The Iron Dream Short Guide

The Iron Dream by Norman Spinrad

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The story is presented as a novel written by Adolf Hitler, called Lord of the Swastika, with an Afterword by one Professor Homer Whipple. Together they comprise The Iron Dream.

There is only one real character in Lord of the Swastika, and he is Feric Jaggar.

As Hitler's alter ego, he bestrides the novel's world like the mighty warrior pictured on The Iron Dream's original paperback cover.

For all that the story is told through his eyes and values, surprisingly little is shown of his inner being. He is almost a hollow man. We do learn that he is a tall, fair, genetically-pure "Trueman," in contrast to the mutants who inhabit large portions of the novel's world. He carries a sense of grievance, however. His parents were exiled from the all-human nation of Heldon for his father's war crimes. So he has grown up in neighboring Borgravia, a land where humans mix with those of inferior "race." Genetic cleansing has hence become an obsession to Jaggar.

Rather than question his father's acts, he sees all people and events through the lens of racial purity. Once he attains his first goal, citizenship in Heldon, it emerges as his driving force.

Political power becomes the engine through which he will achieve racial cleansing, and savage violence its fuel.

Luck and ruthlessness combine to bring him quick results. Occasionally in his rise to power, other traits flash across Feric's consciousness: aesthetic satisfaction at the trim, neat houses and streets in Heldon's capital; political shrewdness when dealing with potential foes. But these soon fade into the story's background. Hitler as author is much more interested in Feric's constant traits: his decisiveness, his glory in brutal battle, the combined bonhomie and worship he draws from his top lieutenants. And always, of course, his dedication to genetic purity.

A few of Feric's Swastika Circle have a bit of individuality. Waffing, the portly ex-Brigadier who becomes his High Commander of Security; Ludolf Best, an awed young man who serves as his personal aide; and Stag Stopa, the motorcycle gang leader whom Jaggar first defeats and then briefly allows to organize the semiofficial Knights, are two-dimensional characters. But they never become real, threedimensional characters. Most of Jaggar's henchmen do not even get this far; they are mere yes-men.

Adolf Hitler is the other, if unseen, character in The Iron Dream. Most of it, after all, is "his" book, or at least the kind of book Spinrad thinks he would have written had he turned his hand to fiction rather than Mein Kampf. As such, Hitler is just as violence- and race-obsessed as is his hero Feric Jaggar. There is, as Whipple notes grudgingly, a

certain "raw power" in his words and imagery, which may be due to his career as an artist. But overall, as a writer, he is heavy-handed, monomaniacal, and repetitious. He shows no sense of subtlety and is fascinated by things that most people find obscene: images of spilled organs, excretory functions, and grotesque beings. Altogether the reader is forced to agree with Whipple's summary, but in reverse. It would have been better if Hitler had been merely a neurotic science fiction writer purveying his vision to a handful of fans.

Social Concerns

The Iron Dream refracts social reality from several angles. As Lord of the Swastika, a novel purportedly authored by Adolf Hitler in an alternate timeline universe, its massive violence and obsession with genetic purity remind us of the horrors of World War II.

Although the plot does not exactly duplicate the real Hitler's rise and his subsequent acts, the parallels are quite close. Even readers unfamiliar with the history of that era cannot miss the Nazi miasma of racism and will-to-power that infests the story's events.

It was published during a late stage of the Cold War. In a pseudo-scholarly afterword by fictional professor Homer Whipple, the other premises of its alternate universe are made clear. The National Socialist movement flickered out after a few years as a fringe political party. Instead, Communists took over Germany by a coup in 1930. Britain fell to them in 1948. The United States and Japan are left as the only "free world" great powers facing a Greater Soviet Union. Whipple notes ironically that it is not hard to understand the popularity of Hitler's book.

In "the present perilous times," it provides an appealing fantasy: a strong leader like its protagonist who could pull Americans from despair and apathy by the sheer force of his vision. The author's evil empire of Zind, says Whipple, represents the Greater Soviet Union. Clearly Spinrad meant to indict the panicky anticommunism of the Cold War era, along with the conquest and repression practiced by both fascist and communist regimes.

The novel was written during the Vietnam War era. Although it contains no overt comparisons, its violence is probably a protest against that war as well. Among the weapons used in the Heldon war effort are napalm, portable rocket launchers, and "pacification" of enemy territory through total destruction.

Finally, the book speaks chilling truths to the post-Cold War world.

Decades after it was written, wars of "ethnic purity" rage. There are still countries ruled by men who resemble Supreme Commander Feric Jaggar. It is their limited resources, rather than their dreams and tactics, that keep them from dominating the world stage as he did. And the "culture of violence" that Jaggar encouraged, and that Spinrad meant to parody, has only increased in our own media and arguably in our society as well.

Techniques

The Iron Dream consists of some 243 pages of Hitlerian fiction, Lord of the Swastika, and an eleven-page "Afterword," the literary analysis by Professor Homer Whipple. The novel by "Hitler" imitates the generic structure of heroic fantasy or quest novels. In these, a hero of noble birth sets out to reclaim his heritage and right the world's wrongs. Early in his quest, he finds evidence that confirms his special status. Before he can attain his goal, however, he must meet increasing tests of strength, skill, and will. As the stakes become larger, so do the battles.

He may be deflected from his path by unexpected events, but only temporarily. Even when circumstances change, he finds a way to turn them to advantage, until a final, climactic moment when he stands triumphant. And so it is with Feric Jaggar. His obstacles are minimized, however, and the narrative focuses more on violent and gory scenes than is common in the genre.

This merely shows that Hitler would probably have been a hack writer (but not necessarily an unsuccessful one), just as he is usually judged an indifferent artist. Many writers have trouble writing a less than admirable main character. To also "get inside the head" of a man like Hitler and write with his authorial voice is a considerable achievement.

Whipple's "Afterword" puts the preceding novel into perspective, if not exactly the perspective of either real life or the actual author. Critics have pointed out that all the reader's reactions and rationales while reading the novel are then repeated, and parodied, in the "Afterword." There are a few exceptions to this fact. They are more likely to be noticed by those familiar with science fiction than by the general reader. Sword and sorcery, and military fantasy, are not Spinrad's usual fare; he is a versatile and often cerebral writer. However, in Lord of the Swastika he shows that he knows these subgenres quite well. However much the structure of Lord of the Swastika resembles sword and sorcery, most publishers would issue it as "military science fiction," because of its technology level. Whipple speaks of sword and sorcery as a male genre rife with phallic symbolism and violence. This is not wholly untrue. Adolescent males seem especially drawn to the subgenre. But today's sword-and-sorcery fiction is written from a wider base. It includes female protagonists, female writers, and many books in which magic and wit far outweigh the violence that occurs. (These trends were just beginning in 1972 so neither "Whipple" nor Spinrad can be called inaccurate.) Finally, in several places Whipple equates "sword and sorcery" with "science fantasy." This is a more serious mistake. While science fantasy sometimes uses sword-and-sorcery staples like magic swords and heroes of noble origin, it is a quite different subgenre. It tends toward richer characterization and treatment of social issues and has always had many female writers and readers. Spinrad's dislike of this subgenre's commercial orientation may account for the lapse.

Themes

Like its societal concerns, The Iron Dream's themes come out on several different levels. The most important is the horrific image of power-lust and aggression run amok. Along with this, there is also a lesson in the ease with which Jaggar takes over Heldon's government. Although in "Hitler's" fantasy it was always inevitable, the failure of good men to do anything made it easier. Even the council members he displaced offered little protest. Their docility did not save them; they were summarily executed anyway.

The second thematic level is that of the pornography of violence. Feric Jaggar employs television spectacles of street fights and then of gory battle scenes to titillate and energize Heldon's citizens. Professor Whipple describes Hitler's whole book as an exaggeration of pulp sword-and-sorcery motifs. In his nonfiction Science Fiction in the Real World (1990), Spinrad has exposed science fiction's "dirty little secret." Whatever the surface plot, he says, practically all novels of the genre carry the implicit theme of "right makes might." The Lord of the Swastika turns the theme back to "might makes right," of course. The Iron Dream's parody of sword and sorcery is especially thought-provoking in view of Spinrad's essay. At minimum, it challenges science fiction readers to ask whether their favorite books contain more than a "might makes right" or "right makes might" story line.

But the theme's importance goes far beyond the science fiction community.

It calls into question the type and amount of violence shown in almost every medium, and its meaning within a work. From action films and cartoons to computer games, and even to romance novels, there is a tendency to make the protagonist a "hero" merely because he exudes "leadership" and brandishes firepower. Feric Jaggar is a logical end product of this trend.

The third theme is the perversion of sexuality into violence. Homer Whippie's "Afterword" also serves as a satire on the school of literary criticism which sees phallic symbolism in almost every motif. Nonetheless, as he points out, the symbolism is there. It is blatant as well as intrinsically tied to brutal force in this novel. The absence of any women characters emphasizes the point. Violence serves as a substitute here for more normal and direct sexuality. The comparison with elements of our own society is left to each reader's imagination. The novel's wrapup shows the ultimate results of such substitution. Sterilization is universal and the future rests in the hands of cloned "truemen," created in vats without any woman's help. In the final scene a spacegoing rocket blasts off to take the "seed of the Swastika" out to "fecundate the stars."

Key Questions

The Iron Dream is not a pleasant book to read. Even readers of head-bashing sword and sorcery or heavy-duty military science fiction may blanch at the stream of atrocities that "Hitler" spews out. This is one of the effects the real author intended, of course, but it does not provide much fodder for a discussion. The worthwhile ideas are concentrated in the final eleven pages of the "Afterword." For this reason, a session built around the novel may end quickly or veer into a more general discussion of history or of violence in media and literature.

However, it is an excellent title to include in a multibook program on any of several different topics. Groups studying the history of Nazism or of World War II might treat it as a roman a clef, identifying real-world parallels of the novel's events and people. It fits easily into an discussion of dystopian novels, and possibly into one on postnuclear holocaust novels as well. It also could serve as illumination, from a different angle, for an examination of media violence.

1. The Iron Dream was banned by West Germany when it came out, for fear readers would miss the satire and admire it as an actual celebration of Nazism. Was this fear well grounded?

Unique to Germany?

2. Feric Jaggar meets few obstacles in his rise to power and subsequent reign of terror. Looking back, are there any pivotal points where he could have been stopped, either by human actions or by a random event falling out differently? Or was he fated to do what he did, as the Great Truncheon motif seems to imply?

3. This ease in accomplishing the "hero's" program marks "Hitler's" book as a crude fantasy. Writers are usually urged to make things as difficult as they can for their heroes, in order to sustain tension and make the eventual victory more meaningful.

However, there are at least a couple of genres that contradict this rule: erotica and fairy tales. How much is it a universal rule?

4. Reading The Iron Dream calls into question previous assumptions about heroes, from King Arthur to Superman.

What conclusions do you draw?

5. "Professor Whipple" points out that the phallic symbolism of Lord of the Swastika keys into "one of the most prevalent sexual pathologies of our civilization," which equates male sexuality with violence. Are there literary works or forms which use phallic symbols in entirely different ways? Is Whipple's labelling of Lord of the Swastika as a sword-and-sorcery or science fantasy novel accurate? If not, what are examples of books that would argue against it?

7. Whipple also finds it ridiculous to believe anyone could come to power in the real world as Feric Jaggar does, by whipping up public emotions with grandiose displays. Obviously this is irony; Hitler used just such techniques.

What similar methods would a latterday Hitler use in our electronic world?

8. Jaggar's hatred of mutants is simple code for Hitler's hatred of "nonAryan" races and the physically disabled. Yet it is also true that actual mutants might be born after a nuclear war. Their appearance might well frighten or disgust other people. How do you think humanity would cope with this?

9. There are times when Feric Jaggar acts instantly, while a better-balanced leader would have first questioned whether he was being lied to. His purging of Stag Stopa is an example.

Yet in one theory of leadership, it is better to act decisively, even if mistakenly, than to hesitate. How valid is this belief?

10. "Hitler's" Heldon resembles the all-male worlds created by some science fiction writers, because women are virtually invisible. Most such worlds are dangerous and terrible places. A woman writer, Lois Bujold, has in Ethan of Athos (1986) created a much more peaceful all-male world. Do you think there could be one? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

As noted above, the book's plot, such as it is, is patterned on sword-andsorcery novels. The Conan tales by Robert E. Howard are probably the best-known examples of this subgenre.

The Iron Dream also uses motifs from more famous literature. Feric's Great Truncheon is an obvious phallic symbol, especially blatant when the "author" lovingly describes its features.

But the manner in which Feric claims it harks all the way back to King Arthur.

Like Arthur's sword Excalibur, which could only be drawn from the stone by the rightful High King, the Great Truncheon or Steel Commander can only be lifted and wielded by a true heir of the ancient Kings of Held. It has been guarded in the forest by the Avengers, a motorcycle gang. When Jaggar picks it up to defend himself in a fight with their leader, the entire group is stricken with awe. This truncheon is the only touch of "magic" or true fantasy in the entire book.

The novel resembles Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) in being a cautionary political fantasy that can be read as a warning against more than one system. It has never attained the wide readership of Orwell's book.

Whether this is from timing, the greater complexity of The Iron Dream's structure, or some other factors, is an open question. Mutants created by radiation damage date back at least to Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959) and other postnuclear war novels of the 1950s and 1960s.

A later work, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1986), also features a repressive militaristic regime that comes to power through a coup, and wages endless war for no good reason.

The point-of-view character and stylistic approach are quite different from Spinrad's, but both books could be called "cautionary dystopias." There is also a parallel in the endings. The main section of The Handmaid's Tale is followed by a scholar's afterword, which places the story in its "historical" setting and also speculates on the heroine's ultimate fate.

Related Titles

Spinrad's other works share with The Iron Dream a fascination with political phenomena and media manipulation.

His Russian Spring (1991) offers still another alternate future for the Soviet Union.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994