

The Harrowing of Gwynedd Short Guide

The Harrowing of Gwynedd by Katherine Kurtz

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Characters

Three major characters share center stage in *The Harrowing of Gwynedd*, a tale of intrigue and high fantasy.

Evaine MacRorie, the only surviving daughter of Camber, had worked with her father in his scholarly and occult pursuits. She appears frequently in the preceding trilogy, but without revealing much about her personality or motives. In *The Harrowing of Gwynedd*, however, she is the primary focus of the action. With Camber, King Cinhil, Evaine's husband Rhys Thurn, and many other towering figures gone, the remaining Deryni look to Evaine for aid and leadership. And what an extraordinary leader she turns out to be.

With her rare insight into present and threatened political developments, she skillfully holds together a diverse group of talented and sometimes erratic Deryni nobles. At the same time she is the only one qualified to do the necessary research into the forgotten and proscribed mystical lore that might settle her father's spirit. Along with these multiple responsibilities, she must also manage to nurture and educate her three young children. Evaine must deal with her grief and spiritual questioning alone, lest her discouragement infect others.

In nine prior Deryni novels, Kurtz has not portrayed her female characters in much depth, even where their actions are integral to the plot. Evaine's central role in this book, and especially the complexity that emerges in her character, thus comes as a pleasant surprise. It is also noteworthy that in a genre where adolescents seeking their calling and women warriors predominate as heroines, Evaine MacRorie is neither. She is now a widow and a mother, confident in the practice of her scholarly and magical skills, and she makes a difference in her world through social and spiritual accomplishments rather than through swordplay.

The second important player is Queron Kinevan, a former Gabrielite brother and a talented Healer. Queron appears sporadically in the previous books as the founder of a new order, the Servants of Saint Camber. At that time his dedication to this task made him an annoyance to the MacRorie family. Knowing that Camber was not actually dead, and having a distinctly uneasy feeling about his premature elevation to sanctity, his son Joram, Evaine, and Camber himself tried to underplay Queron's cause without questioning his piety.

Now, however, with Camber assassinated and the whole Deryni race under siege, Evaine and her brother see Queron in a different light. A short, wiry man whose loyalty to Camberite causes is unquestioned, he becomes the chief implementer of tactics to save obscure Deryni from persecution. When Queron is taken into confidence by the inner circle and shown Camber's true identity, his faith is tested but not crushed.

He becomes a prime exemplar of how trust and responsibility can hone the judgment of a formerly headstrong person.



Prince Javan, the third major character, is second-in-line to the throne, born just minutes after his twin brother Alroy. He starts out as a frightened young boy thrown into circumstances he can scarcely make sense of. In the course of the novel he learns to control and mask his part-Deryni powers, to discern the real motives of wily Council members, and to employ a harmless measure of duplicity in order to survive and keep in touch with the circle who protect and counsel him. Javan is likely to need all these abilities in the future, as Alroy is frail, naive, and rules only as a puppet of powerful and unprincipled men. Despite the dangers of his position, Javan retains his high spirits and painful sense of honesty, and is a most appealing young man.

Other important characters include Evaine's brother, Father Joram MacRorie, and Revan, an irregular evangelist whose cult of a second baptism is used to "block" and provide safety for many vulnerable Deryni. The stage is crowded as well with many nobles and religious figures of good and evil intentions. Although in some cases a previously suspicious character may be revealed as innocent and helpful, for the most part Kurtz peoples her works with sharply defined heroes and villains.



Social Concerns

The Harrowing of Gwynedd tells the story of events immediately following the death of Camber, the protagonist of the Camber of Culdi trilogy. The forces of fear and reaction are taking control of the fictional kingdom of Gwynedd during this era. Pogroms against the telepathically gifted Deryni are instituted, laying the foundation for centuries of suppression to come.

The surviving members of Camber's family and circle find themselves faced with two immediate tasks as the novel opens. They must develop tactics and a structure to preserve their race's lore, and save as many Deryni as possible from the savage persecutions. They also have to determine what to do with the saintly Camber's remains. The latter is not as simple a matter as it seems. The very mention of Camber's name is proscribed; the secret of his assumed identity must be kept—and it now appears that Camber may not be exactly dead after all.

There is enough inherent danger, mystery, and political intrigue in the situation to make *The Harrowing of Gwynedd* a fine, absorbing novel for entertainment alone. Yet several profound themes are threaded through the narrative; themes also present in Kurtz's other Deryni novels.

The tragic consequences of hating the "other" forms a major motif of the entire series. While in King Kelson's era both the restrictions on and the reempowerment of the Deryni bear some resemblance to contemporary American racial and ethnic tensions, the campaign of eradication shown in the present novel is an even more somber reminder of the past. The Holocaust, the Inquisition, witch persecution, and the "death squads" of various autocratic regimes all come to mind.

But the waste and horror of such campaigns of terror are only part of the picture. As in the preceding books of the series, the novel's heroes are those who stand against such unreason. It is their role to counteract the madness: by overt political strategies where possible; through underground resistance and protective coloration when these are the only means open. Kurtz thus emphasizes over and over the social responsibility of the individual to work against evil.

Since the reader already knows that the kingdom of Gwynedd is descending into several "dark age" centuries, this tale could easily become grim. It does not, however, because the courage of this "saving remnant" shows a nobler aspect of the human spirit, and gives hope for the more distant future.

The mutual support of like-minded friends is an immense help in the efforts of the besieged group. So also is the considerable Deryni command of magical techniques. However, there is another side to these endeavors. The world of Gwynedd is suffused with a religious culture indistinguishable from medieval Christianity except for the absence of a Pope. It is also a world where magic works, although only in the hands of gifted individuals and with the proper ritual observations.

Previous books of the series connect magic and spirituality only on a surface level: the four archangels are invoked to ward a ceremonial space, and so on. In the present novel, Deryni protagonists of necessity delve into ancient mystical practices, and they see glimpses of a more profound unity among Deryni magic, Christian sacraments, and the Power beyond. The horizons this suggests are only hinted at, but they include the ultimately benign nature of the universe, and a possible new spiritual synthesis. While the details of the emerging synthesis are no doubt based in the author's own vision, its general shape may reflect a growing openness to new symbolism and ritual in many mainline churches.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Like most of Kurtz's books, *The Harrowing of Gwynedd* is written in a nonobtrusive style, with third-person narration and a straightforward sequence of events. The viewpoint changes as the story shifts back and forth between scenes involving the several major characters.

One unusual feature of the author's style is the attention she gives to visual image-building. In the novels which feature warfare, the descriptions of feudal panoply—the bright banners and glittering horses' harness and the warriors' colorful regalia—are painted in vivid and evocative detail. In the present book, passages about the invocation of powerful magic play a climatic part similar to that of battles in standard fantasy. These scenes of magical rites are described step by step so that the reader can visualize and almost feel the objects handled and the unseen powers that are being manipulated. This technique works effectively to strengthen suspense, so that the revelations which end such scenes have maximum impact.

Quasi-medieval settings and plots about maintaining a rightful royal line through battle and sorcery are common in contemporary fantasy. Kurtz's books differ from the standard fantasy novel in several ways. They are unusual in the amount of emphasis they put on political machinations and on the influence of religion in the characters' lives.

Deryni powers draw on a well-worked-out theory of magic, rather than merely being called up to produce "special effects." A final distinguishing feature of Kurtz's fantasy is its heavy focus on the price of power—both political and magical—rather than on its glories.

Perhaps the works most comparable to the Deryni novels on a general thematic level are two series usually classified as science fiction: Bradley's *Darkover* books and Lichtenberg's *Sime-Gen* series. The Deryni books have in common with *Sime-Gen* an overarching concern with bigotry and its poisonous fruits, including the threat of genocide. With Bradley's *Darkover* books they share not only a feudal social system and the accompanying pageantry, but a sustained examination of the conflicting claims of society, family, and individual destiny.

The three series all have the uses and abuses of telepathy as a major motif. In each, telepathy is sometimes operated and elaborated on as simply a form of nonmachine technology, and sometimes treated as a metaphor for power, interpersonal sensitivity, or spiritual enlightenment. However, the differences are as interesting as the similarities. Unlike telepaths of the other two series, who hold social power by virtue of their paranormal abilities, Deryni are at great risk merely for possessing theirs. Consequently they have not worked out a system of "telepath's ethics" as the other two groups have. Even the heroes in Kurtz's novels routinely use mindintrusion for purposes of masking their presence in an inconvenient situation.



While such activity is usually harmless, the thin line between such "tricks" and the evil use of unusual powers is sometimes breached. For example, in *The Quest for Saint Camber* (1986), young Prince Conall starts by begging his mentor for a love charm, and ends up ensnared in a net of deceit, moral disintegration, and murder. In any event, the multiple uses of telepathy in these books work to heighten the moral dilemmas common to humanity.



Key Questions

The Harrowing of Gwynedd seems to be a novel of ideas as much as it is a novel of adventure. Typical of Kurtz's fantasies, it seems to draw on modern social problems for its situations and themes. The theme of the persecution of those who are different is a timeless one, but Kurtz's handling of it suggests contemporary American problems of racial and religious intolerance. These are important issues, and an emotional discussion can be built on Kurtz's portrayal of bigots and victims, of villains and heroes.

The novel also echoes her oft-made point that individual people have a responsibility to oppose evil. Well worth examining is how she presents this idea and how well her presentation suits life as it is actually lived.

Can we oppose and triumph over broad social evils such as those portrayed in The Harrowing of Gwynedd? Do we have to have the strength of character and unusual talents of the protagonists of the novel in order to defy the evils of persecution by the government, religion, and broad segments of society? Or, does defiance of evil make people into heroes? Are the heroic figures of the novel made into great people by their actions, rather than having the greatness come first? These are tough questions, but the high quality of Kurtz's writing provides enough substance to sustain a group discussion.

1. What is the "harrowing" of Gwynedd? Is Kurtz making any allusions with the title?

2. The effort to eradicate an entire segment of the population resembles events of the twentieth century. The religious aspect is particularly reminiscent of the persecution of Jews by the Nazi's in the 1930s and 1940s. Most readers are likely to see the parallels; does Kurtz handle the persecution in a manner that illuminates the motivations of the persecutors? Do we learn anything about why people defy such evil even when they do not have to?

Do we discover any methods we might use to defy persecutors?

3. This topic flows out of topic two, and could be used for an extended discussion. What effect does Kurtz's portrayal of persecution have on you: emotional, intellectual? Do the plights of her characters move you? Do they seem real enough that their situations matter to you? This topic calls for personal responses, but The Harrowing of Gwynedd seems to call for individual, subjective responses from its readers.

Perhaps the personalizing of very broad issues can help clarify them.

4. How does Kurtz build her images in The Harrowing of Gwynedd? Is her imagery original, or is it trite? Are her descriptions of magic special?

5. Evaine MacRorie appears in earlier novels, but she takes center stage in this one. Does The Harrowing of Gwynedd answer significant questions you have had about her,



if you have read the earlier books? What would you still like to know? Are you pleased with her portrayal?

6. Queron is handled in an interesting way by Kurtz. His acquiring of what could be a disillusioning truth instead seems to strengthen him.

Learning the truth is significant turning point in his life, after which he could give up his ministry, become embittered, or choose to temper his conduct with what he has learned.

Queron chooses to become a better man. How well does Kurtz handle his discovery of the truth about Camber?

What is she trying to say about truth and its consequences?

7. Is Queron being used? One moment he is an annoying outsider, the next a valued insider. Is he really respected by those of Camber's inner circle?

8. How well are court politics presented in *The Harrowing of Gwynedd*? Is Javan's development as a politician credible?

9. *The Harrowing of Gwynedd* is part of a long cycle of books. Are any aspects of the imaginary world becoming stale? Are there any significant inconsistencies? What is new and fresh?

10. How well is the idea of telepathy worked out in this novel? Are its uses consistent? Why are the ethics of the past elusive for telepaths, here?

Related Titles

The Harrowing of Gwynedd continues the story of the earlier days of the Kingdom of Gwynedd begun in the preceding Legends of Camber of Culdi trilogy. Two additional novels, *King Javan's Year* (1992) and *The Bastard Prince* (1994), tell of events immediately after the present novel ends.

These three books make up the Heirs of Saint Camber trilogy.

Kurtz has also written two trilogies about the same kingdom many generations later, dealing with events during the reign of King Kelson Haldane.

These books are linked closely to the Camber titles not only through common thematic concerns but also through the cult of Saint Camber and the mysteries about him, which play an important part in the plots of the latter-era novels.

In addition, two supplemental Deryni volumes have been published. *The Deryni Archives* (1986) is a collection of short stories that explores turning points in the lives of some characters from the various novels. *Deryni Magic* (1991) is a "sourcebook" that catalogs and examines the various Deryni paranormal abilities and ceremonies that are seen in the novels.



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