

The Hounds of God Short Guide

The Hounds of God by Judith Tarr

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Contents

The Hounds of God Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	10
Related Titles.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Alf is an unforgettable and vivid main character, albeit not one who easily wins the reader's full sympathy.

When first introduced in *The Isle of Glass* (1985), he is an insufferable prig.

Blessed with a fair, radiant beauty and a brilliant mind, immune to the normal ravages of age and death, he tries to lose it all and become a simple, mortal monk. Baffling as this is to those who lack such boons, they still might accept it. Alf is clearly a holy and well-meaning man. But he holds everyone else to the same high standards of self-abnegation. When he returns good for evil once too many times — turning loose the ruffian squires who have tried to kill him — it takes a royal mission to keep him safe. He also sets the groundwork for the kidnappings and persecutions in *The Hounds of God*, many years later. One of the youths remembers his humiliation and determines to destroy Alf and all his kind.

Alf does change when he leaves the abbey and moves into the secular world. He learns the skills of politics well enough to become Gwydion's Lord Chancellor. In Byzantium, he finally drops his overwrought chastity and becomes Thea's lover (after she has followed him all the way from Francia and rescued him many times). He travels with Jehan, a brawny knight-monk, and discovers physical skills can complement his own arcane ones. Despite all this, his basic personality remains the same. In a crunch, he will always expect his own self-sacrifice to save the day.

Simon Magus, who uses his powers to kidnap Thea and the babies and transform them into hounds, serves as an "evil twin" figure to Alf. Like Alf, he has grown up haunted by the prejudice which labels elvenfolk "demon spawn." Simon let his self-hatred fester, and it drove him insane. He was easy prey for the Pauline monks, who use him as a tool. Fine-tuned by their direction, his magical powers wax mightily, but once he has to face the reality of what he is, he crumbles.

Most supporting characters are complex and well developed in their own right. The dark-haired Nikephoros is an interesting mix of apprentice mage and vulnerable youth. Although Thea spends most of this novel needing to be rescued, it is a reversal of her usual role. An accomplished shapechanger, she usually had more adventures and fun than Alf. When Simon's magic traps her in a hound's body, her high spirits serve her well. Even chained and cowed, she retains her dignity and hope.

Social Concerns

The Hounds of God is the concluding volume of Tarr's debut fantasy trilogy, "The Hound and the Falcon."

These books are set in a medieval world only subtly different from that of actual history. The middle book, *The Golden Horn* (1985), took its elven hero Alf through Constantinople's siege and fall to the crusaders in the thirteenth century. Among other themes, it showed how tragically events can go awry when political ambitions and religious fervor mix. *The Hounds of God* picks up a plot strand from the initial volume, overzealous churchmen who want to wipe out the elvenfolk, to show the same thing happening in Western Europe some years later.

Alf and his circle ultimately face down their most ferocious opponents — a rogue monk and the insane sorcerer whom he controls. This does not quite end the elvenfolk's troubles.

Their king, Gwydion, lies near death from the same sorcery. His realm has been overrun and devastated by the Pauline order. The weary Pope, Honorius, makes a final decision on the fate of these troubling not-humans. He decides to banish the elvenkind to their own invisible world of Broceliande.

This will avert any more persecutions, but at the cost of separation and anguish for Alf and his friends. Even so, it is a more positive and humane compromise than occurred in the real world of the same era. This was the era of the Languedoc persecutions in France. More centuries of religious intolerance and strife followed.

The novel's implications are not limited to medieval history; there is a message for our own time. Rhiyana, the elvenking's country, has a largely human population. It is also unique in medieval Christendom, because every variety of faith and ethnic heritage is welcome there. Jewish rabbis, Greeks and Saracens, folk magical and mundane — all are free to follow their own paths in Rhiyana. This openness is rare and precious. The book also implies it is more in keeping with Christianity than a regime that tries to inflict one way of life on all. "Yes, there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," Alf quotes at one point, defending Rhiyana's open policies as well.

The quotation is still relevant to a society wracked by debates over cultural diversity.

Some minor but interesting social concerns are hidden in various characters' dilemmas. Stefania, a young woman whom Nikki meets in Rome, helps her uncle Gregorius in his scribe's work. Her true calling — the way she describes herself — is as a philosopher. Her dream is to form a company of women who live together and share their learning. A modest enough dream, it seems. Nikki says it sounds like any school, only with women as the students and teachers.



Yet it is so shocking in that era that she has mentioned it to no one else. Even today, the image of a woman philosopher is unusual enough to be striking.

Nikki, whom Alf adopted as a foster brother during the siege, was then an autistic child. Alf taught him words and how to communicate mind-to-mind, so he could function in the world. Nikki still has a disability, being unable to speak as others do, but he has learned to work around it.

Thea Damaskena loves Alf wholly and passionately, yet refuses to formally marry him. She jokes that it would ruin her reputation as a wanton.

Yet one suspects that what she really fears is losing her freedom. She shapechanges and flies and disappears at will. Would Alf's sober brilliance mute her freedom to set her own course? The question is not answered in the book.

Techniques

The Hounds of God is a traditionally told fantasy novel. Crucial events occur in quick succession. Arcane duels are fought with light and whirlwinds and mind-enhanced weapons. The hero, Alf, has to learn a power he has formerly disdained, when he shapeshifts into a leopard in order to track down Thea in the Roman ruins.

This novel, and the whole trilogy, do differ some in structure and feel from the usual medieval-setting fantasy.

Rather than build a separate fantasy world out of historical and mythical elements, Tarr has incorporated the mythical into the real world of history.

The books are rich in historical detail.

The Golden Horn, which the author herself describes as a term paper run mad, vividly describes the crusaders' siege of Constantinople. The Hounds of God shows scenes of the half-wasted, half-glorious Rome of the medieval papacy, a setting more honored in church histories than in most fiction.

Another structural departure comes in Alf's battle with Simon. Although it forms a conventional climax to the story, it is not one which leads to instant resolution. Many problems remain to be solved: the nature of the Pauline Brothers' involvement, the invasion and interdict of Rhiyana, its king's and people's fate, Nikki's romance with Stefania, Jehan taking up his long-delayed episcopal duties.

Winding up these matters takes many pages. To readers who expect a succession of special-effects thrills leading up to a fireworks ending, it may seem slow. But it is compatible with the whole trilogy's plan, and it is more emotionally wrenching than a quick resolution would be. By showing problems to be solved even after the heroics, Tarr brings existential realism into a genre that too often follows a formula structure.

Themes

The tragedy of intolerance of difference is a motif woven through the whole trilogy. It is a basic theme in this novel. Alf spent earlier years desperately trying to be something he was not, a humble monk. Now that he has dropped the monk's persona, his family and his king must also suffer. They are hounded and tortured, and they finally survive only by accepting banishment.

Much fantasy is built around a struggle between good and evil. *The Hounds of God* shows the conflict here as more complex than in many medieval sagas. Even Jocelin, the renegade monk, believes he does God's will in trying to destroy the elvenfolk.

Alf, who spent his long youth in futile pursuit of mortal weaknesses and mortality, still has moments of ridiculous self-abnegation. Things often go awry when he believes he is setting them right. Often a visible evil is not one's biggest moral challenge. It may be more important to simply let one's preconceptions go and listen for the will of God. This is what Alf ultimately does. As he prepares to cross into Broceliande, he faces the unknown armed only with the Pope's order: "Go, find your God where He waits for you."

The novel is full of anguished separations. At its opening, Thea and their newborn twins are magically whisked away from Alf. At its ending, Nikki and Jehan lose their friend Alf forever as the magic mist closes off the elven realm. In between, other events tear people apart. The theme of separation ties into the series' premise of elven semi-immortality. Separation and loss are part of what it means to be human.

As long as Alf stays in the world, he will know this anguish too. His human friends, left behind in their mortal lives, must face it continuously. Alf leaves a token with Jehan, which perhaps symbolizes the hope and magic that enable humans to do so gallantly.



Key Questions

The Hounds of God is most profitably read and analyzed along with the rest of the trilogy. While it is not essential to have read the other books to understand this one's plot, much of its character and thematic development will be missed without such background.

A discussion might also widen its scope to include other medieval fantasy worlds and works such as Kurtz's Deryni, Lackey's Valdemar, and even C. S. Lewis's Narnia. Plots, themes, the meanings of magic, and the uses of fantasy for illuminating reality and teaching moral lessons, are among the possible topics for lively discussion.

1. "The Hound and the Falcon" is the title of the trilogy. At its very end, Jehan is holding a brooch decorated with a hound and a falcon, both of whose eyes look at him knowingly.

What do you think this represents?

2. Nikki reluctantly, at the last moment, decides to stay in the world and go back and marry Stefania. How would this work out? Will she lose her dream of being a philosopher? Will he feel more apart than ever, after losing Alf and everyone else he knows with powers similar to his own?

3. During Gwydion's coma, his queen Maura has an affair with Cardinal Torino, who was originally sent to bring Rhiyana into compliance with normal church law. Did she do this mostly to protect the realm as best she could?

4. Maura says that in Broceliande, Alf at least will be able to fulfill his destiny. At the mass to christen his children, Alf almost panics, knowing it will be a more complete exile than he has ever faced before. Is this in character for him?

5. What will he have going for him in Broceliande that he did not have before? What will he miss most, of what he loses?

6. Although elvenfolk were feared and hated long before, few moved against them before the Legate came, supposedly bearing the Pope's order to stamp them out. Was this because they had temporal power in Gwydion's kingdom? Because people feared their "witching?" Are there any twentiethcentury parallels?

7. While Simon kidnaps the human child Anna along with Thea and her twins, he almost ignores her. When she attacks him he flings her back out into Rome, along with the boy Cynan in puppy form. Was her whole involvement accidental?

8. Pope Honorius's answer to the problem of a feared minority is banishment. Is this too neat a solution? What has the earth lost thereby? What have the elvenfolk lost and gained?



9. Are there partial parallels in human history and current events? How have they worked out?

10. Is the fact that Thea "dances around" Alf and follows him for most of the trilogy, a version of the usual supportive female role? What else do you think she was doing during her shapechanging adventures away from him?

Literary Precedents

The most identifiable precedents are from ancient legend and folklore. Simon Magus, Morgiana, Tao-Lin, and the wolves following in the Queen of Elfland's wake, all appear in Western fantasy lore. Tarr gives them her own spin and interpretation. The elven kingdom and folk, likewise, share the world with humans in many traditional tales.

The theme of persecution based on spurious religious doctrine, as well as the church-centered background, suggests Katherine Kurtz's Deryni novels as an influence. There are many similarities between the two series. There are also many, and interesting, differences. Kurtz is more interested in the intricacies of politics; Tarr in the details of historical events. Deryni have to stay in the ordinary world and work out their differences with humans; they do not have the out of a separate realm or of immortality like Tarr's elves. In both series, consequences flow from the limits the author has given her characters and their magic.

Related Titles

The Hounds of God is the concluding novel in a trilogy about the earthly life of Alf, the elven priest. The first book is *The Isle of Glass*, and the second is *The Golden Horn*. Events in these two books take place about twenty years before the third book opens.

This trilogy is also related to *Alamut* (1989). Aidan, Gwydion's brother and a minor character in *The Hounds of God*, is the male protagonist of *Alamut*. It is set around a century before the events of the trilogy.



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