

The Genocides Short Guide

The Genocides by Thomas M. Disch

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Characters

Disch's aesthetic concerns outweigh the other elements of *The Genocides*. For instance, his characters are variations of familiar stereotypes. The novel features Anderson, the industrious village leader who figures out ways to fight the voracious alien plants that cover the land, driving out all native life. It also features the well-educated man, Orville, whose knowledge of mine engineering helps the small farming community escape the murderous machines of the alien invaders who brought the deadly plants to earth.

Other characters include Blossom, the virginal innocent who comes to love Orville; Buddy, the goodhearted son of Anderson; and Maryann, devoted wife of Buddy. These and the novel's other characters are the stock figures found in tales of invasions of Earth by alien civilizations technologically more advanced than our own. Through courage, nobility, and common sense, these stock characters should eventually defeat the invaders. In *The Genocides*, the stereotype characters are intended to remind readers of those in such novels as *The War of the Worlds* and *The Day of the Triffids*, because their failures are meant to contrast with the successes of gallant earthpeople in most alien invasion stories.

The expectations created by novels about invasions of Earth are defied in *The Genocides*. Disch found the usual story of humans battling invaders from outer space to be aesthetically unsatisfying. Logically, earthpeople should lose to superior forces. In *The Genocides*, the determination of Anderson, the intelligence of Orville, and the devotion of Maryann are all to no avail. Stock characters, who routinely emerge victorious in science fiction novels, lose to an alien civilization that regards humanity as mere pests. One of the aspects of *The Genocides* that make it controversial is its portrayal of characters whose struggle to survive is meaningless in the face of superior technology. They lose, and all humanity is exterminated.



Social Concerns

In each of his novels, Disch seeks to convey a truth about the human condition and to create a new twist in an established literary form. In his first novel, *The Genocides*, Disch seeks to combine truth with a kind of literary gamesmanship. The novel is dystopian; it falls under the science fiction subcategory of stories about invaders from another planet that is archetypally represented by *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells. At the time of the writing of *The Genocides*, the film version (Allied Artists, 1963) of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) had achieved much repute. In Wyndham's book, seeds fall to earth from outerspace. The resulting plants are at first merely curiosities or are cultivated. They eventually begin walking and attacking people. Chaos ensues, with a courageous protagonist eventually discovering a way to battle the plants, which seem impervious to normal human weapons. Disch also uses the motif of extraterrestrial seeds falling to Earth. The resulting plants are dangerous because they can outgrow any native plant; they rapidly push out all competing life. Wyndham's characters are usually courageous with a few cowards or crazies among them as obstacles to success, and although Disch's characters show courage, they are also jealous, vengeful, foolish, and venal. Also, they are helpless; they play out their drama of lust and intrigue against an invasion by an enemy that easily turns Earth into a giant farm. Humanity never has a chance of defeating an enemy that is powerful beyond comprehension and for which human beings are mere pests, to be exterminated like any other farmland nuisance. The conclusion of *The Genocides* is representative of Disch's most important concerns; he is quoted by Charles Platt as remarking, "To me, it was always aesthetically unsatisfying to see some giant juggernaut alien force finally take a quiet pratfall at the end of an alien-invasion novel." ("Thomas M. Disch," *Dream Makers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction*, 1980, pages 11-12).



Techniques

The pattern of *The Genocides* is a familiar one in popular fiction. The novel presents a desperate situation in which people under extreme stress are reduced to their basic personalities, their civilized facades having been stripped away. Their adventures are followed as they meet each new test in their efforts to survive. Disch twists the familiar plot line by showing the characters slowly losing their battle against a relentless enemy. They slowly lose their farmland, their farm animals, their homes, and their refuges. As they retreat, they also lose their civilized morality; they are reduced to murder and cannibalism. The subplots of sexual infidelity, lust, and greed that spice up such novels as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), also an "end of a civilization" novel, make the passions of people seem trivial when set against the horrible events in *The Genocides*. Disch's principal literary technique throughout the novel is to twist stereotypical characters, plots, and images into unexpected forms. By having humanity lose, and by having a merciless alien invader triumph easily, Disch makes *The Genocides* into a sharp satire on commonly accepted views of the strengths of human beings under stress by showing that advanced technology is indifferent to people's virtues and weaknesses.

Key Questions

The Genocides will likely make some readers angry, which is okay because the novel is not meant to be a happy one. In it, all the traits we human beings like in ourselves and all the traits we despise add up to pointlessness: We are insignificant pests in a universe that is indifferent to our joys and our pain. Even though it may put some readers off, The Genocides offers substance for discussion. Note its satirical elements. Are they clues to the point Disch is trying to make? Is the novel a logical, well-unified whole? Has humanity ever done to other species what is done to it in the novel? Where is the moral high ground, if any?

1. Does The Genocides have any traits typical of first novels?
2. How satisfying is the ending of the novel? Disch wanted something that was aesthetically appropriate. Is it?
3. Do you find yourself trying to figure out ways the humans in the novel can escape their bitter fate?

Why? What ways do you think of? Are any plausible within the confines of the situation in the novel?

4. What are the ways The Genocides defies expectations?
5. What aspects of literary stereotypes does the novel satirize?
6. Why tell a long tale of adventure only to have all the characters' daring, courage, and innovation come to nothing?

Literary Precedents

The satire of *The Genocides* depends in large measure on the familiarity of its situation, characters, and themes.

The novel recalls *The Day of the Triffids*, which features alien plants ravaging earth and destroying modern civilization. *The War of the Worlds* sets the basic pattern for alien invasion novels. It has people heroically battling the frightfully deadly war machines of Martians.

Eventually, a small virtue of planet Earth — its microbes — destroys the Martian enemy. Humanity is taken to the brink of destruction only to be saved at the last moment. In some novels, the factor that saves humanity may be a human characteristic such as the power of love or a scientific discovery that pinpoints a fatal weakness in the alien invaders. *The Genocides* skips the last-moment device that saves humanity and carries its plot to its logical conclusion: the extinction of humanity.

Related Titles

Disch does not often repeat himself.

Of his other novels, *The Puppies of Terra* (also published as *Mankind Under the Leash*, 1966), comes closest to *The Genocides*. In this novel, people are kept as pets by alien beings. As in *The Genocides*, the later novel shows people as the virtually helpless victims of powerful aliens, but humanity finds a way to fend off the attentions of its alien masters. In *The Puppies of Terra*, Disch is even more explicitly interested in the aesthetics of fiction than he is in *The Genocides*, but the novel's plot is less well developed.



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