

# The Goblin Tower Short Guide

## The Goblin Tower by L. Sprague de Camp

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# Characters

The protagonist Jorian in *The Goblin Tower* is a typical de Camp sword-and-sorcery hero. He is tall, strong, and handsome; he is also worldly and suspicious of strangers. His caution is tempered by his good heart and outgoing personality. Among his faults are talking too much, falling too easily in love with women, and fear. This last quality makes him an appealing character because most people would be terrified in the life-threatening situations that Jorian often finds himself in.

Courage without fear would make Jorian seem noble, perhaps, but he would be remote, even austere. His fear and weaknesses make him someone with whom readers can share an adventure; readers can empathize with his will to survive.

Other characters are charming stereotypes. Most do not stay around long enough to become wearisome, although there are so many that they are hard to keep track of. For instance, there is the workmanlike headsman Uthar, the butcher, who is too involved with his craft to have any special feelings about his task; Vanora, the housemaid and slave, who is alcoholic and manipulative; and Porrex, the wizard, who cheats Jorian and Karadur out of their money. Each plays his role in the narrative and then falls aside. Only Karadur, who saves Jorian's life only to force him to go on a dangerous and probably foolish quest, lingers for most of the adventure. Karadur is wise in the ways of magic but not in the ways of the world and is too trusting. He provides motive for the quest and serves as a foil for Jorian. Karadur seeks an ideal world: Jorian simply wants to keep his own head on his shoulders.

## Social Concerns

Robert E. Howard, creator of the Conan stories, is often thought of as the "father" of the sword-and-sorcery subgenre of modern fantasy. If Howard is the "father," then de Camp, who revived Howard's work and then built upon it, must be the "stepfather." The subgenre's focus on an ancient and largely unrecorded past, on magic and the supernatural, on swordplay, and on adventurous quests, has been shaped in part by de Camp.

Typical of his sword-and-sorcery tales, *The Goblin Tower* shies away from direct social commentary, using twentieth-century America primarily for humor and to make the point that the novel does not take place on ancient Earth but instead on an alternate Earth in another "plane" of reality. The magic of *The Goblin Tower*'s world allows for travel among many different planes. The novel is a moralistic tale that emphasizes the advantages of kindness and thoughtfulness over cruelty and ignorance.

## Techniques

The *Goblin Tower* employs techniques that are familiar from *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941), and *Rogue Queen* (1951). As in the first novel, de Camp presents characters as social types, using them to describe his imaginary world. As in *Rogue Queen*, he keeps the action rapidly moving, following each solution to a problem with a greater, more complicated problem. The imaginary world of *The Goblin Tower* is filled with political intrigue and bizarre locales — tried and true elements for entertaining fans of sword-and-sorcery fiction.



## Key Questions

When literary scholars discuss heroic fantasy (which they do not do very often), authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard are usually mentioned, but de Camp usually is not; yet de Camp has had a profound influence on the literary subgenre of sword-and-sorcery. A discussion might begin by examining those aspects of *The Goblin Tower* that are representative of the subgenre and those which remain unique to de Camp, such as how he connects his fantasy world to our own world. Another approach to discussing the novel might begin by focusing on the characterization of Jorian: Why does he have the weaknesses he has?

How does he compare to other fantasy heroes?

1. Compare Jorian to Conan, an archetypal figure for sword-and-sorcery adventures. What do these characters have in common? How do they differ?

How do their personalities shape their adventures?

2. How does modern America figure in *The Goblin Tower*?

3. What is the source of the novel's humor?

4. The combat in *The Goblin Tower* is rough, cruel, and crude. Does this make the narrative unappealing? What are the positive aspects of portraying combat this way in an heroic fantasy?

5. How do the goals of Karadur and Jorian differ? How do they interact with each other? Which is the better man?

6. In what ways does *The Goblin Tower* defy expectations? Does it have original twists on the typical heroic fantasy narrative?

8. How are sexual relations handled in *The Goblin Tower*? Are these mature relationships? Are they objectionable?

9. How does the structure of the quest affect the development of the novel's narrative?

10. How important are the exotic locales to the appeal of the novel? How imaginative are they? Do they remind you of the works of other authors?



## Literary Precedents

Almost any fantasy focusing on a quest borrows from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), which recounts the Knights of the Round Table's quest for the Holy Grail. Major elements are travels through strange lands, deceptions by sorcerers and witches, heroic combat, political intrigue, sexual infidelity, and the search for a noble ideal. L. Sprague de Camp includes these elements in *The Goblin Tower*, although as a twentieth-century author he takes a more cynical view of them. For instance, the combat is rough, cruel, and crude, lacking highminded knight errantry and outsized heroism.

De Camp's sword-and-sorcery tales owe much to Howard's Conan the Barbarian stories. Howard's work has a fevered intensity, with sex imbuing nearly every scene with emotional power. Sex is seldom far from Jorian, but the style of *The Goblin Tower* is more refined than that of Howard's Conan tales. De Camp's work is the product of a mature author whose mixing of humor and danger is surehanded. What *The Goblin Tower* lacks in intensity is more than made up for by its carefully imagined world and its emotional variety.



## Related Titles

The sequels to *The Goblin Tower* are *The Clocks of Iraz* (1971), *The Unbeheaded King* (1983), and *The Honorable Barbarian* (1989).

De Camp has declared that he prefers to read and write sword-and-sorcery stories. Thus, it should be no surprise that many of his books have elements of sword-and-sorcery in them. The battle scenes in *Lest Darkness Fall* have an otherworldly air about them, particularly the climactic conflict involving a knight in golden armor and a mysterious villainous general called "Bloody John." *Rogue Queen's* events take place in a technologically primitive culture, and the novel has a heroic quest that involves Iroedh in combat that sometimes resembles the standard swordplay of sword-and-sorcery fiction. Of de Camp's sword-and-sorcery writings, the most significant, besides his series about Jorian, may be his completions of tales begun by Howard, such as *Tales of Conan* (1955) and *Conan the Usurper* (1967), as well as his elaborations on Conan's adventures, such as *Conan of the Isles* (with Lin Carter, 1968). A series of magical stories about psychologist Harold Shea's adventures, written in collaboration with Fletcher Pratt, remain popular. The first book of their series is *The Incomplete Enchanter* (1941), followed by *The Castle of Iron* (1950; these first two books were combined in the *Compleat Enchanter*, 1975), and *The Wall of Serpents* (1960). Probably the best of his sword-and-sorcery novels is *The Goblin Tower*, the first two sequels of which continue Jorian's adventures, with the third recounting Jorian's brother Kerin's quest to discover the secrets of the Kuromonian clock escapement.





# Copyright Information

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