

The Honorable Barbarian Short Guide

The Honorable Barbarian by L. Sprague de Camp

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Overview

The Honorable Barbarian focuses on the adventures of Kerin, part of a family of clock makers; he is sent off on a long and hazardous journey to find out the secrets of the Kuromonian clock escapement. De Camp has the marvelous ability to make daydreams come to life. The adventures of Kerin are like a marvelous daydream that has been given life and disciplined into the form of a novel. It is a coming-of-age tale in which Kerin grows from irresponsible boyhood to manhood. In the process, he learns to be open minded, respectful of other people's customs, and responsible. His adventures are populated by fairies, magicians of many kinds, eccentric characters, and the woman he befriends and falls in love with. The Honorable Barbarian is an example of de Camp's ability to have fun with words and story; the novel is humorous throughout.



About the Author

Lyon Sprague de Camp was born on November 27, 1907, in New York City to Lyon and E. Beatrice (nee Sprague) de Camp. As a young man, de Camp seemed destined for a career in the applied sciences. In 1930, he received his bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering from the California Institute of Technology, and in 1933, he received his master's degree in engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey. During World War II, he was an assistant mechanical engineer at an aircraft factory, and he served as a Lieutenant Commander in the United States Naval Reserve. Even his first book was a technical one, *Inventions and Their Management* (1937; coauthored with Alf K. Berle; revised as *Inventions, Patents, and Their Management*, 1959).

Yet, in 1937 came a hint of the career to come. He published his first short story "The Isolinguals" and began his relationship with the fantasy magazine *Unknown* and the science fiction magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* and with their editor, John W. Campbell.

In 1939, he married English teacher Catherine Crook; they have two children, Lyman and Gerard. It is difficult to assess the effect his wife has had on de Camp's writings, but she has collaborated with him on several books, and she has over the years handled most of her husband's business affairs. During the 1940s, de Camp attracted a large following of young readers with his strikingly original plots and situations.

In addition, he developed those traits that mark his fiction: lighthearted humor, careful characterization, and a keen attention to details that make even the most outlandish situations vivid and believable. His short stories and the novels *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Incomplete Enchanter* were successful enough to allow him to devote himself full time to free-lance writing after World War II.

Since that time he has written nearly one hundred books, including nonfiction as well as popular fiction. He has also published about four hundred articles and stories. His works have been translated into more than a dozen languages. Throughout his career he has focused first and foremost on entertaining his readers, and he has succeeded not only in retaining the readership he cultivated in the 1940s but also in winning new readers from each following generation. Among science fiction writers, his nonfiction discussions of literature and science are held in high esteem.

De Camp's first major literary award came for a book he coauthored with Willie Ley: *Lands Beyond* (1952) received the 1953 International Fantasy Award for nonfiction. In 1973, his short story "The Fallible Fiend" received the August Derleth Fantasy Award. Those who attended the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy conventions voted on the greatest fantasy stories ever published, choosing de Camp's "Nothing in the Rule" (1939) as one of the twenty-two stories so honored. As a consequence, the story was included in *The Fantasy Hall of Fame* (1983).

In addition to awards for specific titles, de Camp has been honored for his career of achievement. He received the 1976 World Science Fiction Convention's "Gandalf," Grand Master Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Field of Fantasy. In 1979, he received the Science Fiction Writers of America Grand Master "Nebula" Award. In 1984, he received the World Fantasy Convention Award in recognition of his lifetime of achievement. In 1966, he was the Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, and in 1972, he was the Guest of Honor at Boskone IX, a regional science fiction convention held annually in Boston since 1964. He remains one of the best-loved figures in the fields of fantasy and science fiction.



Characters

The Honorable Barbarian is the fourth in a series, but the first to focus on Kerin, younger brother of Jorian, hero of the first three novels. Kerin is described as a "prudent and judicious" youth; Jorian is more experienced with the world and offers him much good advice, which he tries to follow. Kerin remembers not to talk too much in front of strangers, to hold chivalry and honor in high regard, and to keep his word. Kerin is no one-dimensional hero who is strong and always clever, but a young man who learns from his mistakes.

Kerin's love interest is Nogiri, a courageous princess of Salimor, who is kidnapped and raped by pirates. Kerin clumsily rescues her, nearly causing a disaster, and Nogiri at first puts him off, saying she is betrothed. But the rape has made her unsuitable for marriage to a prince, so she is sold to the wicked wizard Pwana to be killed in a ritual sacrifice. Once again, Kerin rescues her and together they flee from Salimor on a Kuromonian ship. He then marries her to protect her from Pwana under Kuromonian law.

Schooled in the traditions of her people, Nogiri sees marriage for love as barbaric; marriage should be for more important matters, such as the union of two important families. Eventually, however, she forms an emotional bond with Kerin. When Kerin's conscience troubles him when he turns over a navigation device to the wizard Klung, rather than to the king to whom it was promised, Nogiri finds his anxiety amusing. But Klung tells her to treasure Kerin for his tender conscience, because too many men have no conscience at all.

The novel abounds with magical figures. Belinka is a sprite who has been commanded to watch over Kerin; her task is to keep Kerin from other women so that he may return home and marry Adeliza. Kerin does not want to marry Adeliza, and he certainly does not like being pinched and poked by Belinka every time he gets close to another woman. Eventually though, he and Belinka become more friendly than hostile, and the sprite helps him considerably in Salimor.

Finally, she falls in love herself with a male sprite and abandons her guardianship of Kerin when he weds Nogiri.

Other important magical figures are men and women who have occult powers. Some, like Pwana and Klung, have great powers and are among the elite magicians. Others, like Janji, who navigates the ship Dragonet by magic, have limited powers. These latter tend to be specialized; for instance, there is a whole guild in Salimor devoted to magical navigators. These magical figures tend to have ordinary human strengths and weaknesses, with only their command of a single magical art setting them apart from other people.

Pwana is a power-crazed man who uses his skills to deceive people and to ingratiate himself with the rulers of Salimor. Klung, on the other hand, although he is as great a



wizard as Pwana, operates a clinic. People wait their turn in his garden, and for a fee, he tends to the needs of each. He is a great inventor, certain that his teleportation machine will make him the preeminent wizard in Salimor, but in the meantime he makes his living helping people with their everyday problems.

Setting

The events in *The Honorable Barbarian* take place in a world that resembles Earth but is different in important ways. This world is called by its inhabitants the "Primary Plane." There are many other planes of existence, including the one that is Earth as we readers know it. In the Primary Plane, the populations of the world are spread out in a familiar pattern, with European-like peoples in the west, Polynesian-like peoples in the southeast, and a Chinese-like people in the east. Many of these people's customs are similar to those of the real-life peoples, but the customs are shaped by the reality of magic. In the Primary Plane, magic is as commonplace as air and water.

When Kerin begins his journey to the east, he routinely sees a magician who casts protective spells on him. Later, these spells ward off magical attacks.

Thus, the people of the Primary Plane make magic part of their everyday lives. They consult magicians, wizards, and witches much as people might consult physicians, lawyers, or accountants. For much of his journey, Kerin is accompanied by a small female fairy, who flits about on her wings. She was captured from another plane of existence—one in which fairies are commonplace—and told by an enchantress to follow Kerin and keep him out of trouble. Throughout the journey, she is accepted by people as Kerin's familiar—his companion spirit—and no one thinks her unusual.

One source of humor in the novel is the way the people of each of the nations that Kerin travels through regard themselves. They see themselves as highly civilized and outsiders as barbarians. When Kerin first sees a Salimorese, he is surprised by her being naked from the waist up. She comes from a climate in which clothes can be uncomfortable, but Kerin at first thinks her way of dressing strange. Later, after mixing with the Salimorese, he stops worrying about their way of dressing and accepts them as they are.

On the other hand, they think him barbaric; his clothing seems rough and inelegant to them. His accent is considered a sign of his primitiveness. They have heard rumors of bizarre sexual traits in his countrymen and wonder whether his restrictive clothing is meant to hide his lust.

When he gets to Kuromon, Kerin encounters a culture that is even more self-absorbed than his own or that of the Salimorese. The Kuromonians have in common with the Salimorese the belief that they have all the true answers to religion and civilization. They go beyond the Salimorese in the depth of their belief that all outsiders are dreadfully primitive. Any custom that differs, however slightly, from their own is taken to be a sign of barbarism.

When Kerin learns to use chopsticks, Kuromonian merchants are delighted to see a barbarian learning civilized ways. When Kerin decides to ride a donkey rather than a man-carried chair, his escort laments that Kerin is not properly fat as an important man should be and thus does not weigh the chair down enough to eliminate the bouncing

that irritates him. Wherever he goes, Kerin finds people that are intolerant of outsiders, yet he learns that the different peoples and their cultures have both good and bad qualities, and that civilization is a word that matters little in love and friendship.



Social Sensitivity

The nudity in *The Honorable Barbarian* is not described in any detail. Like real-life Polynesians of the past, the Salimorese eschew most garments; their climate makes most clothing uncomfortable, perhaps even unhealthy, and the effect of their nudity is not titillation. Part of de Camp's point is that different customs are not necessarily better or worse customs; sometimes they are just different. In the case of the Salimorese, climate has affected their customs of dress.

One might reasonably wish de Camp had handled the issue of rape with greater sensitivity. Nogiri has been raped by pirates. This might quite reasonably make her dislike the company of men, but she recovers with seeming ease. This shows her to be tough and determined, but it makes the rape seem like just a minor misstep in an adventure. Gang rape can kill a woman, and it may be worth pointing this out to young adult readers who may not realize the gravity of what she endured and just how strong she must be to recover her sense of dignity and sense of purpose after such abuse. Taken as a part of how Nogiri's character is developed, her recovery from rape is one of several incidents meant to show that Nogiri is a fine heroine worthy of the love of a fine hero.

Sexual politics play a small but significant role in *The Honorable Barbarian*.

At first, women seem to be cunning, clinging sorts; one such woman tries to entrap Kerin into marriage. This is later offset by Nogiri and other Salimorese women. They are headstrong and determined sorts. Still, as a general rule, men dominate the societies in the novel, even though Kerin understands that a woman can not only be equal to himself but superior to himself.

Literary Qualities

For a story of a quest to work, it must have a clearly defined goal. Everything that happens in the story is measured against whether it helps or hinders the main character's efforts to attain the goal. The Honorable Barbarian provides these essential qualities but uses them for humorous effect. The goal is a minor one: Find out how the secret escapement of Kuromon clocks works. Eventually, the goal turns out not to have been secret after all. Kerin endures hardships, pain, and fear throughout the novel; almost everything he does lands him in danger except for achieving the goal of his quest.

Themes

The theme of the quest dominates the structure of the novel, but the underlying significance revolves around Kerin's coming of age. Typical of the sly humor of the novel, the quest is not anything particularly momentous, such as destroying an evil wizard bent on conquering the world. Kerin's family business is manufacturing clocks. Thus, his mission is to go to the far eastern country of Kuromon to uncover the secret of the Kuromonian clock escapement. The quest that follows, in spite of its many complications, is one of industrial espionage. Ironically, when Kerin finally gets to see one of the great clocks, he finds out that all he need do is ask, and he is allowed to see its inner workings and even make drawings of it. The great trade secret he has traveled so far to uncover turns out to be no secret at all. But Kerin's personality has been transformed by his adventures. He begins his journey as a nervous, shy young man. As he matures, he gains self-confidence and self-knowledge, and returns home, bringing with him a loving wife. The traditional object of the quest is treated humorously and contrasted with Kerin's journey to manhood.

Key Questions

A discussion that approaches *The Honorable Barbarian* with a serious tone may get nowhere. The novel is a light adventure, telling of a young man's growth to maturity and his adventures in exotic setting with cultures that often bemuse him. Therefore, perhaps a discussion of the book should be in a lighthearted vein, inviting laughter at de Camp's humor as well as respect for how he blends theme, tone, and action.

1. In what ways is the world of *The Honorable Barbarian* reminiscent of our own? Why would de Camp incorporate aspects of our world into his fantasy world?
2. What are the sources of comedy in the novel?
3. Does the novel make any serious comments on cultural chauvinism?
4. Why would de Camp shift the focus of his *Unbeheaded King* series from Jorian to Kerin? What narrative possibilities does Kerin's characterization offer that Jorian's characterization does not?
5. Why does Nogiri warm to Kerin?
6. How important is magic to the plot of *The Honorable Barbarian*? Could it be the same without magic?
7. Why would de Camp make the actual achieving of the goal of the quest simple and without danger?
8. Why do the Kuromonians not guard their technological secrets? Why are they even eager to tell all?



Topics for Discussion

1. When Kerin returns home, how is he different than he was when he left? Are the changes good or bad?
2. The immediate reason for sending Kerin on his quest is to have him escape a forced marriage. Did his family have any other reasons for sending him on the quest?
3. What are the funniest scenes in *The Honorable Barbarian*?
4. Does Kerin do the right thing when he gives the Kuromonian navigation device to Klung instead of to the king? Why or why not?
5. In context of this story, do you agree that a man with a conscience should be treasured by his wife?
6. What are some of the different social customs Kerin encounters? What does he learn from them?
7. Each society seems to believe that its ways of doing things are the most civilized ways. What might de Camp be saying about how people view other cultures?
8. Why are the Kuromonians happy to show Kerin the workings of their clock? Why would Kerin's family think the workings would be a closely-held secret?
9. De Camp seems to like to defy his readers' expectations. Take, for example, the exiled man Kerin finds on an island. What would he normally be in a standard, unoriginal adventure? How does de Camp defy clichés with the man?
10. From Kerin's point of view, what are honorable qualities in a man? Does he live up to those qualities? In what ways does he succeed or fail to be honorable?
11. Critics have long noted that de Camp nearly always writes novels principally to entertain readers. Does *The Honorable Barbarian* entertain? Is that enough to justify writing or reading a novel?
12. How do Kerin's attitudes toward women mature during the novel?
13. Is Kerin right to mistrust rulers? Would you have given Tso-tuga the code book?
14. Do the references to sex have any place in a book like *The Honorable Barbarian*!



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is an escapement in a clock? What does it do? Why is it important to a clock?
2. Compare Kerin to his older brother Jorian, who is the main character in three previous novels. In what significant ways is Kerin different from Jorian. How do these differences affect the plots of the novels? How do they affect your appreciation of the plots?
3. The Honorable Barbarian is a humorous novel with some dark aspects. What are these dark aspects (for example, the attempt to sacrifice Nogiri), and how do they affect the humor of the novel? Do the dark and light aspects of the narrative clash or do they harmonize?
4. What customs of the peoples described in The Honorable Barbarian are taken from real life? Why does de Camp use them in his fantasy novel?
5. De Camp has always cared a great deal about his audience. If you liked The Honorable Barbarian, write him a letter telling him what you liked. You can send the letter in care of his publishers.
6. The Honorable Barbarian is part of a literary subgenre called "heroic fantasy" or "sword and sorcery." What aspects of the subgenre does it make fun of?
7. De Camp's continuation of the Conan series begun by Robert Howard has been very popular, especially with young adult readers. Compare the character Conan in one of de Camp's books to the character Kerin. Are the characters similar in any significant ways? Do they differ in important ways? What does all this tell you about de Camp's skills as a creator of characterizations?
8. What is magic like in The Honorable Barbarian? Is it surprising in any ways?
9. Are there, or have there been, any real-world cultures that would share Nogiri's attitudes toward falling in love and marriage? What cultures would these be? How do, or did, they deal with strong emotional bonds between men and women?

For Further Reference

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Related Titles

The Honorable Barbarian is the fourth novel of what might best be called the Unbeheaded King series, after Jorian, who in the first novel, *The Goblin Tower*, escapes his ritual beheading.

The first three novels follow the adventures of Jorian, a big, strong, and clever man who somehow manages to face every problem and danger with a good sense of humor. The Honorable Barbarian represents a shift in focus for the series, making Jorian's younger brother Kerin the main character. Smaller and less self-confident than Jorian, Kerin solves his problems by his wits rather than by physical force.



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