

# The Lovers Short Guide

## The Lovers by Philip José Farmer

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# Characters

The two main characters in *The Lovers* are among Farmer's most memorable creations. Hal Yarrow is completely convincing as one of Farmer's ordinary men, who, in contrast with a superhero like Sir Richard Burton of the *Riverworld* series, are the complete slaves of their inner neuroses and pressures.

Indeed, Hal, like Lane in "My Sister's Brother" (1960), is a typical male character in Farmer's early fiction: A victim of his puritanical conditioning, he is eager to please his superiors, yet, in his own halting way, is also searching for an alternative to his repression. Once free of the Sturch, this timid little man who has never seen his own wife naked is gradually "born again" under the loving influence of Jeannette.

The completely selfless Jeannette will annoy today's feminists, but Farmer would probably argue that she, too, is flawed, and like Hal, must learn to discover her inner resources. Certainly, she is Hal's equal in intelligence and understanding, suggesting that had she survived her pregnancy, she might have developed out of the subservient role she assumes for herself and become like the more independent and aggressive female characters of Farmer's later fiction. In any case, Farmer presents the strange, doomed love affair between Hal and Jeannette with genuine delicacy, making *The Lovers* one of the most poignant works in all of science fiction.

## Social Concerns

Farmer has written three different works called "The Lovers." The first is the 1952 story which shook up the science fiction establishment by introducing sexual themes into a genre previously oriented toward science and technology. This story was followed by a novel-length adaptation, published in 1961 and then revised and republished in 1979. The following discussion deals with the 1979 novel, the most easy-to-obtain version.

Few readers in today's era of sexually explicit films and fiction are likely to be shocked by this novel's sensitive portrayal of a love affair between a male human and female alien. Therefore, we should remind ourselves that Farmer originally was reacting against the dominant cultural mood of the Eisenhower era in America during the 1950s. This was also the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy — a time of mindless patriotism, anti-intellectualism, and suppression of dissent. Farmer attacks the repressive mood of this period of American history by contrasting a bigoted, sterile masculine society characterized by self-righteousness, with a tolerant, Edenic feminine society illustrating the transcendent grace of romantic love. This contrast between male negation and female affirmation anticipates the central thesis in a major work of American literary criticism, Leslie Fielder's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). Here, Fielder argues that the American male imagination is in flight from conventional social life and rejects women and the feminine principle.

When *The Lovers* is read in the context of Fielder's thesis, it seems obvious that Farmer's real achievement was his introduction not merely of sex, but of the much wider issue of sexual freedom in relation to the development of our full human potential. Farmer's protagonist, Hal Yarrow, belongs to a politically and sexually repressive society ruled by the Sturch, a combination of state and church. Although the Sturch claims to be devoted to the spiritual welfare of its citizens, like all dictatorships it is actually based on fear, ignorance, and suppression. Its rulers present themselves as the source of all good. In reality, they are sexually frigid, women-hating men whose paranoid, schizophrenic tendencies burst through their icy shells in religious frenzies. Life under their rigid control has left Hal horribly frightened and efficiently repressed, but after he is sent to the planet Ozagen ("Oz-again"), he falls under the influence of the Wogs, a friendly and sexually liberated people. Hal's love affair on Ozagen with the lovely Jeannette teaches him for the first time that not only a woman, but also a human being, can be beautiful. Ironically, Jeannette is not human at all, but a "lalitha" — a human-looking alien with an insect's inner anatomy.



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

Farmer's basic strategy in *The Lovers* is to combine a passionate love story with a political satire in a dystopian setting. There is no precedent in science fiction for the love story, but Farmer's celebration of the saving power of passion and love has suggestive echoes of the work of an earlier, mainstream writer, D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Considering sexuality a key element of life and believing sexual maladjustment to be the symptom and curse of our age, Lawrence avoided all reticence in his most controversial novel, *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1928).

In this novel, the banality of a love affair between a dissatisfied wife and her husband's gamekeeper is transcended by the poetic revelation of their sexual experience. Lawrence's work inspired subsequent writers to a far more specific and frank scrutiny of sexuality in personal relationships, just as Farmer's *The Lovers* had a liberating effect on subsequent science fiction.

Although the sexual content of *The Lovers* was new to science fiction in 1952, Farmer's basic premise and plot are highly derivative of the most famous of all literary dystopias: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, first published in 1949. Like Orwell's Winston Smith, Hal Yarrow is a minor government functionary with a flair for languages. Also like Winston, Hal lives in a world divided up into three huge empires, each continually at war with the others solely to keep its citizens dependent upon its security. In both novels, the sexually repressed society is ruled by an unseen dictator whose minions liquidate anyone showing signs of independent thought. Both novels also have a male protagonist who falls in love with a woman who teaches him the unique joy of truly loving another. Finally, both authors show that we reject the body and the natural world of change at the risk of turning towards a rigid imperialism, both political and sexual. Thus, *The Lovers* is basically an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into a science fiction format, using the same contrast between social repression and individual freedom, and for much the same reasons.

However, *The Lovers* differs from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in at least two major aspects. First, Farmer characteristically increases the shock effect of Orwell's plot by making Hal's lover a female alien with an insect's biology.

Second, and much more important, Farmer rejects the pessimism inherent in Orwell's bleak conclusion. Both authors reveal their skepticism towards bureaucracy and organized religion, but Farmer still champions the power of the individual, as he does in most of his writing. Under torture, Orwell's Winston breaks and betrays even his lover. Released, he feels cleansed of his "sins" and is last seen affirming the worth of a monstrous social system. In contrast, Farmer allows his gentle Wogs to defeat the Sturch's attempt at colonization. Hal is last seen determined to remain faithful to the memory of Jeannette by caring for their three "children" — all female. Hate, cruelty, and fear are common features of Farmer's fictional world; nevertheless, they are often defeated by love, compassion, and courage.

# Themes

The Lovers is essentially a study of the close relationship between sexual and political repression. The first portion of the novel, portraying Hal's miserable life under the Sturch, is an anti-utopia or "dystopia" warning against the dangers of isolating ourselves from joy and love by denying out sexual natures. As Farmer does throughout his writing, he implies in The Lovers that the physical and the spiritual are one, and that in rejecting the former, we also destroy the latter. Without Jeannette, Hal is a resentful, terrified rabbit. With her, he at least temporarily overcomes a lifetime of rigid discipline and in the process illustrates Farmer's three preconditions for a love which is both physical and spiritual: a genuine passion, a deep affection, and a feeling of being one flesh, male and female inseparable.



## Key Questions

Farmer sees the conscious mind of twentieth-century humanity as out of touch with the deepest center of its being and offers passionate love and sex as a remedy. His interest in sexuality, both human and alien, is sure to provoke controversy, as his attack on patriarchal religions for their tendency towards puritanism and social tyranny.

Moreover, Farmer's portrait of the "ideal" woman as a lover rather than a mother or person of intellect can lead to discussion of the maturity of Farmer's view of femininity and, indeed, of his celebration of sexuality.

1. Is *The Lovers* a fair criticism of social conditions in America during the 1950s? What conditions or events in particular may Farmer be reacting against?
2. What connections does the novel make between puritanism, political power, and social tyranny? To what extent can these connections be perceived in America today?
3. How does the Sturch corrupt language by co-opting words for its own purposes? In this context, how is *The Lovers* similar to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?
4. To what extent does Hal Yarrow accept and internalize the Sturch's teachings? To what extent does he resist them? Is Hal an appealing character in spite of his flaws?
5. What kind of alternative does Ozagen provide to the Sturch? Are the Ozagenians really as harmless as they initially appear?
6. What is the relation of language to Hal's quest for more freedom? What connections can be made between the Siddo language and Siddo, the capital city of Ozagen?
7. What does the word "wogglebug" suggest about how technologically advanced societies perceive less advanced ones? Are there any parallels to be made with the American experience in Vietnam?
8. What are the main personality traits of Jeannette? To what extent does she seem more of a mythic figure than a "real" person? How successful is Farmer in conveying the transcendental nature of the experience she provides for Hal?
9. Is it fair to say that this novel is uneven on the level of characterization? Are we able to empathize with Farmer's characters, or is the novel more successful as an allegory?



## Related Titles

Farmer has written three different works called "The Lovers." ("The Lovers" [1952], story, expanded into a novel [1961], revised and republished, [1979]. Sequels: "Moth and Rust" [1953], story, rewritten and retitled as *A Woman a Day* [1960], novel, retitled *The Day of Timestop* [1968], and *Timestop!* [1973]; "Rastignac the Devil" [1954], story.)

The two alleged sequels to *The Lovers* are disappointing. The different versions of "Moth and Rust" are not sequels at all, but spy stories of the future, set in the same repressive society of *The Lovers*. "Rastignac the Devil" is a kind of "prequel," for its protagonist is the man who becomes the father of Jeannette, Hal's alien lover. Both stories are much more concerned with the nature of hypothetical new religions than with sexuality.

Of much more interest are those stories and novels which continue Farmer's exploration of human and alien sexuality. "The Captain's Daughter" (1953), for example, shows how fear of sexuality results in repression and self-destruction. In this story, reprinted in Farmer's 1962 collection *The Alley God*, an alien life form inhabits human bodies and reproduces by forcing its hosts to have intercourse, a fate which the story's isolated father and daughter naturally resist. The stories in *Strange Relations* (1960) portray very strange relations indeed, between human beings and alien life forms like the lovely alien Martia, in "My Sister's Brother." In *Flesh* (1960), Farmer speculates on the results of adding the urge to worship to the sexual urge, instead of separating them as is done in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This novel is not for the squeamish, but even it is overshadowed by the most violent and scandalous of Farmer's novels dealing with sexual themes, the near-pornographic trio of *The Image of the Beast* (1968), *Blown* (1969), and *A Feast Unknown* (1969). The first two novels attempt to make explicit the latent sexual content of Gothic fiction by relating the horrific adventures of a detective who becomes involved with two warring alien parties.

These latter derive their psychic energy from the bizarre sexual practices they impose upon their human victims.

Similarly, *A Feast Unknown* makes manifest what is usually buried beneath the surface in pulp-adventure novels.

Farmer's version of Tarzan is a "phallic superman," a randy warrior god lacking normal human inhibitions.

However extreme and grotesque Farmer's writing might become, its basic impulse is never obscured. Farmer is a taboo-breaker whose sometimes shocking scenarios celebrate sexuality as a means of fulfillment in life and rebellion against death. This impulse is particularly clear in "The Henry Miller Dawn Patrol" (1977) — a comic, yet oddly moving story reminding us that even the aged long for more intense sexual lives. The title character is a seventy-nine-year-old resident in a nursing home who roams the





halls searching for available elderly ladies with whom he can gratify his persistent and apparently insatiable desires.

Farmer's Henry Miller, like the famous iconoclastic American author of the same name, is a septuagenarian outlaw using sexuality to make his own determined protest against old age, dying, and death.



# Copyright Information

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