

# Hardfought Short Guide

## Hardfought by Greg Bear

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## Overview

Hardfought tells of a small portion in an eons-long war between humanity and the very ancient species of the Senexi. The narrative focuses on Prufrax, a girl barely entering her adolescence, and Aryz, a Senexi whose job is to first understand humans and then, if successful, commit suicide. The violent coming together of these very different beings illustrates how understanding between humans and Senexi might be achieved and how such understanding could lead to peace.

Hardfought is very densely written, intense in action and theme, and it demands that readers think closely about how events and characters develop in a culture vastly different than our own. The vicarious adventure in a wondrous cosmos that the story provides, along with the very density of the writing, are two of the most attractive aspects of the novella. It also presents themes of immediate interest to young people, offering sometimes simplistic answers to complex questions, but doing so with a clarity that is bound to appeal to readers who wish to have their minds taken seriously by those who write for that audience.

## About the Author

Greg Bear was born in San Diego, California on August 20, 1951. He grew up in many different areas of the world because his father was a Navy man who served assignments in Japan and the Philippines, as well as postings to naval bases on the Gulf Coast, East Coast, and West Coast of the mainland United States. His childhood experiences in diverse lands may account for the sensitivity to different cultures displayed in his fiction. It is difficult for young children to make friends when moving about frequently, and Bear's passion for reading may have its origin in lonely hours when he was young. He is an eclectic reader of science, history, and fiction.

His ambition to be a writer seems to have begun early, perhaps when he was eight years old, and Bear was writing in hopes of publication by the time he was a teenager. This precocious feat was achieved at fifteen when he sold a short story to Famous Science Fiction. Despite his early good fortune Bear, like many young writers, found it difficult to publish other works; his second professional publication did not appear until he was in his early twenties, but he attracted critical attention as one of science fiction's most promising young talents.

In the years since he has retained the respect of critics with his taut narratives and imaginative settings.

To supplement his income as a novelist, Bear worked as a journalist, contributing to Southern California newspapers during the 1970s and early 1980s. Bear is widely admired by his science fiction peers, and he has served in various posts for the Science Fiction Writers of America, including president from 1988 to 1990. The Science Fiction Writers of America have given Bear three Nebula awards: for best 1983 novella, *Hardfought*; for best 1983 novelette, "Blood Music"; and for best 1986 short story, "Tangents". The World Science Fiction Convention has twice given Bear its annual Hugo award: for best 1984 novelette, "Blood Music" and for best 1987 short story, "Tangents."

"Through reading science fiction, I became interested in other forms of literature, in astronomy and the sciences, in history and philosophy," Bear says in his preface to his short story collection *The Wind from a Burning Woman*. The importance of science to the development of his mind may be why Bear often addresses the interests of young adults in his fiction, and why he would choose a character in early adolescence as the principal human protagonist in *Hardfought*. What would Bear's life have been without astronomy and the sciences, literature, history, and philosophy? What might happen to young people if they were denied access to history and culture?

*Hardfought* offers some of Bear's answers.



## Setting

The action takes place on two spaceships in the Medusa nebula and in flashbacks to Earth where the first Prufrex lived when she was not fighting in the war against the Senexi. The human spaceship, huge enough to contain a park and numerous people, is a world-in-miniature where information is rigorously controlled. Prufrex, like all "Glovers," is denied any information not directly related to her task of killing the enemy; even her entertainment is restricted to depictions of violence and heroic glovers.

Her love life is rigorously regulated, with unseen "overs" choosing who she may or may not have as friends or lovers, and her emotional development, sexual responsiveness, and ability to conceive are controlled with equal severity. Her body, as controlled from without as her mind, is without explanation manipulated to serve the ends of others—her fingers are mutilated to make them fit the gloves she later wears for fighting. Prufrex thus has a life barren of emotion, choice, and scope, empty of everything except the imperative of killing the enemy.

Aryz is on a Senexi "seedship," a vast structure that seeks out planets to colonize or to exploit. Part of its function is to eradicate all native life on those planets the Senexi choose to exploit. Aryz likens this to the human practice of cleaning food before eating it, and he is startled by the revulsion humans feel towards the Senexi exterminations. On Aryz's ship are "brood minds," beings that store all of Senexi history and that control "branch inds" such as Aryz. The brood minds are analogues of the "mandates" on human ships, storage receptacles for all of human history. Like Prufrex, Aryz is manipulated by his superiors, who limit what he is allowed to know. His brood mind goes so far as to tell Aryz to commit suicide after his job with turning human captives into weapons against human ships is completed; his newly acquired knowledge is deemed pollution that could harm other Senexi if it were communicated to them.

The flashbacks to the original Prufrex, from whom thousands of clones have been bred, explain how the war started and how the disastrous restriction to historical knowledge began among humans. The flashbacks tell how the Senexi start the war without intent by doing what they have always done; they cleanse a few planets of all life, including human colonists, as part of their seeding process. The genocidal attacks infuriate the humans, who retaliate by destroying Senexi ships. The original Prufrex has no doubts about which species has justice on its side, and her battles include one in which she destroys a Senexi processing plant that is grinding up the intelligent native species of a gas-giant planet. Such matters seem sure to further inflame the anger of humans, but the "overs" (probably political and military leaders) decide that they need to control access to history in order to manipulate people into fighting what may be a very long war.

## Social Sensitivity

Hardfought is a harsh, uncompromising study of the baleful effects that result from restricting people's access to their history. When taken to cruel and destructive extremes this action stifles minds, distorts personalities, cripples emotional freedom, and stultifies judgment. It is a dark story that may be quite unsettling for some younger readers, even though it may simultaneously satisfy their craving for literature that engages their minds.

Nudity is alluded to now and again, clothing is primarily restricted to what is useful, and part of the sterility of the shipboard environment is the absence of ornamental garb. The control of the sex lives of the human characters may put off some parents, although young adults are likely to take it in stride as an example of how inhumane the culture of war has become.

## Literary Qualities

One of the appealing aspects of *Hardfought* is its colorful language. For instance, Bear writes, "The Medusa was a huge womb of stars - and disputed territory." The nebula is a womb because it is a place where gas coalesces to form stars. To suggest Prufrax's state of mind, Bear writes, "She [Prufrax] is the great avenging comet, bringer of omen and doom." As good as such lines are, the novella's style sometimes breaks down, usually when Bear presents an epithet intended to summarize what characters are supposed to have learned from a series of events. Clevo, inventor of the mandates, asserts that "What you know, you cannot hate." The epithet is snappy and sounds good, but it suggests that either Clevo is not well read or that he is fundamentally stupid.

# Themes and Characters

Hardfought, a cautionary tale very rich in ideas, has two themes that are especially prominent. One is the unifying theme of history. "The thread survives by whim," begins the story; the "thread" is history, and it is the premise of the novella that denying access to history affects, alters, and warps individual lives. In the world of Hardfought, people are made strangers to their past by "overs" who, lying by policy and design, either completely withhold knowledge of history from those under their control or heavily edit what they allow to be known.

Thus glovers like Prufrax have no idea how long the war against the Senexi has been going on, or even why it is being fought. They are allowed to know only what will further serve the purpose they have been molded for, the killing of Senexi. This results in spiritually stunted humans who yearn to know without knowing why they yearn.

The second compelling theme is "And if you truly understand, why are you fighting and not talking?" - a thought of the original Prufrax.

The control of access to history limits people's abilities to understand one another and resolve conflicts.

This idea applies equally as much to the Senexi as it does to humans. Aryz is kept unaware of such matters as his culture's systematic eradication of intelligent life forms, and he is surprised to learn that the "vermiform natives" in the battle for the gas giant were intelligent beings. When Aryz, the two prisoner Prufraxes, and the mutant communicate via the mandate, they begin to understand one another through the histories they learn of each other. Aryz learns that humans regard his species as genocidal monsters; the humans begin to understand that for the Senexi the war is a result of mistakes. It is no wonder that those on each side who want the war to continue do not want their fighters to know the true history of the conflict and what is really happening now: communication between the species could lead to understanding and understanding could result in compromise.

Bear offers three characters to illustrate his ideas. One is Aryz, the branch "ind" ordered by his brood mind to study humans in order to learn how to make captive humans of the Senexi into weapons to be used against their own kind. "The Senexi were nearly as old as the galaxy," with "nearly twelve billion years' experience." They evolved in a gas giant at a time when heavy elements were rare, not yet produced in stars and then exploded into the cosmos by novae.

They are very slow to adapt to change, taking thousands of years to achieve what humans might achieve in only a few years. "To change would be unspeakably repugnant" to a Senexi, making thoughts of compromise with the humans disgusting.

Indeed, when thoughts of understanding come to Aryz's mind, "He realized, none too clearly, that by Senexi standards he was now a raving lunatic."





Aryz embodies one of the tough contradictions of the narrative. He is charged with learning about human beings and told that he must kill himself once this task is completed because his mind will then be polluted by forbidden thoughts. This chance to serve in a special way excites Aryz, even though he realizes that "He has been blessed - and condemned." Cruel in his determination to use his human prisoners, Aryz "wants them to associate comfort and completeness with 4652 Hardfought nothing but himself," and he reminds himself that "Communication with the human shapes was for one purpose only; to use them as decoys, insurgents. They were weapons." Yet as Aryz learns about his prisoners, he finds his attitude unexpectedly changing, perhaps when "He discovers that even between human and Senexi there could be a bridge of need - the need to be useful."

Having found one emotion in common with the repulsive humans, he is prepared to begin to understand them in a way that would be pollution as far as his superiors are concerned; then his understanding evolves into a recognition of how the humans view the Senexi. The original Prufrex learns that learning about how you are viewed by your opponent can help you defeat them, but Aryz learns the further lesson that it may help you recognize why your opponent fights, which may then lead to a resolution of differences which ends the conflict. Aryz, before learning about humans, had not thought about how the behavior of the Senexi might be viewed by outsiders, but knowing why humans hate the Senexi could lead to a change in behavior that the Senexi do not want to make. Apparently, it is easier for them to continue to loot worlds and exterminate their inhabitants than to stop.

Cut off from his brood mind, Aryz continues to learn on his own: "What Aryz was feeling, for the first time, was a small measure of freedom." This freedom comes from having unrestricted access to information; as long as others obstructed his learning, he was not free. Having not been free before, Aryz experiences "another aspect of complete freedom, confusion." Discovering that what he had always believed might be wrong is confusing, and deciding what to learn and where to find it is also confusing.

The causal linkage of knowledge to freedom to confusion is extended to further knowledge when Aryz follows Prufrex's story within the mandate, increasing his understanding of humans in general through understanding one individual human being.

Humanity is represented primarily by two versions of Prufrex. One Prufrex was born on a star ship and knows little about anything other than her destiny to be a "glover," a warrior. All of her life is restricted; even her lovers are chosen for her. Just entering adolescence, she has few doubts and less knowledge about her life. She does not know that she is but one in a long history of Prufrexs, dating back to the early days of the war against the Senexi. "They breed thousands of us [glovers]. We're expendable," she is told by Kummax, her lover.

To understand the world of the shipboard Prufrex one must understand the circumstances of the original earthly Prufrex, the great warrior who saved the vermiforms from extinction by the Senexi grinding machine. Her history is an ironic one in that she learns much about the truth of the war but remains deluded about the future.



Although she discovers that the war may never be truly won in a stalemate that goes on forever, she is cheered by the thought that there will be many future versions of Clevo (her lover) and herself, and that they may fall in love again countless times. This vision of future companionship in the never-ending fight is doomed never to happen because those who decide to control access to learning history also want to control how history is shaped.

Thus the myriads of Prufraxs between the first and the present shipboard one were kept in ignorance of all that had gone before, while being denied the chance to freely choose any course of action. Naturally, being able to choose a cloned ancestor of Clevo as a lover was out of the question. The shipboard Prufrax is only allowed to meet the latest shipboard Clevo once.

Fictional characters are often poorly developed when made to serve themes, but the characters in *Hardfought*, even as they dramatize and illustrate complex themes, become sharply individualized through embodying the needs of individual people. The shipboard Prufrax has a markedly different character than did the original Prufrax, although the two are genetic duplicates. The original Prufrax, self-aware and knowledgeable about human history, not only knows much about why she is fighting in the war but even chose to fight, an option denied her descendants. She is highly motivated by her family history; her mother was also a great glover. Here again, she has the advantage of her descendants who know nothing of fathers and mothers. Her history is touching because of an element of naivete in her personality; even while acquiescing to the cruel edicts of "overs," she hopes that the future may be better.

The shipboard Prufrax shares little of her progenitor's personality. She is a stunted human being, denied knowledge beyond her assigned task of fighting the Senexi. She cannot choose lovers or friends, and even her body's development is governed by others and not by nature. She hates the Senexi not through knowing the history of the conflict between species but because she has been trained to it. She has neither true tales of heroism nor a glorious family history of warfare to inspire her; she is spurred on only by the manufactured glory of manipulative "fibs." Despite the ignorance imposed on her by the overs, she has the capacity to ask questions and to learn.

The revelation from Kumnax that she is one of many expendable glovers broadens her thinking: what else should she know? The glovers, through the ages of the war versus the Senexi, had retained one rule independent from their masters: "What one fighter learned that could be of help to another had to be passed on, even under penalty." Kumnax is punished for what he has told Prufrax, but the incident shows that independent thought is possible, even among those whose lives have always been severely restricted. Having learned this, the shipboard Prufrax is slightly prepared for what she learns in the mandate, and she shows a capacity to understand her enemy. This knowledge causes her to become "polluted" in the same way Aryn is: she can see an avenue to peace. When she is murdered, it is partly an act of cleansing by her murderer.



# Topics for Discussion

1. What is meant by "But the Senexi had taken the long view too often in the past"?
2. What purpose does the mutant serve in the narrative? How does it affect the themes of Hardfought?
3. Why are the Prufraxes killed at the end of Hardfought?
4. Why would a government want to keep its people ignorant of history?
5. How well does Bear make Aryzan alien being with very different modes of thought from humans? Is he alien enough?
6. Why do the glovers not rebel instead of continuing to be treated as expendable?
7. Of what value to an individual person is historical truth?
8. Could people lead happy lives without ever knowing the truth about why they do what they do?
9. Governments in wartime restrict public access to information about the war. Why do they do this?
10. How important is it to understand your enemies?
11. What is the point of having the Prufraxes and the mutant learn all that they do if they are only going to be killed before they can tell anyone?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Have there been cultures in which people were compartmentalized as they are in *Hardfought*? What cultures were they? How did they function?
2. Have there been cultures that strictly controlled what people could learn? What was their purpose for the control? What were the results of their control?
3. *Hardfought* begins with a short account of historical record keeping in Imperial China. How did this practice come about? Who were the people who developed the practice? How well did it work? What were its effects on China's history?
4. Is it possible for scientists to control a person's physical development the way Prufraz's is controlled? What could happen if they did?
5. How are soldiers trained? What are the fundamental principles they must learn in order to be good soldiers? Which of these principles shows up in *Hardfought*?
6. Compare the lives of the fighters in Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974) with those of the human fighters in *Hardfought*.
7. Do the depictions of battle in *Hardfought* come closer to those in Haldeman's *The Forever War* or those in Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*?
8. In *Hardfought*, the Medusa nebula is described as a "womb" for stars.

How do nebulae give rise to stars?

What is the process? What is the result? How long does it take? How much time would have to have passed for the Medusa nebula to have changed as much as it has from the beginning of *Hardfought* to the end?

9. The galaxy was poor in heavy elements when the Senexi came into being. How are heavy elements formed? Where may they be found?

Why would they be rare in the young galaxy?

## For Further Reference

Clute, John. "Bear, Greg." In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al.

New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995, pp. 99-100. An overview of Bear's career, emphasizing the relationship of his writings to the period in which they were written, mostly in the 1980s.

Perlberg, Marilyn A. "Greg Bear."

*Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction*. Vol. 1, *Biography and Resources*. Edited by Kirk H. Beetz.

Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 114-117. Perlberg summarizes Bear's life, career, and critical reception, and she provides a heavily annotated bibliography of resources for learning about Bear.



## Related Titles

Wars are almost by definition times of the most extreme stress for the societies and individuals involved, and as such they are often used in literature to show a life stripped of routine, normality, and social convention, revealing the essence of the engaged characters and cultures. Robert Heinlein and Joe Haldeman are other science fiction writers who have used war as the central situation in some of their books for the above purpose.

Heinlein has used war in several of his fictions, including the well-known *Starship Troopers*, a novel originally written for young adults whose violence has led it to be marketed for adults. *Starship Troopers* shows how a young man is transformed from a pacifist into an effective warrior. Some of the techniques used to indoctrinate him are echoed in *Hardfought*, such as the molding of personality through control of information by leaders.

Whereas *Starship Troopers* finds some virtues in fighting for a good cause, Haldeman's *The Forever War* finds scant virtue in war, only much cruelty and stupidity. Soldiers in this novel are cynically manipulated and as expendable as the glovers in *Hardfought*, which is much more in the tradition of antiwar fiction like *The Forever War* than in the gung-ho, save-the-galaxy mould of *Starship Troopers*. In *The Forever War*, as in *Hardfought*, the fighters are alienated from their culture and have little idea of where they are fighting or why. *Hardfought*, on the other hand, is not really an antiwar novella; its focus is on a set of ideas that the war helps to illustrate, and its investigation into the value of history is more important than its fighters or events.

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