Great Sky River Short Guide

Great Sky River by Gregory Benford

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

Contents

Characters

The Family Bishop, the men and women at the center of Great Sky River, is essentially a fighting unit, and its members share many of the personality traits of the soldier-characters of the typical World War II film. Benford gives us a competent, but aging commanding officer; a self-doubting protagonist named Killeen who has what it takes to command, but must prove it to himself and others; an eager and somewhat bumbling teenager who sees it all as a game; a variety of more or less competent followers; and an ambitious competitor who thinks that he, rather than Killeen, should be the new commander. Each member of the family Bishop does come alive as a real person, though, and Killeen is particularly well drawn. Benford succeeds admirably in developing a character who is profoundly ignorant of the world around him, but whom we can nonetheless respect for his competence and the genuine concern he feels for his family. Also intriguing are the partial personalities of the dead which each member of family Bishop stores within their own skulls.

Social Concerns/Themes

Great Sky River takes place in the same universe as In the Ocean of Night (1978), Across the Sea of Suns (1984), and other novels in the Nigel Walmsley series, but at a time much farther into the future. Humanity long ago succeeded in establishing a galaxy-spanning civilization. On the planet Snowglade, for example, there was a golden age during which human beings drastically altered their own bodies through cybernetic improvements and DNA restructuring. That near-utopian period ended, however, due to the onslaught of the Mechs, a robot civilization descended, perhaps, from the robotic intelligences of Walmsley's day. Now humanity is nearly extinct, its few remnants, although still superhuman in terms of their physical capabilities, caught up in a hopeless, nomadic lifestyle. On the run from the Mechs who now control Snowglade, the remaining human families are little more than vermin, nibbling at the edges of a high civilization that they cannot pretend to understand.

Benford's themes are several. He shares with such science fiction writers as Greg Bear (Blood Music, 1985) and Bruce Sterling (Islands in the Net, 1988) the belief that humanity has reached the point where we will soon be able to make drastic changes in our bodies, enhancing our mental and physical capabilities to the point where we will appear virtually superhuman. In Great Sky River, for example, people have a built-in computer and an enhanced musculature that allows them to quite literally run all day. Benford emphasizes, however, the idea that such innovations will have little effect on our basic nature. While we will be able to achieve scientific and intellectual marvels the likes of which the twentieth century cannot yet conceive, we will nonetheless retain our current emotional strengths and shortcomings. We will never cease to be human.

Benford sharply contrasts his new, improved humanity with the Mech machine intelligences. Essentially, he is attempting to do something that may not be possible. Previous to Benford, most attempts to portray Artificial Intelligence (AI) in science fiction have involved what are essentially human beings in machine form. Most fictional AI's, from Heinlein's Mike in The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress (1966) to William Gibson's matrix AI's in Neuromancer (1984), have simply been a human intelligence, rendered faster and somewhat more logical.

Benford's point is that if true thinking machines actually do come into being, their thought processes may not be simply faster than ours, but fundamentally different, and thus beyond our comprehension. Different is not necessarily better, however, and Great Sky River, although a fairly grim novel, does contain a modicum of the determined optimism that is found in much of Benford's work. Beaten down though they may be, the men and women of Snowglade refuse to give up. They may be on the run, but they will keep running until both their legs and their cybernetic circuits give out.

Key Questions

One of the complaints leveled against many works of science fiction is that the aliens and artificial intelligences who appear in the genre are simply too much like us, little more than human beings in funny bodies (or, for that matter, in human bodies with funny heads). This is particularly obvious in such relatively unsophisticated science fiction films and television shows as Star Wars and Star Trek where the creation of truly nonhuman aliens runs into both conceptual and practical difficulties, but it is also the case in many science fiction novels and short stories that have long been recognized as classics.

Some writers have argued that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to envision an intelligence that is truly different from our own. It has also been suggested that the creation of such a thoroughly non-human intelligence in a work of fiction might in fact be undesirable, because it might make the story impossible for human beings to understand. Benford, however, is clearly attempting to describe such intelligences in Great Sky River, and any discussion of this novel would do well to center on this issue. Benford's Mechs think very differently from human beings. Their actions are driven by very different cultural imperatives. If they have emotions, those emotions are very different from what humans feel.

Much the same can be said of the several other alien intelligences discovered by Family Bishop over the course of their adventures. See the entry on Furious Gulf for some general ideas for Group Discussion.

1. The human characters of Great Sky River have received a wide variety of enhancements, including built-in computers, reenforced musculature and skeletons, greatly improved sense organs, and so forth. Yet they seem quite human in many ways. Going beyond the obvious, how do Benford's humans differ from contemporary humanity?

Does it seem likely that people who have been changed so much on a physical level would maintain so much of their basic humanity?

2. To what extent does Benford succeed in creating a clearly non-human intelligence? To what extent does he fail? How difficult is it to follow the Mech thought processes displayed in the novel?

3. Consider the Mech known as the Mantis as a character. How would you describe it? What motivates it?

4. Traditionally, Artificial Intelligences have been seen as emotionless, as running entirely on logic. Is this true of Benford's Mechs?

5. Why are the various Families in Great Sky River named after chess pieces? What does this add to the novel?

6. How do you react to Killeen, the novel's protagonist? Why has Benford chosen a hero so full of self-doubts?

How believable is Killeen's gradual development into a competent leader?

7. The humans of Great Sky River carry the recorded partial personalities of their own ancestors on chips slotted into their brains. These ancestral voices provide wisdom and serve to keep humanity's history alive. They can also be a major problem, causing distractions at the wrong moment and occasionally pushing those who carry them into psychosis. What do you think of this idea? Would you be willing to carry the active personalities of your parents or others in your own mind?

8. It was suggested above that stories in which machine intelligences do battle with or enslave humanity can be read allegorically. In such stories the machines can be seen as representing the lower classes, the proletariat, the people who run the machines and who are generally feared or despised by the middle and upper classes. To what extent does this seem to be true in Great Sky River? Consider the creatures known as Manmechs in particular.

9. To what extent does the overthrow or enslavement of humanity by its machines, and particularly by its computers, seem likely in our own world?

Do we see any examples of this in the present day?

10. Many other science fiction novels have been written that discuss these dangers; a number of them are mentioned in the above paragraphs, for example Rudy Rucker's Wetware and Dan Simmons' Hyperion and The Fall of Hyperion. Read one or more of these books. How do their ideas compare with Benford's?

11. Read In the Ocean of Night and, if possible, the other Nigel Walmsley novels. Great Sky River and its sequels are set some time in Walmsley's future.

Based on the information Benford provides, what do you think happened in the time between the two series?

Literary Precedents

Benford is writing within one of the most heavily worked traditions of science fiction —
the story which expresses the fear that humanity may someday be replaced by another
species, perhaps one which we ourselves are responsible for bringing into existence.
Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) is, in part, an early working out of this idea, as is H.
G. Wells's The Time Machine (1895). Other early and influential examples of the theme
include Karel Capek's R.U.R. (1921), which features the first fictional uprising of artificial
intelligences against their masters, and his War With the Newts (1937), in which a race
of not very successful but intelligent amphibians is first enslaved by humanity and then,
learning human military techniques, conquers the planet. Capek's fiction, and the many
similar stories which followed, can clearly be read as allegory. Behind the revolt of the
robots lies the upper-class fear of the revolt of the proletariat, the machine intelligence
symbolizing the class of people who spend their lives working with machines. Similar
connections can be made between Capek's newts and the oppressed third world.
Equally popular in the history of science fiction, however, has been an alternate version
of this theme, which sees the Earth as being abandoned to its machines and domestic
animals because humanity, having achieved transcendence, no longer needs the
planet.

Among the many science fiction stories that explore the idea of humanity being
overthrown or replaced by its own creations are Clifford Simak's City (1952), D. F.
Jones's Colossus (1966), Jack Vance's The Last Castle (1967), Rudy Rucker's Wetware
(1988), and Dan Simmons's Hyperion (1989), and The Fall of Hyperion (1990).

Related Titles

Great Sky River is a logical extension of Benford's earlier novels, especially those in the Nigel Walmsley series, which take place in the same universe but many years earlier. It demonstrates his interest in new technology, space exploration, the potential for technology-based changes in the human mind and body, artificial intelligence, and the difficulties of information exchange between radically different cultures. In this novel Benford once again attempts to portray non-human minds with a minimum of anthropomorphism. In the sequel, Tides of Light (1989), Benford continues this exploration, developing yet another alien culture, one which shares with humanity a biological origin, but which is much more heavily cyborged.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.