

The Huntsman Short Guide

The Huntsman by Douglas Hill

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Overview

Although *The Huntsman* is basically the tale of a teen-age boy's courageous quest to rescue his foster father and sister from their alien captors, the past Hill creates for the events in the story inspires thought about human characteristics and values. Young Finn Ferral's environment is the world some three hundred years after a global fire.

The story of the "Forgotten Time," when billions of people inhabited the earth, is passed on to Finn by his foster father, Joshua. Obsessed with power and wealth, unmindful of the damage they were doing to the natural environment, those people had finally wreaked almost complete destruction on the planet. A portion of the world's population survived, but they were forced to scavenge among the ruins.

About a century following the catastrophe, aliens invaded the planet, slaughtering or capturing all human beings who attempted even friendly contact. Eventually, only a few thousand humans were left, and they retreated into the dense forests that had begun to reappear. They learned that they were never totally safe from the humanoid aliens they called Slavers; in order to be less conspicuous they had divided into small tribes and lived in isolated and primitive villages. The overwhelming dominance of the Slavers crushed human pride, courage, and hope. All that remained was the basic instinct for survival. This is the world in which Finn finds himself when the story opens.

The central action of the novel involves Finn's attempts to find his father and sister, who are stolen from their village while Finn is away hunting. Not knowing where the Slavers have taken them, the young hero relies on his considerable skills as a woodsman to trace the enemy to their lair.

There, through guile and courage he is able to rescue Joshua and instill some hope in the other humans he frees in a daring raid against the Slavers' base.

The story offers young readers some insight into the horrors of physical enslavement.

In addition to the global concerns the novel addresses, it is easy to identify with Finn's desire to discover his personal history. He knows only that he was discovered as an abandoned toddler and adopted by Joshua Ferral and his wife, Myra. When he learns that he, like the half-human, half-beast Baer, is the result of a failed experiment in genetic engineering conducted by the Slavers, he has difficulty regaining his self-esteem. Hill uses this situation to illustrate that it is the human soul, rather than the exterior body, which nurtures admirable human qualities.

About the Author

The son of a locomotive engineer and a nurse, Douglas Arthur Hill was born April 6, 1935, in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada. He earned his B.A.

from the University of Saskatchewan, graduating with honors in 1957. He completed his graduate studies at the University of Toronto in 1959.

Hill began his career as a free-lance writer in 1959, moving to London, England, where he still resides. His varied interests are reflected in his works as well as the positions he has held for different publishing concerns. He served as an editor for Aldus Books Ltd. in London from 1962 to 1964, and he was the literary editor for the Tribune, a weekly London paper, from 1971 to 1984. He was employed by Rupert Hart-Davis as a science fiction adviser from 1966 to 1968. He held the same position from 1969 to 1971 with Mayflower Books, from 1972 to 1974 for J. M. Dent & Sons, and from 1974 to 1982 for Pan Books. During these years, Hill produced a number of his own works, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for adult readers. For some works, Hill chose to write under a pen name, "Martin Hillman."

Hill's first publication for young readers, *Coyote the Trickster: Legends of the North American Indians*, appeared in 1975. Produced with his wife, Gail Robinson Hill, the book retells collected North American Indian lore. Since then he has written numerous science fiction tales for children and adults, as well as poetry and nonfiction, contributing poems, book reviews, and articles to a number of periodicals. Poetry is his first love, but, being a person of widely diverse interests, he fills much of his work time and leisure time by writing fiction and nonfiction; he also enjoys games, cycling, photography, and television.

Setting

The time of the novel is established as a future period, approximately three hundred years after the world has been almost totally destroyed by fire. Even though nuclear warfare is not specifically identified as the cause of the devastation, Hill makes a strong implication that this is the case. The action of the story begins in and around the woods of Finn's village and extends as he travels to the settlements of the Slavers. In the segments describing Finn's attempts to rescue Joshua from the Slavers' camp, the surroundings vary from dense forest to expanses of desert.

Finn is more comfortable in natural settings, but as he searches for Joshua and Jena, he is forced to explore the structures of the aliens. These are described in some detail to stress their mechanical nature, in contrast to the forests where the humans live. No geographical locations are specifically identified, but for this novel it is necessary only to understand that the story takes place somewhere on a ravaged Earth.



Social Sensitivity

The setting of the story is a forceful admonition for environmental consciousness. Readers may be gratified to realize that in the decade following this book's publication, people became more aware of and began to work more diligently to preserve our natural resources.

The most prominent element of *The Huntsman* which may damage its appeal to parents and teachers is its violence. Any human encounter with the alien beings results in slaughter or cruel enslavement and a single objective surfaces—one side can triumph only through annihilation of the other.

It appears that the human characters have adopted the ruthless attitude of the Slavers. Hill's defense of this stance is discernable in the story of the "Forgotten Time" when humans attempted friendly communication with their oppressors and learned that any contact meant death.

Descriptions of the genetic experimentation of the Slavers may cause adult critics to question the appropriateness of this book for youthful readers. Without question, it is reminiscent of accounts of Hitler's objectives to create a perfect race. Additionally, it brings to mind the controversies in our own time concerning embryonic implantation. Used wisely, however, the novel offers a sobering lesson in what can happen when scientific experimentation is conducted without regard to human compassion and wisdom.

Literary Qualities

The Huntsman is a futuristic novel of adventure and action, but Hill's characterizations go beyond the superficiality of many science fiction works aimed toward the adolescent audience. Hill does a fine job of portraying attitudes which often result from fear and oppression. Even though the plot is simple and predictable, the book offers a solid base for discussion of the basic need for personal preservation versus the spirit of unity for collective progress. Also, through his association with Baer, Finn comes to appreciate the idea that differences of physiognomy sometimes mask admirable qualities. The young hero learns to overcome prejudice and to accept others for their inner qualities rather than judge them by outward appearances.

Hill's use of dialogue in *The Huntsman* may be distracting to some readers. Even though he apparently intended to make the speech seem more natural, the poor grammar of his characters tends to make them seem less intelligent. At times, it borders on parody of Black English or speech associated with country people, groups who have suffered from some of the same kinds of prejudice that Hill is trying to erase through his story. Therefore, some discussion may be necessary to make young readers aware that the author is not intending to denigrate characters whose speech is broken or colloquial English.



Themes and Characters

Although a number of characters are introduced in *The Huntsman*, Finn Ferral and his mutant companion Baer are the most fully developed. Joshua Ferral is portrayed as an admirable man but more through Finn's remembrances of the qualities he instilled in his adopted son than through his own actions in the story.

Other characterizations are achieved through general collective description.

For example, most of the humans are fearful and cowering, feeling that their only defenses against the Slavers are concealment and obscurity. Those who have been captured entertain no hope of freedom and for the most part are resigned to total submissiveness until they die.

The Slavers are hideous humanoids who wish to attain complete control of the planet, and they are in the process of genetic experiments through which they hope to produce organisms of human appearance, but possessing animal strength and weakened intelligence. The Slavers are incapable of any emotion except momentary fear and surprise. They also lack imagination, a quality Hill stresses as being an essential component of human nature. Hill describes the Slavers and their batlike sentinels, called Spywings, as having mechanical insides; the "blood" they bleed when wounded is actually an oillike substance, reinforcing the notion that they are devoid of human qualities even on a physical level. The Bloodkins, humanlike beasts who work for the Slavers, are portrayed as being more animal than human; they seem to exist only to inflict pain on humans who have been captured and made to work at the Slavers' mining operations.

Finn is a lad of superhuman agility, strength, and sensory perception.

While he is in pursuit of the Slavers, his uncanny abilities suggest qualities of a mythic hero. Early in the story Hill establishes the fact that Finn is different from the humans with whom he is raised; although he looks like them, he possesses instincts for surviving in the wilds that surpass even the most talented of the band with whom he lives.

When he realizes that his existence began in a test tube of a Slaver laboratory, however, Finn finds himself in emotional turmoil. Fortunately, he is able to put his personal dilemma aside until he rescues the people he finds held in captivity with Joshua and insures their safety to some degree.

Like Finn, Baer is a product of Slaver experimentation. His imperfection, by Slaver standards, is that he is beastly to look at and is slow and clumsy.

More significantly, though, he possesses the human qualities of empathy and compassion, making him unsuitable for service to the calculating Slavers. When he first encounters Finn, he is a fugitive from his mechanical masters; his knowledge of Slaver



habits and processes makes him an invaluable assistant to the young hero. His sensitive insight helps Finn come to terms with the facts of his origin.

The central theme dominating this novel is the question of what it means to be human. The Slavers possess superior technological skills, but Hill makes it clear that they are deficient in numerous personal qualities that readers should value. The villagers and those humans who have been captured and forced to work as slaves for the mechanical masters have lost some of their humanity, content to simply survive and bereft of all hope for escape or for improving their situation. The Bloodkins, bred by the Slavers to contain only certain human qualities, represent that side of humanity which is capable of great cruelty toward their fellow beings. Although he resembles the other Bloodkins physically, Baer is an anomaly because he is capable of compassion. Finn is most human: Bred to have superior instincts, he has not lost his capacity for love, his ability to use his wits, and his belief in the possibility of overcoming tremendous obstacles to achieve noble goals.

A second important theme is the quest for identity. It is significant that Finn is a huntsman, for the term takes on symbolic significance in the novel.

Finn hunts in the traditional sense for only a brief part of the story; the qualities he develops in that profession, however, provide him with the skills he needs in order to undertake the more important hunt for his relatives when they are taken by the Slavers.

Simultaneously, the young huntsman is on a journey to learn who he really is.

He must come to terms with the fact that he has been bred by the Slavers and must come to accept the notion that, despite his conception under such horrific conditions, he is still human.

By the end of the novel, Finn has become comfortable with his identity and has accepted his role as a leader in the fight against the Slavers.



Topics for Discussion

1. When Joshua Ferral found Finn in the forest, he considered the possibility that the Slavers left him there, but he took him and raised him as his son. If Finn had been discovered by someone else from the village, what other actions might have been taken?
2. One criticism of the story is that the Slavers seem incredibly stupid and relatively easy for Finn to trick and evade. Does this characteristic of the Slavers undermine the credibility of the story, or can it be rationalized using information either directly stated or inferred?
3. Hill does not provide specific details about what took place in the world three hundred years before the story begins. However, he does give some description of what human life was like before the earth was ravaged by fire. Are there human activities taking place in the world today that could be compared to activities of the people of the "Forgotten Time?"
4. Do Finn's extraordinary abilities make *The Huntsman* a story too fantastic to be enjoyable?
5. When Baer tells Finn about the methods of special breeding and embryonic implantation the Slavers are using, what event(s) of actual world history come to mind?
6. What reasons might Arthur Hill have had for choosing the title for this book?
7. *The Huntsman* is the first volume of a trilogy, so it is logical to assume that the next book will carry on with the search for Jena. Does Finn's failure to find her in this story make the book less enjoyable?
8. Imagine that Finn had been kept and raised by the Slavers. What differences might there be in his temperament and values?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Huntsman is classified by some critics as fantasy and by others as science fiction. Which categorization is most defensible?
2. Writers of fiction often intend to convey a meaning deeper than the plot of a story. Do you think this is the case in The Huntsman? Explain your response.
3. Baer tells Finn that the Slavers know only facts and have no imagination. What does he mean, and why is that an important characteristic of the Slavers?
4. The Huntsman was first published in 1981. Have there been occurrences in the world since that time which make the story less relevant than it may have been five or ten years ago?
5. Identify qualities in The Huntsman that do or do not motivate you to seek out and read other works by Douglas Hill.

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 39. Detroit: Gale, 1985:105. A brief biographical sketch of Hill, with an extensive list of his publications.

Gleason, George. Review. In *School Library Journal* (February 1983): 89.

Gleason's review is not entirely favorable, and it offers a starting point for constructive arguments of support or rebuttal for the merits of the novel.

Related Titles

The Huntsman is the first volume of a trilogy about Finn Ferral's adventures.

The second and third volumes are titled *Warriors of the Wasteland* and *Alien Citadel*, respectively. In *Warriors of the Wasteland*, Finn is not alone in his search to find and rescue his foster sister. Besides the faithful Baer, he has the help of a group of humans who are no longer satisfied to accept the dominance of the Slavers resignedly. Hope and determination grow within the party as they follow their youthful leader. When Finn is captured by the Slavers in *Alien Citadel*, his companions are impelled to rescue him. Their resolve stands to prove that as long as any of them remain alive, they will strive to prevent the aliens from erasing human life from the face of the Earth.



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