

# The Integral Trees Short Guide

## The Integral Trees by Larry Niven

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# Characters

In keeping with science fiction traditions, Niven devotes little space to in-depth characterization. He is concerned with man's interactions with his environment rather than with his fellow man. The main characters follow familiar lines: Clave, the leader, man of action, and lover; Jeffer, the scientist; Gavving, the young hunter who comes to maturity during his adventures. The female characters, Minya, Lawri, Merrill, and others, are depicted as equal to the men as warriors and scientists.

Interestingly, although the Smoke Ring dwellers are technologically backward and organized along tribal lines, Niven does not depict them as savages enslaved by superstitions. Although only the tribal scientists and their apprentices understand science, most of the characters accept scientific explanations for unfamiliar phenomena. This skepticism helps them to deal with Kendy and reveals Niven's confidence in the power of reason.

The Checker, Sharls Davis Kendy, is perhaps the most interesting character in the novel. A fanatic whose only purpose is to serve the state, his form follows his function. His personality is recorded in the computer of the ramship Discipline, turning him into an unaging sentient machine, a fusion of technology and totalitarianism. Niven effectively begins and ends *The Integral Trees* with Kendy, establishing him as a continuing threat to the mutineers' descendants. Although a sinister figure, Kendy is also an impressive one.

The Smoke Ring itself, with its bizarre flora and fauna, might be viewed as the central "character" in the book.

Niven dazzles his readers with integral trees, floating cotton-candy jungles, mobies, dumbos, elongated human giants, and other wonders. His carefully worked out speculations are more fantastic than many worlds presented in fantasy novels, yet they are always logical.



## Social Concerns/Themes

The *Integral Trees* combines two of Niven's favorite themes: the need for freedom, and the necessity for exploration and discovery. The heroes, outcasts of the Quinn tribe, are descendants of space travellers who mutinied against the totalitarian authority of Earth and settled on Smoke Ring, an asteroid belt with its own atmosphere that circles a neutron star. The people of the Smoke Ring live in varying degrees of savagery, inhabiting floating jungles or gigantic flying trees shaped like integral signs. The novel is structured as a series of escapes, revolts, or exiles which are also voyages of discovery. Through this plot structure, Niven suggests that although freedom brings danger, it also brings an excitement that makes life worth living.

The novel presents a frequent theme in Niven's fiction, the double-edged nature of science and technology. The people of London Tree use the superior technology they have preserved from their ancestors to enslave their neighbors. Sharls Davis Kendy, a former Checker for the State, now a human machine, plans to reestablish his control over the Smoke Ring dwellers by means of the almost magical powers that he can offer to any would-be dictators. Niven neither shrinks from the dangers inherent in scientific progress nor retreats into technophobia. His characters manage to snatch the Promethean flame without burning their fingers, in keeping with his basically optimistic philosophy.



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The *Integral Trees* is an exercise in constructing an alien environment, a standard form of science fiction. While some writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Frank Herbert, or C. S. Lewis make exploring a new world a spiritual journey with the alien world symbolic of the human consciousness or soul, Niven, like other science fiction world builders, makes the *Smoke Ring* a new part of the physical universe. Niven challenges himself to design a free-fall environment scientifically consistent and filled with details ranging from astronomy to anthropology. The *Integral Trees* may be best compared to such works as Foul Anderson's *Fire Time* (1970-1974), Robert L. Forward's *Dragons Egg* (1980), and Niven's own *Ringworld* (1970). Niven, in fact, dedicated *Integral Trees* to Forward for his help in designing the *Smoke Ring*. Niven exercises care in presenting his *Smoke Ring* without slowing down the plot with exposition. He buttresses his text with maps, diagrams, and a glossary. The story itself begins with no formal exposition and provides background information with flashbacks, reminiscences by Kendy, and computer research consulted by the tribesmen. In this way, the reader gradually gets accustomed to the *Smoke Ring* and experiences a sense of awestruck wonder at this creation.

Niven also follows in the libertarian tradition of Heinlein, Anderson, and Pournelle. Coercive statism, represented in the novel by Kendy, the London Tree's copsik-runner (slavers), and the chairman of Quinn tribe, are all threats to the heroes' freedom. Niven does not specify what kind of state Kendy serves because its structure, fascistic or communistic, is not as important as the fact that it holds absolute power. The novel's sequel, *The Smoke Ring* (1987), closes with the hint that Kendy will play a larger and more direct role. Niven seems to feel that statist like Kendy cannot be finally defeated.



## Related Titles

The Integral Trees forms part of Niven's Leshy Circuit series which also includes A World Out of Time (1976).

The link in these stories is the totalitarian state of Earth which colonizes other planets with ramships. The Integral Trees and its sequel can stand on their own since their main interest is the unique environment of the Smoke Ring. Although critics have found Niven's attempt to create a free-fall environment fascinating, the series does not have the scope or inventiveness of Niven's Known Space series.

The Smoke Ring continues the adventures of the remnant of the Quinn tribe in exploring the Smoke Ring.



# Copyright Information

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