

Lord of the Two Lands Short Guide

Lord of the Two Lands by Judith Tarr

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Characters

There is a long-standing fantasy tradition that heroes should be people of high estate. Tarr has used this pattern in *Lord of the Two Lands*, insofar as the two main characters are Alexander and Meriamon. While Meriamon has a royal heritage and mission, she joins the Macedonian camp alone. Her experiences there are gritty and down to earth. She does not mind.

She even frets when Alexander assigns Ptolemy's brother as her guard; she prefers to spend her free time alone, observing and pondering. Free time is not plentiful for her, though, once her skills at healing become known.

As an Egyptian and a woman, Meriamon has certain knowledge and entrees that Alexander lacks. He seeks her out as a confidante and occasional emissary, and they become friends. All the time she is traveling with the army, she feels the distance from her native Egypt keenly. When she finally gets back and sees her mission completed with Alexander's investiture, everything has changed. It is still her land, but Alexander has become her king, and her future plans must take both into account.

Meriamon is herself an appealing character, but in many ways she serves as a foil to Alexander. He takes over the book just as he took over the civilized world in his own time. The author has painted a portrait of the young conqueror that is unforgettable: mercurial, inquisitive, brilliant, a reliable and generous commander in his own camp. He is also determined not to be crossed by petty kings that block his progress. If they surrender peaceably their people suffer not at all. If they resist, he will try any means available — and invent new ways — to subdue them, as he does in the siege of Tyre.

The Alexander of this book truly feels he has a sacred mission. Not just to conquer the known world; not just to bring Greek civilization and reason to alien climes, although these drives are part of it. He is also called to throw off the power of Persia, which has brought much misery to the surrounding lands.

Meriamon's and Alexander's motives can be described in ordinary enough political and personal terms. But there is another level on which they operate, that of prophecy and the supernatural.

This carries the destiny theme; but it haunts them beyond simple questions about what will happen in the future.

Ultimately both characters are concerned with the questions: "Who am I?" and "What does my life mean?"

These take them into the Egyptian land of the dead, the trackless desert reaches, where they finally get an answer from the god.



It is entirely possible to read this novel with a skeptical mind, assuming its characters merely believed the mystical events had happened. But it is more fruitful to accept them at least as a resonance of character, if not an actual way of knowing otherwise unknowable aspects of existence.

The fact that two characters so dominate the book does not mean its others are nonentities. Many of them, including historical figures like Hephastion and Ptolemy, are well drawn even if secondary in the story. Nicolaos, the guard with whom Meriamon ultimately falls in love, is an especially complex character who combines dogged determination and humor in a unique way.



Social Concerns

Lord of the Two Lands is a historical novel lightly touched with fantasy elements. It follows Alexander the Great's campaigns for a period of about a year and a half, from the battle of Issus until he left Egypt to go further east and take on the remnants of the Persian empire. Like most of Tarr's historical novels, it reflects the author's fascination with the people and events of history, which come vividly alive in the book. Its aim is more to entertain and delight than to present a new interpretation. Still, certain views come through clearly in this imaginative novel.

Alexander's mode of leadership is the very opposite of that of the oriental monarchs whom he deposes. They are remote, authoritarian, indolent, and tradition-bound. Alexander is full of energy; he speaks to every man in his army almost as an equal; he loves working out new solutions to military and technical problems. These traits work for him because he is both competent and supremely confident. His approach parallels modern management theory; Alexander may well have been its first practitioner. He is not a modern man, but in this book he is immediately understandable — and likable. Alexander's conquests are noted for spreading Greek culture and ideals across the Mediterranean and beyond. This retelling makes clear how totally these changed the world.

The traditions of Egypt, a land ancient even then, are also shown to have great depth and some near-contemporary values. Meriamon, the heroine of the book, travels alone on a mission to Alexander and his army. This is an age when women of most cultures, including the Greek, spent their lives within the walls of the household or harem, but Meriamon expects that if she marries, it will be a partnership, rather than an arrangement to cement political ties or produce heirs. She is a royal princess by lineage. A Persian satrap now holds the throne in Egypt, so she has served as a singer in the temple at Thebes, a respected but not elevated vocation.

Further, the Egyptian obsession with death is shown as actually an obsession with life. Egypt is a land of bright colors and warm sunlight. Meriamon's shadow, a mystical half-visible entity in the form of the jackal god Anubis — a god associated with the afterlife — appears as her comrade and protector rather than a fearful figure.

Techniques

Meriamon is the point-of-view character for most of the book, although the focus diverges occasionally to show an event going on in Alexander's or Nicolaos' purview. Some of the battle scenes are told almost as they would be in a history book. There are some stunning descriptions of desert travel and of the variegated, sometimes stark landscape of the ancient Near East. In general Tarr is more interested in the historical events and in character interaction than in exploring cultures.

The book's structure is worth noting.

It opens with Nectanebo's spell, then shifts to Meriamon's adventures with the army many years later. At the very end, the journey through the desert, the sandstorm, and the miraculous rain lead to Alexander's transfiguring visit to the oracle. The focus thus goes full circle, from magic to clamorous, mundane events, and then back to magic and mystery at the end.



Themes

While the above features may seem to modernize the story, its strongest theme is the ancient one of destiny.

Alexander's mother was said to have given him his unique sense of destiny; she told him he was the son of a god.

In this novel the tale goes back even further. Nectanebo, the last native Egyptian pharaoh (and Meriamon's father) is shown in the prologue. He is scrying the scene of Alexander's conception, enlisting the aid of his god Amon. The young lord who will be born can ultimately take back the Egyptian throne from the Persians, which Nectanebo is unable to do. In a scene near the book's end, Alexander goes to the oracle of Zeus-Amon at Siwah, and has his identity and destiny confirmed.

Meriamon, likewise, has a destiny to fulfill. She goes to Issus to persuade Alexander to come to Egypt, to see that her father's forecast is carried out.

Meriamon must wait, then travel with the army many months, before this happens. At first focused on her missions and desperately homesick for her own land, Meriamon gets caught up in the life of the campaign. She tends wounded men, makes friends, and falls in love. But as her conscious mind becomes less single-minded, unseen currents are working out her destiny, even so. At Siwah, Meriamon also has a mystical revelation. Unlike Alexander's, which told him what he already expected — and feared — Meriamon's prophecy reveals a subtly-altered life plan for her. She has fulfilled her initial charge to bring Alexander to Egypt and see him installed as Lord of the Two Lands. Now her destiny and his are linked. But she will ultimately return to Egypt and see it flourish under his lieutenant Ptolemy, and have a normal life as well.



Key Questions

The organizer of a discussion on *Lord of the Two Lands* has a wealth of choices. The session could look primarily at the historical events, the fantasy elements, or the characters. With each of these, there is also the possibility of comparison with other authors' works.

An optimum plan might be to have some points and questions ready on each aspect of the book. Most fantasy fans are reasonably well informed about large historical events like Alexander's conquests. History buffs may or may not be familiar with the protocols of fantasy. Tarr's fantasy elements in this book are based on belief systems of the ancient world; and may be accepted as such even by those who do not usually read fantasy.

1. Meriamon's "shadow" is sometimes visible to others; sometimes not.

No other character seems to be accompanied by such an entity. What do you think it is? What purposes does it serve?

2. At one point Alexander's advisors suggest he marry Meriamon. This would make sense politically. They are friends, and he seems as willing to marry her as his other choices. Why then does she refuse, saying she is infertile?

3. Meriamon evidently believes she is infertile, as she also warns Nicolaos that she cannot have children. Is there a physical, a magical, or a plot reason for her infertility?

4. In this novel, Alexander carried out a scorched-earth policy only at Tyre, whose king insulted him and resisted his siege. What message was he trying to send to other rulers?

5. Part of Alexander's success, according to history, was due to his attention to the logistics needed by a mobile army. Another part was due to the loyalty and high morale he inspired. What are some examples of each shown in the novel?

6. In the novel and in history, Alexander was offered Egypt's throne willingly. Did the Egyptians do so just because he was the best alternative available? Why did his rule appeal to them more than the Persians' overlordship?

7. What are some examples of Alexander's policy of adopting local customs and deities (or giving the appearance of doing so) whenever possible?

What purpose did it serve? Did it work? Do you think he was sincere about it?

8. Nicolaos fumes when his injury keeps him away from combat, and even more when he has to serve as Meriamon's guard. Yet a friendship and respect develops between them. Meriamon finds herself drawn to him. She is dismayed; she keeps musing that the guard is supposed to fall in love with the princess, not the other way around.



Was it a mutual attraction? In what ways is there not such a gap between them as the princess-and-guardsmen scenario would imply?

9. The rain that falls in the Libyan desert comes just in time to save Alexander's party. Afterwards, they viewed it as divine intervention. It added to the growing legend that Alexander was indeed favored by the gods; he would succeed at whatever he tried. Is this as useful a legend in politics now as it was then?

10. Are there really times in which everything goes one's way, as it did for Alexander during this period? If so, to what can they be attributed (besides coincidence)?

Literary Precedents

As Tarr points out in a well-documented author's note, there are numerous scholarly works on Alexander, but relatively few recent novels. She lists Mary Renault's trilogy of Alexander novels (*Fire from Heaven*, 1969; *The Persian Boy*, 1972; and *Funeral Games*, 1981) as a predecessor. Another is Melissa Scott's *A Choice of Destinies* (1986). A modern novel about Alexander's chief of staff Parmenion is *Dark Prince* (1993), by David Gemmell.

The historical novel formerly encompassed a large genre. Almost as many were published annually as novels in the realistic contemporary mode. During the 1970s and beyond, this situation changed. Aside from big-name authors like James A. Michener (many of whom got their start during the boom in historical fiction), the historical setting is now most often used as one element of a cross-genre novel.

There are Christian historical novels, medieval detective tales, and alternate history novels (published as science fiction), among other types. Historical romances are a large segment of the huge mass market romance-novel industry. Tarr's historical fantasy novels have found a niche, in this new market situation, as well-researched historical novels with a twist of mysticism.

Related Titles

Tarr's Throne of Isis (1994) is about Cleopatra, Ptolemy's descendant and queen of Egypt, some 300 years later.

Her Pillar of Fire (1995) is set many centuries before, in the time of Akhnaton and Moses.

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