

Jupiter's Bones Short Guide

Jupiter's Bones by Faye Kellerman

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Characters

The novel's main character is Peter Decker, the only person who transcends both storylines in the book. Decker has been one of Kellerman's primary characters in all of her mystery novels. A smart cop (Decker has a law degree) with good street sense, Decker is rooted in practicality. He continually pressures the members of the Order for "hard evidence" of their accusation that Asnikov (the psychologist) is responsible for the disappearance of two members of the Order. While Dexter is the vehicle through which the reader learns the first storyline—the mystery behind the Order— Dexter himself is the second storyline. In between his investigations, Decker must deal with the daily challenges of being a parent and of learning the customs of the Jewish Orthodox religion (to which he converted in order to marry Rina). Decker serves as the link between these two stories—the very real problems of parenting, and the almost surreal events that occur at the Order.

Decker is assisted by two main detectives, Marge Dunn and Scott Oliver. Marge is the 36-year old bright protege of Decker, often finishing his sentences for him. She is also the strongest character in the book.

While Decker sometimes flails at trying to address his domestic problems, Marge always seems to have the right answer. It is fitting, then, that Marge becomes the ultimate hero of the book—leading the underground raid into the Order after Bob has barricaded the compound, and saving most of the children. Oliver provides the (attempted) comic relief sidekick to Marge, filling in as the stereotypical crude cop.

Decker's family is familiar to Kellerman fans, having appeared in all of her earlier mystery novels. Not surprisingly, these characters develop Kellerman's strong theme of the importance of family. Decker's wife, Rina Lazarus, is an Orthodox Jew who, like Decker, is in her second marriage. She has two sons from her first marriage, Samuel and Jacob. Although Rina has played a prominent role in many of Kellerman's earlier books, she is notably in the background of this novel, appearing every so often to provide the strict religious viewpoint on many issues, often speaking half of her sentences in Hebrew. She thus helps develop the issue of the tension between religion and modern society. Rina's oldest son, 17-year old Samuel, presents Decker with his first domestic crisis—Samuel wants to follow in his deceased father's footsteps and go to school in a dangerous area in Israel. Rina's other son, Jacob, later gives Decker domestic headache number two, when Decker walks in on Jacob and his girlfriend, and then learns of Jacob's problems with girls, pornography, pot, and his molestation by a male teacher several years earlier. Finally, there is 5-year old Hannah, the daughter of Rina and Decker, whose main role is to constantly remind Decker not to place work ahead of family.

The members of the Order round out the other half of the Jupiter's Bones cast. At the head of the cult is the late Father Jupiter, aka Dr. Ganz. Although Ganz was charismatic and a brilliant scientist, allegations also emerge that he was an adulterer and stole other



academics' ideas. Ganz/Jupiter illustrates the theme of relativity, that most things are not purely good or purely bad.

Although Ganz enjoyed world-renown as an astrophysicist, his daughter admits that "I think the Order made Dad better. Better meaning more sane or more . . . conventional. The sect gave him a title, gave him a forum for his lunatic ideas, gave him respect, gave him a home and a woman."

And, as Decker ruminates about Jupiter later in the novel: Perjury. Adultery. Plagiarism. A sadistic man who took pleasure in ruining careers according to his own daughter's recollections. Yet others saw him as a god and a savior. Where was the truth? If it existed, it certainly wasn't absolute.

In the end, however, the supposed murder of Ganz takes a back seat to the out-of-hand situation as his gurus struggle to take over the Order.

The ultimate "winner" in this struggle is guru Bob Ross. A former student of Ganz's, Bob revered him both as Dr. Ganz and as Father Jupiter. Although Bob is introduced as the only member of the Order not using an assumed name, he actually changed his name long before joining the order. Bob signifies the most extreme and ambitious member of the cult—after Father Jupiter's death, Bob jockeys for power with the other gurus, and eventually murders guru Pluto and blows up the Order's compound, with himself and all of the adult members inside.

Guru Pluto (real name Keith Muldoony) came from a white trash background in West Virginia, and met Ganz when he was in a mental institution in that state. Pluto then blackmailed Ganz's wife to keep her secret, and eventually traveled with Ganz when he returned to Los Angeles as Father Jupiter. A staunch anti-authority figure, Pluto serves primarily as the arrogant and vociferous decoy. While Decker and his associates spend their time worrying about Pluto, it is Bob who is planning the ultimate takeover of the Order. The other male guru, Nova, briefly enters the storyline as the person who signed Father Jupiter's death certificate and who contacted Jupiter's daughter in the outside world to tell her of Jupiter's death. For this transgression (it was forbidden for the Order to secretly speak with outside society), Pluto ends up murdering Nova in a rather gruesome fashion.

The remaining guru is Venus, the only female leader in the Order. Somewhat of an enigma, Venus was the childhood best friend of Jupiter's daughter, who then became sexually involved with Jupiter and joined the Order. She also serves primarily as a decoy, although she apparently joins with Bob in his decision to blow up the compound.

A key character who appears later in the novel is Andromeda. Formerly a member of the Order and a teacher of the children, Andromeda's real name is Lauren. Lauren in fact is a spy within the Order, placed there by the psychologist Reuben Asnikov to rescue one of the younger children. Lauren represents perhaps the truest hero of the novel. As a member of the Order for two years, she endured the strict lifestyle and even sex with Bob and other males, always waiting for an opportunity. In her time at the Order, Lauren



dug a tunnel, by hand, from inside the compound out to the surrounding hills. Lauren's chance comes when Decker and his associates enter the Order for their investigation. In the disruption, Lauren takes the younger child (Lyra) and escapes. It is through Lauren's descriptions of the Order's repressive and at times deadly lifestyle that Kellerman most vividly expounds her theme of the destructive nature of cult psychology.

In Vega, a child member of the Order, Kellerman demonstrates that some goodness can exist even in a place of apparent evil. Vega, an extremely intelligent girl, has lived her entire life in the Order. She is endeared to Andromeda/Lauren as her teacher, however, and when the climatic escape scene arrives, Vega is forced to choose between loyalty to Andromeda or to the Order as a whole. She chooses Andromeda.

In the end, Vega is adopted by Marge, and thus represents the new hope for the children of the Order.

Finally, Kellerman uses the characters of Europa (Jupiter/Ganz's daughter) and Reuben Asnikov (cult psychologist) primarily as sources of information for the reader.

Although Europa's name is ambiguous—it could pass for one of the Order names as well—she is not involved in the Order's activities. A science professor like her father, Europa provides the background for Jupiter/Ganz's life, and explains many of the complex physics metaphors Kellerman uses. Asnikov also serves as a source of information for the reader, and as a way for Kellerman to present the professional analysis of her views on cult psychology.



Social Concerns

Jupiter's Bones is the epitome of popular fiction pulled from the headlines. For her eleventh mystery novel, Faye Kellerman took the 1978 Heaven's Gate mass suicide and changed the facts just slightly—a cult with a charismatic leader who taught college astrophysics rather than mathematics, a setting in Los Angeles rather than San Diego. She then added elements directly from the Waco and Jonestown cult tragedies, placed it all in the hands of her familiar character, police lieutenant Peter Decker, and produced Jupiter's Bones. The result is more thriller than mystery, following a plot that begins with Decker's investigation of the cult leader's death, but soon focuses on his attempts to save the cult's children from genocide. Along the way, Jupiter's Bones attempts to provide what the real-life stories could not—a glimpse into the destructive psychology behind cults. It also examines the related social issue of the conflict between religious extremism and modern society.

The book begins with the death of its title character, Father Jupiter, the charismatic leader of a reclusive cult named the Order of the Rings of God. Twenty-five years earlier, Jupiter was known as Dr. Emil Euler Ganz, a world-renowned astrophysicist.

However, when Ganz's ideas on time travel (and the alien voices in his head) became too much, his wife had Ganz secretly placed in a mental institution. Ten years later, he resurfaced as Jupiter (a not-so-subtle reference to his astrophysics background) and formed the Order. At first blush, Ganz/ Jupiter's death appears to be a suicidal overdose of alcohol and valium, but all good mystery includes homicide. Thus, suspicious facts soon point towards Jupiter's murder, paving the way for Decker and his assistants to investigate the Order's compound, and for Kellerman to present her take on the cult mentality.

Kellerman's general psychological profile of the Order is nothing new—its leaders are generally social misfits who despise traditional authority. They exhibit distrust and hatred for the police, the symbol of conventional authority in the outside world.

This is particularly true in Pluto, one of Father Jupiter's four assistants (termed "gurus"), a red-faced, high-stress character who constantly threatens Decker and his associates for trying to impose their "outside" laws on the Order. The Order's complaints about authority, however, could not be more hypocritical. The Order's leaders, the gurus, enforce the cult's rules with an ultrarigid, even deadly, hand. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Order's children, the ultimate focus of the story.

The children of the Order are portrayed as innocent and obeying lambs, cared for by Father Jupiter and the Order and wholly dependent on (and thus loyal to) the Order for their survival. Underlying the Order's care of its children, however, is the darker, abusive side of the cult psychology. For Kellerman, the Order's evil comes from its complete lack of free will. As Reuben Asnikov, a prominent psychologist whom Decker asks for help, explains: "Jupiter doesn't want to give his followers freedom. . . . He keeps his adherents away—away from freedom, away from their pasts and from parents or old



friends." In addition to a lack of free will, a common thread in the Order is sexual abuse. All the female members of the Order are sexually abused. As Lauren, an escapee from the Order, tells Decker: "They're all perverts."

The only seemingly "normal" leader at the Order is guru Bob, who did not change his name to a celestial reference. In his first meeting with Decker, Bob explains that, "[u]nlike most of the people here, I wasn't running away from myself per se. Just running to something better, my spirit being my compass." As it turns out, however, Bob is the most disturbed of all—he murders guru Pluto, tries to lead the children in a mass suicide of pink Kool-aid (taken straight from Jonestown), then blows up the compound (ala Waco). Kellerman provides little to explain Bob's demise, although, like the rest of the Order, Bob is no stranger to sexual issues—he has sexual performance troubles with women, becomes sexually aroused when breaking the law, and imposes sexual relationships on several female members of the Order.

The other main social concern in *Jupiter's Bones* is the tension between religious extremism and modern society. On the one hand, Decker and his detectives see the Order as a religious cult whose members are delusional and dangerous. On the other, Ganz was a world-renowned astrophysicist, and many of his followers, including the children, could hold their own discussing complex physics with university professors. Thus, the Order is an odd marriage of religious extremism and hard science.

A similar union is played out in the novel's secondary storyline. *Jupiter's Bones* flips back and forth between two plots—the investigation of the Order, and Decker's troubles on the home front. The latter drama is what has made Kellerman a bestseller. It revolves around the marriage of Decker and Rina Lazarus, an Orthodox Jew. Decker and Rina have been the mainstays of Kellerman's mystery novels since her first book, *The Ritual Bath* (1986). Both in their second marriage, Decker converted to Orthodox Judaism to marry Rina, and constantly struggles to mesh the strict religious rules with his secular lifestyle as a cop.

The religious extremism issue is also addressed by Reuben Asnikov, the expert psychologist, who points out to Decker that many of the strict religious beliefs in mainstream society can be traced to cult-like sects: Most of your religious variants started as open cults, founded on isms by a charismatic leader who held a vision. Some examples: Christian Science developed by Mary Baker Eddy . . . Mormonism with Brigham Young's sighting of the angel, Maroni, Jewish Chasidism with the Ba'al Shem Tov. Today, many of these cults have been integrated into standard American religious practices. But way back when, these leaders were ridiculed and ostracized.

Kellerman thus poses an unspoken question—what makes today's cults any different from orthodox religions? Especially a cult based in hard science? for Kellerman, the answer lies in her first social theme—the complete psychological and physical control over cult members. As Asnikov explains, "Ah, but there's a big difference. In these open cults . . . they are free to come and go. No one is forcing them to stay." In the Order, however, the members are "not permitted access to the outside world"; its members are "captives."



Techniques

In this mystery novel, much of the mystery is removed by the fact that Kellerman relies so heavily on the real-life facts of the Heaven's Gate, Waco and Jonestown tragedies. In addition, Kellerman reveals the murderer halfway through the novel, and the last half turns into more of a thriller as Decker attempts to save the Order's children from guru Bob. However, as in any good mystery, Kellerman uses several of the characters as decoys in the first half of the novel. Red herrings are thrown out for Europa, Asnikov, and even gurus Venus, Nova and Pluto who, while no saints, all serve to deflect attention from guru Bob, the true villain.

Kellerman also plays with the technique of giving most of the characters two different names, and switching between the names throughout the novel. All members of the Order have an assumed name (and even Bob is using a fake name). Decker and his associates are often referred to by either their first or last names. At the Decker household, Rina and her boys flip back and forth from using their Hebrew names (Rema, Yonkeleh and Shmuel) to their more conventional names. The result is confusing at times, but perhaps is another way of expressing Kellerman's theme of relativity.

While the names may be different to different people, the characters themselves do not change.

Although the main plot may be predictable given its similarities to real-life headlines, what makes this novel work is Kellerman's ability to focus on personal relationships and a conflict of values. The secondary story of Decker's struggles at home is the true strength of *Jupiter's Bones*, and gives it a firm grounding in what otherwise might seem a surreal story line. A master at this technique is Ray Bradbury.

While many of his short stories and novels deal with supernatural or unreal events, what makes his writing compelling are the very real human relationships and emotions around which the stories revolve.

While Kellerman does not approach Bradbury's mastery of this technique, it is nonetheless effective in making *Jupiter's Bones* a story to which, at least in part, most readers can relate.



Themes

Freedom is thus Kellerman's dividing line between acceptable religious extremism and harmful cult behavior. As old as Adam and Eve, the theme of free will pops up throughout *Jupiter's Bones*. In the eyes of guru Bob, free will is the ultimate corrupter. Bob tells Decker that the Order is a "modern-day Eden"—as it existed prior to the fall—a "perfect world" with absolute rights and wrongs. Bob then warns Decker how freedom has ruined the outside world.

"Out there . . . it's strictly Einstein where everything's relative. Or Max Planck and quantum mechanics where things are random and unpredictable." Thus, the children of the Order are given no free will.

They follow the absolute rules of the Order, and every aspect of their lives is controlled by the Order's gurus. This theme is exemplified in Vega, the teenage girl who has lived her whole life in the Order. In the climactic escape scene, Vega is forced to make a choice between staying with the Order or saving her classmates. She chooses the latter. As Marge, one of Decker's detectives, later reflects: "[W]hen given her first brush with free will, Vega had opted for Marge over the Order. Because she instinctively knew what was really right."

Almost immediately, however, Decker casts doubt on Marge's idea of a natural or instinctive law of right and wrong. In Decker's view, Vega's freedom presents a whole new set of challenges: Decker regarded her young, wet face. . . .

The irony of it all—this morally superior creature coming from a cult steeped in immorality, and run by venal, murderous leaders. She had now been emancipated from the menaces of these maniacs. Would freedom and choice now corrupt her pure spirit?

Decker's doubts stem from experience.

On the home front, he allows his teenage sons—both of whom are Orthodox Jews—a large degree of freedom. The result is that both face tough problems, and one even finds himself dabbling in pornography and drugs. Yet Decker adheres to the principle that free will is best. For Samuel, who wants to attend school in a dangerous area of Israel to participate in guard duty, Decker states his objections but ultimately tells Samuel, "[i]t's your decision." Similarly, when Decker walks in on the problem child, Jacob, doing more than studying with his girlfriend, Jacob asks not to tell his mother. "Well, Jacob, that's up to you. If you prove yourself trustworthy, why should I distress your mother?" For Kellerman, it is this freedom of choice that separates parental love from harmful parental control. And, on another level, that separates a religion from a cult.

Another theme in *Jupiter's Bones* is sexual misconduct. As discussed, Kellerman uses this theme to espouse her views on the destructive nature of cults such as the Order.



Sexual misconduct is also a theme in the homefront story. When Decker and Jacob finally sit down to discuss Jacob's caught-in-the-act incident, Jacob reveals that he is obsessed with sex all the time, and feels "wired" for it. He also admits to having a problem with pornography. A few chapters later, Jacob confides in Decker that, about six years earlier, he was molested by a male teacher. There is hope for Jacob, however, because his situation—having a caring parent who ultimately gives his son free will—lies in stark contrast to that of the children of the Order.

Physics and hard science also play a key role in *Jupiter's Bones*. Because Father Jupiter was a prominent astrophysicist in his earlier life, his philosophy for the Order is steeped in physics principles. At several points in the novel, Kellerman launches into fairly detailed physics lectures from members of the Order and from Jupiter's daughter, using the physics concepts as various metaphors. The most prominent is the theory of relativity, which Kellerman uses to describe the complexity of modern society. This is contrasted with Newtonian physics, which, like the Order, provides a workable set of rules, but breaks down under extreme conditions. Another physics metaphor is Ganz/Jupiter's idea of traveling to an alternate universe through a black hole. As explained by guru Venus, [according to Jupiter, there are other universes that parallel our own. You get to them through the black holes. Unfortunately, once you enter the event horizon, you can't come back. . . . So no one can ever come back and tell us about the experience.

Kellerman uses this as a metaphor for the Order's members escaping to the outside world. In fact, in the tense escape scene, the Order's members literally crawl through a black hole, a small underground tunnel, with no idea what lies on the other side.

And, once they do escape, there certainly is no going back.

Finally, Kellerman repeatedly emphasizes the importance of family. Kellerman's strength has always been her ability to combine a compelling and realistic family struggle with a mystery, and *Jupiter's Bones* is no exception. Indeed, because of the importance of family—of caring for children lest they become victims of a cult such as the Order—Kellerman focuses even more in this novel on dealing with the problems of having teenage children.

Key Questions

The psychology behind cults, particularly suicide cults that have made the headlines, has long fascinated the public. Kellerman attempts to explain the mentality behind such cults, and their tension with "normal" society. As with many concepts in *Jupiter's Bones*, however, the explanation turns out to be in relative terms, with no absolute good or evil, no absolute answers.

1. In reflecting on her father, Europa states that "I think the Order made Dad better. Better meaning more sane or more . . . conventional. The sect gave him a title, gave him a forum for his lunatic ideas, gave him respect, gave him a home and a woman." Could one support the argument that the older members of the Order, or at least some of them, were better off inside the Order rather than in a society that rejected them? What about the children in the Order?

2. Kellerman implies that the difference between a socially-accepted religious sect and a harmful religious cult is the "freedom" of the religion's followers.

Is this true? Why or why not?

3. The facts for *Jupiter's Bones* are taken almost verbatim from familiar, real-life news stories. How does this help or hurt the story?

4. Decker gives Rina's teenage sons a lot of freedom—he allows Samuel to go to a school in a dangerous area of Israel, against Decker's judgment, and Jacob exercises his freedom by using drugs and pornography. Do you agree with Decker's decision? Why or why not?

5. America is currently at "war" with an extreme religious sect, the Taliban. How does the Taliban compare to the religious sects and cults examined in *Jupiter's Bones*? How does it rank in Kellerman's litmus test of allowing its members to have freedom?

6. In *Jupiter's Bones*, Kellerman uses the effective technique of family struggles and conflicts of values to make the story compelling, but keeps this storyline completely separate from the main plot of the Order. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using two wholly separate storylines in this manner?

7. Kellerman also uses the technique of giving most characters two names, and flipping back and forth between each name, presumably to illustrate her theme of relativity. Is this effective? What else might Kellerman be trying to accomplish with this technique?

8. While the members of the Order at times seem fantastical, Decker and the members of his family are quite the opposite. How does Kellerman make Decker and his family so realistic, so compelling?

Literary Precedents

Jupiter's Bones finds its place among the many popular fiction mystery novels currently stacked on the grocery-store checkout racks. While not a groundbreaking literary work by any means, the novel is entertaining, and does address the public's fascination with real-life cult tragedies. The novel also uses the same strong characters from Kellerman's previous stories, a popular mystery tradition going back to Agatha Christie (Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes and Watson).

Other contemporary authors of a similar ilk include Patricia Cornwall, Sue Grafton and Anne Perry, each of whom also has created memorable characters who reign in a series of novels. Patricia Cornwall writes about Kay Scarpetta, a woman who is the chief medical examiner of the Commonwealth of Virginia, which, interestingly, is a role Cornwall almost played in real life.

Cornwall worked as a police officer, and also landed a position for many years in the medical examiner's office. Sue Grafton writes a series that centers around California investigator Kinsey Millhone. She is 32, twice divorced, no kids, an ex-cop who works strictly alone. The books in the series are all titled after the English alphabet: the first novel featuring Millhone was *A is for Alibi* (1982); the latest in the series is *P is for Peril* (2001). Anne Perry's mystery novels are set in Victorian England, and follow the investigations of the clever and strong Charlotte Pitt, and her superintendent policeman husband Thomas. Perry has written nineteen novels in this series; the latest is *Half Moon Street* (2000).

Related Titles

As noted, *Jupiter's Bones* is Faye Kellerman's eleventh Peter Decker-Rina Lazarus mystery. Kellerman introduced the couple fifteen years ago, and has since published twelve novels with the characters. The most recent is *The Forgotten* (2001), which explores Decker's relationship with Jacob while investigating a series of murders with a direct connection to Jacob.

The Ritual Bath (1986), the first novel in the series, introduces Decker as he investigates a rape case in an isolated Orthodox Jewish community. Rina appears as the widow who discovers the victim, befriends Decker, and helps him investigate in the suspicious community. In the process, the two characters fall in love and marry. As in *Jupiter's Bones*, the novels in the series combine the couple's everyday problems with a criminal mystery. After *The Ritual Bath*, the novels in order are: *Sacred and Profane* (1987), *Milk and Honey* (1990), *Day of Atonement* (1991), *False Prophet* (1992), *Grievous Sin* (1993), *Sanctuary* (1994), *Justice* (1995), *Prayers for the Dead* (1996), *Serpent's Tooth* (1997), *Jupiter's Bones* (1999) and *Stalker* (2000).

Kellerman is also the author of *Moon Music* (1998), a contemporary thriller set in Las Vegas, and *The Quality of Mercy* (1989), a historical novel of Elizabethan England.

Kellerman's husband Jonathan is a bestselling author as well.



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