

Letters from Atlantis Short Guide

Letters from Atlantis by Robert Silverberg

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Overview

Letters from Atlantis is a fantasy tale about a civilization that might have flourished about twenty thousand years ago. Scientists have figured out a way to send people's conscious minds into the past, where they lodge in the minds of their ancient hosts. The main character is Roy Colton, who has been on several such time travels. Somewhere in a laboratory of the future his body lies sleeping, while his mind lives inside the mind of Ramifon Sigiliterimor Septagimot Stolifax Blayl (which translates as Beloved of the Gods and Light of the Universe), heir to the throne of Athilan, better known today as Atlantis; the prince is generally known as Ram. Through him, Roy gets a look at empires that existed in the remote past of human history, and Roy learns some of the secrets of a culture that historians had thought was only a figment of Plato's imagination.

In one of his writings, the Greek philosopher Plato mentions Atlantis, a great civilization that may have existed nine thousand years before his time. In Plato's account of Atlantis, it was destroyed by a terrible cataclysm that sank it beneath the sea. Roy discovers that Plato had some of the details right; for instance, the city of Atlantis was circular, just as Plato says. On the other hand, Atlantis—Athilan—existed much further in the past than Plato suggests. Using Plato's probably fictional account of Atlantis as its basis, Silverberg creates a wondrous and bizarre culture, fleshing it out with details of politics and religion, as well as descriptions of the Athilantans themselves.

About the Author

Robert Silverberg was born on January 15, 1935, in New York City to Michael Silverberg, an accountant, and Helen (nee Baim) Silverberg. Robert began writing for publication while still in his teens. When he graduated with a B.A. from Columbia University in 1956, he married Barbara H. Brown, an engineer, and began a full-time writing career. He was an incredibly prolific writer whose production included short stories, novels, and nonfiction books, produced sometimes at a rate over two million words per year.

During the early years of his career he was regarded a competent but not necessarily good writer.

In the mid-1960s came a shift in his output. His novels and stories became more detailed; the issues he encountered in his nonfiction research became significant elements in his fiction. By the early 1970s some critics regarded Silverberg as an accomplished writer.

Although there have been significant pauses in Silverberg's production, including a four-year hiatus in the 1970s, his work has continued to draw significant critical attention, and he is generally regarded as one of the most sophisticated writers of science fiction and fantasy, in particular, although his nonfiction has considerable merit, too.

He separated from his wife in 1976, and they divorced in 1986. In the late 1970s he needed to earn money to buy his wife her own house; this, he says, pushed him back into writing after his long break, with *Lord Valentine's Castle* being the result. He received \$127,500 for the book, which became the foundation for a series of novels and short stories. In 1987, Silverberg married Karen L. Haber. Critics have noted that Silverberg's fiction of the 1980s and 1990s has been marked by brilliant descriptive prose; Silverberg has made strange, alien places come alive. This is one of the most notable traits in *Letters from Atlantis*. His work of these decades has also seen a fusion in his work of fantasy and science fiction, a trend found in much of the fantastic fiction of the last decade, and shown to good effect in *Letters from Atlantis*, in which the science fiction ideas related to time travel and space travel are merged into an account of a mythical, fantastic land in which each successive king merges his personality with all those who have gone before him. In this land, magical potions can induce time-traveling vision of the past and future.

Silverberg has won numerous awards for his writing. Hugo Awards, which are determined by science fiction fans, are given out annually by the World Science Fiction Convention. Silverberg won the 1956 Hugo Award for "best new author." He won it for the best novella in 1969 for "Night-wings" and in 1987 for "Gilgamesh in the Outback." He won it for the best novelette in 1990 for "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another." In 1970, he was the guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention. Nebula Awards are given out annually by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Silverberg won the Nebula Award for best short story in 1970 for "Passengers" and in 1972 for



"Good News from the Vatican." He won the Nebula Award for best novella in 1975 for "Born with the Dead" and in 1986 for "Good News from the Vatican." He won the Nebula Award for best novel in 1972 for A Time of Changes. In 1962, he won the New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival Award for Lost Cities and Vanished Civilizations; he won the same award again in 1967 for The Auk, the Dodo, and the Oryx: Vanished and Vanishing Creatures. In 1960, Lost Race of Mars was named a best book for children by the New York Times.



Characters

The principal characters of *Letters from Atlantis* are Roy and Ram. Roy is the main character, a scientific researcher who has had his mind sent into the distant past in order to view Atlantis through the eyes of a member of the Athilan royal family. He tells the story through a series of letters to Lora, another time traveler living in the mind of a provincial governor far to the northeast of the Athilan home island. Consequently, his values and emotions dominate the narrative; everything is shaped by what he thinks is worth telling.

Ram is the heir to the throne of Athilan. He is in his late teens and has already gone through two important rituals in which he begins the bonding with his father that will someday result in his being merged with the personalities of all the kings who have gone before. The kings apparently have an unbroken line of succession going back more than a thousand years. Ram is short, olive skinned, and dark haired, with bushy eyebrows. Roy thinks Ram and the Athilantans may be related to the Mediterranean peoples of the modern world. The point of view of the narrative of *Letters from Atlantis* is already narrowed by it being presented by the first person account of Roy; Ram further narrows the point of view because Roy can see nothing but what Ram sees and know nothing but what Ram knows. Thus the reader gets a limited picture of Athilan, and as a consequence, the novel's themes are well focused.

Setting

The events of the novel take place in Europe and on an Atlantic island during an ice age nearly twenty thousand years ago. At first, Roy finds himself and his host Ram in a major trading post on the coast of Europe. Tall, fair stone-age people come to the post to pay homage to Ram, who has been on the continent for more than a year. The Athilantans have built an elaborate network of roads linking trading posts from the southern coast well into what would be Russia today. Roy finds more or less what he expected to find; the buildings are primitive structures with oil lamps and people are dressed in animal skins.

He is surprised when Ram boards the Athilantan ship that will take him home. The ship has electric lights and an unexpected form of propulsion—steam, Roy guesses. This level of technological sophistication is startling, and Roy remarks with amazement that the Athilantans have a technology roughly equivalent to that of the nineteenth century.

Once the ship arrives at the large island that is the home of the Athilantans, Roy is even more amazed. The capital city is more spectacular than any city in the modern world, with wide, long, majestic boulevards and buildings made of finely cut and placed blocks of marble, much of it imported from the regions of Greece and Italy. When the sun reaches midday, the city shines with the reflected sunlight.

Roy shares in Ram's participation in religious rituals, as well as in his assisting his father, the Grand Darionis (King) of Athilan, in running the extensive empire. Ram lives in the royal palace, in spectacularly opulent rooms.

From there, he ventures to temples and once into the Labyrinth, a honeycomb of caves in the dormant volcano that will someday come to life again, exploding and destroying the island of Athilan. The rituals are long and boring. Entertainment sometimes consists of storytellers chanting epics in a tongue so ancient that Ram cannot understand most of it. Further, the Athilantans are racists. They refer to the Europeans as "dirt people," by which they mean that the stone-age Europeans are inferior. When he first returns home, Ram must undergo an elaborate cleansing of the contamination his association with the dirt people must have caused. The Athilantans regard all other peoples as inferior to themselves.

In addition, they practice slavery; they are waited on by enslaved dirt people and see nothing wrong with enslaving those inferior to themselves. These practices make Roy uneasy.



Social Concerns

Letters from Atlantis is a fantasy tale about a civilization that might have flourished about twenty thousand years ago. Some time in our own civilization's future, scientists have figured out a way to send people's conscious minds into the past. These minds lodge in the minds of hosts, people who lived in the past. The main character is Roy Colton, who has been on several such trips into the past. Somewhere in a laboratory of the future his body lies sleeping, while his mind lives inside the mind of Ramifon Sigiliterimor Septagimot Stolifax Blayl (which translates as Beloved of the Gods and Light of the Universe), heir to the throne of Athilan, better known today as Atlantis; the prince is generally known as Ram. Through him, Roy gets a look at a worldwide empire that existed in the remote past of human history, and Roy learns some of the secrets of a culture that historians had thought was only a figment of Plato's imagination.

In one of his writings, Plato mentions Atlantis, a great civilization that may have existed nine thousand years before his time. In Plato's account of Atlantis, it was destroyed by a terrible cataclysm that sank it beneath the sea.

Roy discovers that Plato had some of the details right; for instance, the city of Atlantis was circular, just as Plato says. On the other hand, Atlantis — Athilan — existed much further in the past than Plato suggests. Using Plato's probably fictional account of Atlantis as its basis, Silverberg creates a wondrous and bizarre culture, fleshing it out with details of politics and religion, as well as descriptions of the Athilantans themselves.

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Once there, Roy shares in Ram's participation in religious rituals, as well as in his assisting his father, the Grand Darionis (King) of Athilan, in running the extensive empire. Ram lives in the royal palace, in spectacularly opulent rooms. From there, Ram ventures to temples and once into the Labyrinth, a honeycomb of caves in the dormant volcano that will someday come to life again, exploding and destroying the island of Athilan. Not all is wonderful and exciting. The rituals are long and boring. Entertainment sometimes consists of storytellers chanting epics in a tongue so ancient that Ram cannot understand most of it.

Further, the Athilantans are racists.

They refer to the Europeans as "dirt people," by which they mean that the stone age Europeans are dirt. When he first returns home, Ram must undergo an elaborate cleansing of the contamination his association with the dirt people must have caused. The Athilantans regard all other peoples as inferior to themselves. In addition, they practice slavery; they are waited on by enslaved dirt people and see nothing wrong with enslaving those inferior to themselves.

The issue of slavery is pointedly discussed by Roy in his letters. He is very uncomfortable with the Athilantans' attitudes toward other peoples. He notes that many ancient civilizations practiced slavery without much thought to its morality. This thought of his is not entirely accurate; people like Aristotle wrote defenses of slavery because there were those who thought slavery wrong. This small detail aside, the most bothersome aspect of the depiction of slavery in *Letters from Atlantis* is likely to be its justification late in the novel. Roy learns that the Athilantans are from a planet that orbits a distant star. Thus, he notes, human beings native to earth may very well seem to be an inferior species to aliens advanced enough to have star ships. This makes for muddy waters that are not well cleared up by Silverberg. The native peoples of earth are intelligent enough to be worth trading with, and they are intelligent enough to serve their masters in the capital city; their treatment seems more like the treatment of colonial peoples in recent world history. The simple fact that one has superior technology does not justify one's exploitation of people whose technology is inferior; the fact that Ram has a superior understanding of how the universe works does not justify Athilan's exploitation of people who are less knowledgeable. The nature of Athilan slavery could generate vigorous debates among readers.



Social Sensitivity

That Ram accepts the terrible end of Athilan as he does, first in great depression evolving into serenity, is likely to bother some people. The notion that a leader would know that someday his people will be wiped out in a cataclysm and yet will do nothing to save them is hard to accept. Silverberg is trying to show a culture that seems alien to modern readers, and passivity in the face of doom when much could be done to save people is bizarre enough to be alien. On the other hand, the Ancient Greeks would have recognized most of Ram's sentiments. Striving to better oneself is Ram's principal credo, even in the face of death. Knowing that life must end should not stop individual peoples or entire cultures from persevering and improving their lot.

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It is possible to envision some academic in search of a topic for an article latching onto Roy's feelings for Ram and declare that theirs is a homosexual relationship. After all, Roy may be said to have "penetrated" Ram, and Roy does declare that he feels closer to Ram than he has ever felt to anyone else.

But, if there is one issue that *Letters from Atlantis* does not discuss, it is sex.

All those months in Ram's mind, with Roy complaining about having to spy on Ram's private, intimate moments, and Roy never once discusses Ram having sex with anyone. It is an issue left out of the book. Nowhere does Roy or Ram express sexual interest in the other. They share as friends would share.

Techniques

Letters from Atlantis is told in letters written by Roy to Lora, another time traveler living in the mind of a provincial governor in what today would be Russia. He takes over Ram's mind while Ram is sleeping and writes letters in English which are sent in a pouch to Lora's host. The letters take about two months to travel from the island to Lora, which means Roy is often writing letters without having as yet had replies to earlier letters. This complicated way of presenting the narrative works well because Silverberg is ever aware of the needs of his reader, consistently providing details that clarify what is going on.

Literary critics have long admired Silverberg's writing skill, making it no surprise that Letters from Atlantis would have exceptional depth of thought.

Silverberg conveys a sense of the alienness of the Athilantans while keeping them human enough that readers can understand some of their motivations and beliefs. Ram's strong will, extraordinary closeness to his father, and bizarre fatalism are both manifestations of a being who is not quite human; his quickness to anger, his ability to be happy or sad humanize him. When Roy describes Ram's vision of the end of Athilan, Silverberg wrestles with classic subjects — in the hands of most other writers they would be mere clichés: He discusses life, death, and why people continue to work to better their lives in the face of the inevitable end.

The Ancient Greeks are mentioned several times in Letters from Atlantis, and Silverberg takes an Ancient-Greeklime approach to these matters. About knowing of impending death, Ram says, "And yet you go about your daily lives, doing your work and making plans for the future and seeking always to better yourselves, even though you know that in twenty or thirty or fifty years you will certainly be dead? You don't simply give up and lie down, the moment you discover that death is inevitable, and abandon all striving right at that point?" These are weighty matters for any novel; Silverberg handles them well, inviting mature thought on these universal concerns.



Themes

The theme of discovery dominates the narrative. Roy has entered Ram's mind with specific purpose of discovering what Athilan was really like. A member of the royal family was chosen for him because such a person might have more access to the details of running the Athilan empire than an ordinary person would. Through the eyes of Ram and the observation of Roy, the theme of discovery is enriched by a logical progression of images, each building upon the other, making each successive wonder seem plausible.

When Roy first enters Ram's mind, Ram is in a trading post in Europe. The buildings are more elaborate than one would expect in the Stone Age, but Roy expects the Athilantans to be somewhat more advanced than other Stone Age peoples; that the masters of a vast primeval empire might have bronze age or even iron age technology seems reasonable. Then Ram boards a ship which literally carries him and Roy to the Athilan capital, but also symbolically carries Roy into a new realm of discovery. The ship itself is made of metal, perhaps iron. It has electricity and has an engine of some sort to propel it through the water. These new revelations about Athilan technology build on the earlier ones; the Athilantans evidently are more advanced than they cared to show in the trading post.

Ram, carrying Roy, reaches the great capital city. The notions that the Athilantans have electricity and maybe even steel prepare for the revelations of a city of imported marble with vast avenues and amazing opulence. All of these successive revelations prepare for the biggest one: The Athilantans have technology twenty thousand years ahead of its time because they were space farers who had traveled from a distant planet. In this last revelation, all the hints laid out from the beginning of the book are fulfilled, making for a well-constructed, unified novel.

Religion is another significant theme in Letters from Atlantis. The religious practices of the Athilantans seem to Roy to be too primitive for a technologically advanced culture. The Athilantans slaughter animals at almost every religious rite, with Ram often doing the killing himself by slitting the animal's throat. In this, Roy as modern man is bringing his own preconceptions of what a civilized society should be like to a culture very different from his own. He will not be fully able to understand Athilan culture until he can shake off his notions of what the Athilan religion ought to be like. Eventually, he gains respect for some Athilan practices. In his pilgrimage to the heart of the volcano, Ram nearly succeeds in tossing Roy out of his mind, in spite of Roy's own considerably advanced powers to control Ram's mind. Later, in another religious rite, Ram drinks potions and eventually has what Roy first fears are hallucinations, but what turn out to be images picked up by Ram as his mind travels back and forth through time. Rituals such as the one in which Ram and his father burn their clothes and their crowns are symbols of the past; their home planet was destroyed in a nova, with its people being burned away. Their religion preserves the knowledge of the origins of the Athilantans and honors those who were left on their original world to die.



By gaining some understanding of the Athilantans' religion Roy gains more respect for them, and he accepts that their recorded history of space travel and colonizing earth is true.

The fruition of the theme of religion comes when Roy pleads with Ram to save the Athilantans. Having overcome his revulsion at some Athilan religious practices, he has swung over to great admiration for them. Ram is levelheaded, honest, physically powerful, and charismatic, all qualities that attract Roy. Roy's developing plans to help the Athilantans is plausible because of his growing to admire Ram.

Ram's reaction to Roy's ideas is also well established by the way the theme of religion is developed in the novel.

Religion is an important everyday aspect of Athilan life. Scarcely a day goes by that Ram does not have to participate in one ritual or another. An important part of Athilan beliefs is fatalism. Rather than saving everyone on their home planet Romany Star, they chose to save a relatively small number who rode their spaceships away as their planet began to burn.

"The gods have decreed that Athilan one day must perish, just as they declared the death of Romany Star," Ram explains. He sees the destruction of Athilan as just another purging: "New greatness flowers out of lost greatness." Thus, from his point of view, destruction is sometimes necessary for something else to rise.

That Ram accepts the terrible end of Athilan as he does, first in great depression, which evolves into serenity is likely to bother some people. The notion that a leader would know that someday his people will be wiped out by a cataclism and yet will do nothing to save them can be hard to accept.

Silverberg is trying to show a culture that would seem alien to modern readers, and passivity in the face of doom when much could be done to save people seems bizarre enough to be alien. On the other hand, the Ancient Greeks would have recognized most of Ram's sentiments. His principal credo is striving to better oneself, even in the face of death. Knowing that life must end should not stop individual peoples or entire cultures from persevering and improving their lot.

Another significant theme is loneliness. As Roy points out, being disembodied in someone else's head is to be very lonely. Time travelers are sent in pairs to the same era so that they will feel less lonely because they know a partner is out there, too. Roy and Lora are sent together because of their strong emotional bond. At first, this is enough for Roy, who has traveled through time before and knows what to expect. But as time passes he feels increasingly isolated. He has wonders to tell about and no one he can talk to; he has to be content with taking over Ram's body periodically and writing letters in English to Lora. Had Ram not discovered him, Roy might have made it to the time of his leaving without breaking any rules. But Ram does eventually figure out that he has a visitor in his head; it is either a demon or a wizard, he reasons. Having been found out, Roy is overcome by the loneliness he feels. People need other people to talk



to, to share with. Having poked around Ram's mind for months, Roy declares to Lora that he has never felt so close to anyone before. When Ram speaks to him, Roy feels compelled to reply. The theme of loneliness has done its work, making it seem plausible that Roy would defy his training and speak to his host. Without this, the novel would be less satisfying; Roy would not be able to ask and have answered basic questions about the Athilantans and their origins.



Topics for Discussion

1. How does knowing that the Athilantans are from another planet affect your view of their practicing slavery?
2. What are the Athilantans' attitudes toward their subject peoples?
3. What traits make Ram alien? 4. Roy can only take his memories back with him when he returns home.

What are the most important aspects of the Athilan culture for him to remember?

5. If you were studying the Athilan civilization, what are the three questions about it that you would most want answers?

6. Letters from Atlantis is mostly description without much action. Did it hold your interest anyway? Why or why not?

7. Why does Roy write to Lora? 8. What makes Roy violate the rules and communicate directly with Ram?

9. Is it plausible that a space-faring culture would have a religion that includes frequent animal sacrifices?

10. Why do the rulers of Athilan not move their people when they know that their island will someday explode, killing nearly everyone? What would you do in their place?

11. Letters from Atlantis is the beginning of what its publishers hope will become a series of novels for young adults by famous authors. Is Letters from Atlantis a good beginning for such a series? Why?

12. Do you think that the dirt people would so hate the Athilantans that they would destroy everything associated with them, as Roy suggests?

13. Why would the Athilantans make their European outposts so primitive compared to their city on their island?

Would they not want the convenience and comfort of electric lighting and other advanced technologies?

14. Is what Roy does an immoral invasion of privacy? He says he feels unclean, like a peeping Tom.

15. When did you guess the Athilantans were aliens? Was it too easy?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a story about what happens to the Athilantans on the ships that try to flee from the exploding Athilan volcano. You might want to use Silverberg's plot device of a mind of a time traveler entering the mind of a fleeing Athilan to see what happens.
2. Silverberg uses an unusual point of view for telling his story. Explain how this point of view affects what is told in the novel; Roy, after all can only know what Ram knows. Quote passages from the book as examples of what you mean.
3. Write a story from Lora's point of view, with her writing letters back to Roy. How would she react to what he says?. What interesting details of her own experience would she tell him about?
4. Find Plato's discussion of Atlantis.

What point does he want to make with his story? Is it a valid point?

5. Find an example of a real-life civilization that was destroyed by a cataclysm and tell about what happened.

Be sure to draw on history books and scientific research for your information.

6. Have other books depicted spacefaring aliens landing on Earth in the ancient past and colonizing it? Is this too old an idea, so old that it is worn out by the time Silverberg uses it in *Letters from Atlantis*? Is it just too obvious? How have other books handled the idea?
7. If Silverberg's idea for time travel were possible, what are some of the problems time travelers could expect?

How might they deal with those problems?

8. Are there any other cultures in which religious rituals are a part of daily life? Do they share anything in common with Athilan culture?



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Edited by Walton Beacham, et al.

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Detroit: Gale, 1978: 206-208. Almost entirely a listing of Silverberg's publications, with little information about his life.

Elkins, Charles, ed. *Robert Silverberg's Many Trapdoors*. New York: Greenwood, 1991. A gathering of essays by scholars for scholars.

Platt, Charles. "Robert Silverberg." In *Dream Makers: The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction*. New York: Berkley Books, 1980: 261-268. Platt describes Silverberg and presents an interview with him. Silverberg remarks, "I like wonders, I like a certain amount of excitement, but, moderation, moderation even in excess."

Silverberg, Robert. "Robert Silverberg."

In *Third Book of Junior Authors*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1972: 265-266.

This is a short autobiographical sketch by Silverberg. He says, "Writer is what I set out to be, writer is what I very quickly became, with (I now see) amazingly little difficulty along the way."

Related Titles

Writings for young adults were a significant part of Silverberg's production in the 1960s, but faded away for a time while Silverberg concentrated on complex adult themes. In the 1980s he returned to writing books for young adults, this time incorporating complex adult themes into his books for younger readers. *Letters from Atlantis* and his recent collaboration with Isaac Asimov show this to good effect; *Letters from Atlantis* invites thoughtfulness even as it excites the imagination with descriptions of a marvelous civilization.

Those looking for the roots of Silverberg's ideas in *Letters from Atlantis* may find them in his nonfiction. *Lost Cities and Vanished Civilizations* (1962), *Empires in the Dust: Ancient Civilizations Brought to Light* (1963), *The Man Who Found Nineveh: The Story of Austen Henry Layard* (1964), *Frontiers in Archaeology* (1966), *The Morning of Mankind: Prehistoric Man in Europe* (1967), *Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth* (1968), *Wonders of Ancient Chinese Science* (1969), *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* (1970), and *Before the Sphinx: Early Egypt* (1971) display his interest in the mysteries of the past and a delight in discovering ancient cultures.



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Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

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