In the Ocean of Night Short Guide

In the Ocean of Night by Gregory Benford

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Characters

Benford is in many ways a typical hard science fiction writer in the manner of Larry Niven, Ben Bova, or Charles Sheffield. What sets him apart, however, what gives him a claim to being the best writer of hard science fiction working in America today, is his willingness to explore character development and style, two areas which science fiction writers too often undervalue. Benford's Nigel Walmsley is in some ways the archetypal science fiction hero, a brilliant and courageous scientist, "the man who knows how to do things," but he is much more than that. Walmsley comes across as a living human being, not necessarily a particularly nice man, but an interesting one; not the cool, steely- eyed cliche of pulp fiction, but a hothead who on occasion acts hastily and who is perfectly capable of making things worse by shooting off his mouth. When unobtrusive clarity is needed, as, for example, in Timescape (1980), produces a superior version of the straightforward prose typical of science fiction, but he is by nature an innovator with language. In Against Infinity (1983) and "To the Storming Gulf" (1985) he experiments with style and plot ideas borrowed from William Faulkner. His description of Walmsley's mental transformation near the end of In the Ocean of Night is prose poetry of a very high order, a serious attempt to convey an other-worldly experience, the thought processes of a being who is genuinely alien.

Social Concerns/Themes

In the Ocean of Night, which finished second in the balloting for the Nebula Award as best science fiction novel of 1978, typifies Benford's method in the Nigel Walmsley books. One of the better novels about first contact with extraterrestrials, it can be readily compared with Arthur C. Clarke's Rendezvous with Rama (1973) or Carl Sagan's Contact (1985).

Benford believes passionately in the importance of both the U.S. space program and the attempts made by Carl Sagan, Frank Drake, and others to discover life on other planets, in part because of the valuable spinoff technologies these activities create, and in part because he sees space exploration as something noble in its own right, our century's equivalent of Manifest Destiny. Walmsley, speaking for Benford no doubt, is capable of becoming almost mystical when discussing the subject.

Although Benford's primary theme is first contact, the novel's social concerns are almost encyclopedic. Benford finds occasion to criticize government bureaucracy, the military, the welfare state, and fundamentalist religion, all of which he sees as combining to hamstring American scientific know-how.

As in Timescape, however, the author avoids a simplistic, technocratic response to the problems he is discussing. Benford realizes that scientific innovation has its dark side, but he argues, even more explicitly than he did in Timescape, that it is usually bad government which is responsible for many technologically based problems.

Too often, he argues, government bureaucrats, operating with little understanding of the technology which they, not the scientists, control, come to decisions which are either self-serving or simply ignorant. Benford's novel, set in the early twenty-first century, predicts drastically increasing pollution, worldwide hunger, and the near collapse of Europe, due largely to leaders' intellectual failure to deal with technological innovation.

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Key Questions

Two themes are central to In the Ocean of Night: first contact and the difficulty of doing real science. Thus the ideas for discussion suggested in the separate entries for Great Sky River (1987) and Timescape are equally relevant here. In the Ocean of Night is particularly bitter in its attack on the ways in which the outside world interferes with the ability of real scientists to do their jobs. A useful discussion might center on specific examples of government interference with scientific research, both in the novel and in our world. Also worthy of discussion is the conflict between religion, more specifically evangelical Christianity, and science, particularly in such areas as cosmology, evolution, birth control and transplant technology, and genetics. In the Ocean of Night was published in 1978, yet most of the problems that Benford addresses still exist and many have actually gotten worse.

It should be noted, however, that Benford is making no attempt to be evenhanded here. His attack on those whom he sees as interfering with scientific endeavors is very clearly polemical. Book discussion groups may wish to consider the possibility that there is another side to Benford's argument, that there may in fact be good and sufficient reasons for government, religion, and other nonscience-based groups to interfere with what scientists are doing.

1. Benford believes that government interference is at the heart of many of the problems facing both contemporary science and the world at large. To what extent does he demonstrate this belief in In the Ocean of Night? Do you agree with him?

2. It has been suggested that Benford believes intensely in the importance of the space program. How is that belief demonstrated in this novel?

3. First contact with aliens is one of science fiction's most enduring themes.

More often than not, however, writers portray the aliens being contacted as being very similar to ourselves, in their thought processes if not in their bodies.

Benford believes that any aliens we contact are likely to be very different from us in the way they think. How does he demonstrate this in the novel?

4. How much difficulty did you have understanding Benford's aliens? Would In the Ocean of Night be a better book if the author had made his aliens less, well, alien?

5. What is Benford's attitude towards fundamentalist religion? Why does he feel this way?

6. Benford has been labelled a technocrat. What exactly does this mean?

Does In the Ocean of Night contain any evidence that this is in fact the case?

7. Read Arthur C. Clarke's Rendezvous with Rama and compare it with In the Ocean of Night. What similarities do you see? What differences?

8. Although not defining himself as religious, Benford, like Arthur C. Clarke, clearly has a mystical streak, particularly when he's talking about the future of the human race. What indications do you see of this in In the Ocean of Night? How does this mysticism jibe with his dislike of traditional religion?

9. To what extent do the events of In the Ocean of Night and its immediate sequels foreshadow the events of Great Sky River and its sequels?

10. Consider Benford's protagonist, Nigel Walmsley. How does he differ from the typical science fiction hero? In some ways he isn't a very likeable person; how does this effect the novel?

11. Walmsley appears again as a major character in Bright Eternity (1994). How has he changed since In the Ocean of Night appeared?

Literary Precedents

In the Ocean of Night is a superior example of a common science fiction theme, first contact with alien lifeforms. Such novels can usually be divided into three groups. In the first, originated by H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds (1898), hostile beings, viewed essentially as monsters, invade Earth.

In the second, humans land on another planet and meet an alien race, often viewed in this case essentially as surrogates for our own Third World. See, for example, Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles (1950). In the third type of first-contact story, however, the meeting between man and alien leads to transcendence — alien as angel — with Arthur C. Clarke's 2002: A Space Odyssey (1968) being a typical example.

Benford's novel fits most closely into this third group, Walmsley having been profoundly changed by his experience. Scientist that Benford is, however, the mysticism of the situation appears to make him uneasy, causing him to clothe the novel, at least in part, in the trappings of an alien invasion of Earth plot.

Related Titles

The sequels to In the Ocean of Night are Deeper Than Darkness (1970), revised as The Stars in Shroud (1978), and Across the Sea of Suns (1984). The later books in the series send Walmsley to other worlds and show the meeting between humans and the machine intelligence foreshadowed in In the Ocean of Night.

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