social divisions, as the octospiders have their "alternates" who choose not to suppress their sexuality and live apart from the more ordered mainstream society. Also variant in the Clarke and Lee rendition of the motif is the remoteness of the unknown intelligence behind the creation and operation of the Rama ship, the Node, and the other craft the main characters observe in their travels.

In Hebrew tradition, God frequently deals with humans in at least partially anthropomorphic forms. At the Node, the biot (biological robot) called "the Eagle" brings important information and directions to the humans but does nothing to "reveal" the ultimate nature of the higher power or powers and purposes behind the "survey of spacefaring species" in the galaxy that contains Earth's solar system. The perpetual element of mystery runs parallel to the view that the God of Western tradition is greater than human understanding, but counter to the related view that the traditional God reaches for contact with humanity through a continuing revelation of divine identity.

Related Titles

As third in a series of four Rama novels, *The Garden of Rama* contains references to its main characters' actions in the prior *Rama II* (1989) and even some connections with *Rendezvous with Rama*.

Nicole des Jardins Wakefield continues the protagonist role in *Rama Revealed* (1994). Typically, most of the Clarke science fiction inventory employs one or more of the themes of human potential for learning, application of learning to improving life through technology, and the quest to explore and understand the vast universe beyond the limits of any Earthbound perspective.



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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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