

Makra Choria Short Guide

Makra Choria by Ardath Mayhar

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Overview

Makra Choria combines elements of the traditional fairy tale (good versus evil, use of superhuman powers, and a love story involving the protagonist) with elements of the initiation novel (development of physical prowess, gaining of wisdom, and establishment of ethical values). Initially, the Makralo or ruler of the city of Sherath is Orinath, the father of (Makra) Choria and her older sister (Makra) Theora, who is next in line for the throne (to become Makrala). Although Orinath governs wisely, cruelty and ambition are also hereditary traits of the Makraitis; in fact, Orinath succeeded to the throne when his brother—realizing that he could no longer withstand the temptation to abuse his power—committed suicide. Seeing a similar tendency in the infant Theora, Orinath's wife attempted, but failed, to murder the baby; about a year and a half later, she bore a second daughter and, on her deathbed, urged Orinath to transmit to this child the Gift of the Makraitis.

Hoping to curb the excesses already obvious in Theora by age eleven, Orinath sends Choria away to live with his sister Ellida and soon begins Choria's warrior training and her instruction in the family lore. Orinath gives her a bracelet set with blood-red stones, one of which he has secretly removed from the ring which symbolizes his authority.

Shortly after the return of Theora—now nineteen—Orinath is killed by Ellida, who has also been corrupted by the hereditary evil. Ellida, in turn, is beheaded by Choria, the only person who can strike a member of the ruling family and so avenge her father's death. When Theora's tyrannical rule becomes unendurable, Choria leads a Makra Choria 3545 rebel force consisting of a few warriors loyal to her father, most notably Bethor, her martial arts instructor. Choria is not yet fully prepared to rule; her forces are defeated, with almost all of her warriors killed and Choria herself severely wounded. Before he dies, Garrier—Orinath's trusted lieutenant and Bethor's father—conveys her father's message that in such an emergency she must escape to his wilderness lodge, where he has left the necessary provisions and instructions.

Choria's return, in the disguise of a peasant, and her battle with Theora end the first part of the novel. The clash of superhuman powers between the sisters causes an earthquake which destroys the palace. Forcing Theora to accompany her, Choria heads for the mountains along the border with the kingdom of Algonath, and the rehabilitation of Theora begins. Choria destroys Theora's powers and renounces her own, but an inner force continues to guide Choria, leading them to the cabin of Willowill, an old woman who also possesses superhuman powers and who once was an advisor to Orinath.

Willowill says The Will, the source of all power, has brought them there so that she can teach Theora the lessons she needs.

After spending the winter with Willowill, Choria feels the inner force compelling her to journey on to Algonath, a neighboring city-state with which Sherath has been at war since an unprovoked invasion by Theora's army, which led to Bethor's enslavement. In



the second part of the novel, Choria and a humbled—but still somewhat selfish—Theora rescue a mistreated captive of the Searchers, a guerilla band of Algonath renegades. This captive, who calls herself Pedrada (the Lost One) is actually Petriana, the Lady Mother (dowager queen) of Algonath.

Fleeing imprisonment by her grandson, the new ruler, Petriana has been captured by the Searchers and she was once held in the same prison camp as Bethor.

Also given warrior training in her youth, Petriana exemplifies to a large extent the novel's feminine ideal, becoming a role model for both Choria and Theora. Choria thinks Petriana would have made a fine general, and she learns much from the older woman, as the two of them, with some slight assistance from Theora, rescue Bethor. During their flight, Theora and Petriana are captured by Petriana's grandson but rescued again by Choria and Bethor. Aware that her enemies will probably unite to pursue her, Choria decides to lay a false trail. One measure of Theora's growth is that when Choria does not soon return, her sister comes in search of her.

Having defeated all human opponents, Choria must still overcome challenges from nature. In addition to the rugged mountain terrain, she must fight a Great Bear of the Mountains, and when the 900-weight bear falls on her, she again is seriously injured, but her victory ends the second part of the novel.

The remaining obstacle is the re-establishment of order in Sherath. Unsure of the people's attitude, Choria and her companions enter the city in disguise, but the people of Sherath are eager for Choria's return. Although she urges self-government, the Master of the City tells her that Sherath is not yet ready, the people want Choria and Bethor to rule. The city's bitterness toward Theora must be resolved, however, and Choria urges her sister to submit to Orinath's annual ritual of The Judgment, in which any aggrieved citizen may strike and even kill the ruler. Choria acknowledges the danger to Theora, but believes, correctly, that the people of Sherath—impressed by her sister's courage and the obvious changes in her character—will forgive her as Choria herself has done.

In the epilogue, Choria and Bethor rule Serath, which is again "a place of smug contentment" without bitterness.

Choria does not wish for her former superhuman powers because she says a ruler needs wisdom, not "Power."

Petriana chooses to remain in Serath to help educate Theora, who never marries but eventually becomes "a very angel of tenderness and concern" to the poor and an indulgent aunt to Choria and Bethor's children.

About the Author

Ardath Frances (Hurst) Mayhar, who was born on February 20, 1930, in Timpson, Texas, attributes much of her literary success to a life of hard work in rural settings. Her parents, Bert Aaron and Ardath (Ellington) Hurst, were farmers, but her mother was also a musician. Mayhar describes her early life as a mix of working on her father's dairy farm (as manager, 1947 to 1957), writing poetry, and gaining a reading proficiency in several languages: Latin, Greek, German, French, Spanish, and Italian. From 1957 to 1962 she was owner and manager of the East Texas Bookstore in Nacogdoches, Texas. Here she met Joe E. Mayhar, whom she married in 1958. Mayhar is the mother of two sons (Frank Edward and James Anthony) and two stepsons (Robert William and William Earl).

Self-educated since high school, Mayhar cites several important influences upon her writing—among them: working as a proofreader for the Salem (Oregon) Capital Journal (1968 to 1975) and for the Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel (1979 to 1982) and living in Houston and in Oregon, where she became acquainted with the mountains and with yoga. Nevertheless, the most significant influence seems to have been the landscape of rural Texas, to which she and her family returned in 1975. From 1976 through 1978 she listed her occupation as chicken farmer in Nacogdoches County, but since 1982 she has been a full-time writer, although in 1984 she became also co-operator of the View from Orbit Bookstore in Nacogdoches. She now lives in rural Chireno, Texas, where she says she can "grow fine gardens and hear the wolves howl at night." There, on the edge of the Big Thicket of East Texas, she lives with her "husband, fourteen cats, a cow, a bull, six calves, and a number of wild critters." According to her accounts, she also "writes, reads, gardens intermittently, raises goats, fishes in the river, and walks in the woods."

A self-described "compulsive writer," Mayhar has contributed narrative poetry to *Fantasy Book*, *Pulpsmith*, and *Tempest*, as well as other poems and stories to numerous magazines, including *Twilight Zone Magazine*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Espionage Magazine*, *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine*, *Fiction*, *Gothic*, *Weirdbook*, *Dark Fantasy*, *Kadath*, *Night Voyages*, *Dragonfields*, and *Mississippi Arts and Letters*.

Her work also appears in anthologies such as *Mummy!*, *Amazon II*, *Stories to be Read with the Lights On*, *Espionage 1*, *Swords Against Darkness IV*, and *Dragon 8*. Mayhar facetiously asserts the stamps she buys to mail her manuscripts are the major source of income for the local post office.

In 1985, Mayhar received the Balrog Award as Best Poet. Her manuscripts are located in the de Grummond Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi (Hattiesburg) and at Stephen F. Austin State University (Nacogdoches, Texas).

Setting

Makra Choria is set in the mythical city-states of Sherath and Algonath and in the mountains and wilderness which separate the two. Since the novel's tone, theme, and characters are essentially mythic, there is a suggestion of ancient Greek and Arthurian legends.

Neither time nor geographical location is specified; both resemble traditional fairy-tale settings, with overtones of remote, pre-industrial kingdoms in an era long past.



Social Sensitivity

Choria differs from the traditional fairy tale heroine in that she rescues the hero instead of being rescued by him. She enjoys the warrior training which Theora disdains, and eventually her skills rival those of her teacher. In short, Choria is educated much as the Makralo's son would have been, and she gains the independence and selfreliance traditionally restricted to the hero, while passivity is a characteristic of the less admirable sister.

Equally resourceful are Willowill—who is still a good hunter despite her advanced age—and Petriana—who, like Choria, received warrior training in her youth. Petriana's description of a gentlewoman sounds decidedly modern:

The only gentlewoman worth knowing is the one who can stand eye to eye with danger or demon and spit in its face. . . . To be soft and gentle is fine, when there is need for it. It is stupid when there is need for fortitude and determination. One must deal bloodily with the bloody-minded . . . that is all they know or understand.

Likewise, Theora is portrayed as flawed, rather than inherently evil. In fact, Orinath says she is not deliberately trying to become a villain, and Choria attributes Theora's power-hungry ways to the "unloving watch kept constantly upon her." These suggestions of psychological damage inflicted by a dysfunctional family, a strikingly modern explanation for Theora's behavior, add credibility to her eventual transformation.

Also quite modern is the novel's underlying anti-war tone. For Theora, the invasion of Algonath is merely a way to expand her power, but the citizens of Sherath regard it as another abuse of that power, a further example of Theora's corrupt nature. Bethor and his fellow soldiers consider the war unjust, wasteful, and useless; they march into the neighboring kingdom only because they are controlled by the collars Theora has had placed around their necks.

As soon as Choria strips Theora of her powers, the army immediately ceases to fight and joyfully turns west toward home; the men appear to have been released from an evil spell.

While this war adds to the social unrest in Sherath, it virtually destroys the social fabric of Algonath. The ruler is killed, and civil war breaks out as his brother-in-law and his son struggle to gain control of the city-state. Marauding bands called the Searchers roam the countryside, owing allegiance to neither side and obeying no law.

From ordinary citizens like the Spinnerri family of weavers, to the Lady Mother of Algonath, no one is safe. As Mayhar demonstrates, the repercussions of war are destructive and farreaching.

A major challenge for Ardath Mayhar seems to be reconciling the fairy tale's need for royalty with contemporary American views about the superiority of democratic



government. Mayhar solves this problem by making Orinath a remarkably liberal ruler who annually provides his subjects an opportunity to judge him; his ritual of The Judgment is, in effect, a vote of confidence. Moreover, Choria offers the citizens of Sherath the option of selfgovernment, although some readers might detect a patronizing note in their response (that they are not yet ready to govern themselves).



Literary Qualities

Probably Mayhar's greatest strength is her attention to the details of day-today life; the realistic portrayal of the child Choria's behavior lends credibility to her later successes. Likewise, the careful description of Choria and Theora's journey helps to build suspense, define their personalities, and, at the same time, establish the inevitability of their eventual triumph.

On occasions such as Choria's attempt to outwit the Searchers, the detailed account of the characters' actions seems to slow the pace in this novel of heroic adventure. A related problem is the somewhat episodic plot structure.

Individual incidents are vivid and engrossing, but both the heroine and the author seem to lack a unifying purpose. Thus, Choria sets out to overthrow Theora and liberate Sherath, only to shift abruptly to a rambling journey through Algonath, where she comes within sight of the palace before another change in course. Presumably the force impelling her toward Algonath is her unacknowledged love for Bethor, but her stay with Willowill seems a lengthy digression in that plot, just as the rescue of Bethor seems largely irrelevant to the reformation of Theora or the re-establishment of order in Sherath.

Although the characters' actions frequently are described in minute detail, physical descriptions usually are rather sketchy. For example, the reader is told only that Choria is slender and beautiful with a long oval face framed in redgold hair. When she disguises herself as a peasant, Choria appears to have a stolid, square face and lank black hair.

Other characters are given only one or two physical characteristics: Theora has violet irises set in an oval face, and Willowill has dim gray eyes. Most of the minor characters are even less clearly drawn, and the male characters invariably are stereotypes.

Mayhar has described her work as "metaphysical fiction," in which she "work[s] toward some inner goal, invisible but inexorable." Because she uses the convention-laden format of the fairy tale to deal with the fundamental ethical theme of the struggle between good and evil, her plots have been called predictable. Actually, in this genre, predictability seems inescapable.

A more serious flaw is the novel's overt didacticism, especially obvious when Choria lectures Theora on love and on nobility.



Themes and Characters

Makra Choria's primary theme is the conflict between good and evil. Some characters are obviously virtuous—Choria, Bethor, Orinath, Willowill, Petriana, and various minor characters who assist Choria and Theora in their journeys. Others are just as obviously evil—Ellida, the Searchers, Theora's childhood tutor, and Petriana's grandson. At first Theora too appears to represent unmitigated evil, but Mayhar suggests that Theora also possesses some of the good qualities of her father and sister. Theora is transformed by her experiences and so is granted a kind of redemption.

A secondary theme is initiation or coming of age. Even as a child, Choria is extremely perceptive, aware of her sister's selfishness and potential cruelty. While she seems less obsessed with power than is Theora, Choria too must learn that wisdom is more valuable than the Gift of the Makraitis. In the long run, her superhuman powers are not really strong enough to defeat Theora, but her warrior training and the wisdom she has gained from Orinath and Bethor enable her to defeat all her enemies. Like Theora, Choria needs to learn from Willowill and Petriana; hunting with Willowill sharpens her skills in strategy and woodsmanship, while fighting alongside Petriana teaches her independence and courage.

The principal character of Makra Choria is Choria herself, ultimately the embodiment of the wisdom and virtue to be found in the Makraitis, the ruling family of Sherath. Although Choria seems to possess the physical attractiveness common to princesses in fairy tales, Mayhar chooses to emphasize instead her exceptional maturity and sound values. Unlike Theora, Choria considers the Gift of the Makraitis a responsibility for which she must prepare herself. Even as a child, she is appalled when she overhears her sister's plotting; and, recognizing the selfishness and potential for evil in Theora's nature, she warns Orinath.

Choria is Orinath's younger daughter, and ordinarily her duties would be primarily ceremonial, but she prepares herself for leadership, listening carefully to her father's instructions and striving to excel at warrior training.

Unwilling to rely solely upon the powers she has inherited, Choria not only chooses Bethor, the best warrior in Sherath, as her teacher, but also practices until her skills equal his.

Partially as a result of her training, Choria possesses great confidence and courage. When Theora becomes Makrala, Choria is vigilant, careful not to draw attention to herself; but once she discovers the discontent in the citystate, she disregards personal danger to assume the responsibilities of leadership, even unpleasant duties such as the mercy-killing of some of her followers. These same qualities—courage, confidence, and mature judgment—are evident in her subsequent adventures, as she subdues, then rescues, Theora and as she rescues Bethor and Petriana.



In short, Choria is a modern heroine, clearly intended as a role model for today's young women.

In a reversal of the conventional fairy tale, the dainty, passive character is Choria's sister, Theora, who possesses the hereditary taint of evil among the Makraitis. Where Choria develops her abilities through discipline and hard work, Theora believes that the gift of the Makraitis is her birthright, and she refuses to exert any effort to increase her wisdom and skills. Thus, she cannot withstand the challenge from Choria, who strips them both of all superhuman powers. Once these powers have been removed, the effects of Theora's laziness become obvious, and belatedly she must become more like Choria. From Willowill, Theora learns humility and the value of hard work; then, Petriana and Choria—by their example—teach her the independence and courage that result from confidence in one's own strength and skills.

Although the other characters in this novel are essentially stereotypes, the women of the Spinnerris show resourcefulness and courage; Choria believes she detects a trace of the "Power" in them. More significant figures are two older women whose backgrounds are similar to Choria's. The first "incomplete" heroine is Willowill, the wise old woman who begins the difficult task of re-educating Theora.

Willowill has received some of the warrior training given Choria, and she is a superior strategist and a good hunter, but her training has been incomplete, and she is not prepared to engage in combat as Choria does. Likewise, she possesses some superhuman powers, but here, too, her training has been inferior to Choria's. Further reinforcing the example of Choria is Petriana, the Lady Mother of Algonath.

Petriana has been trained much as Choria has, and she is a capable ally for Choria. Nevertheless, in the past Petriana apparently has relied upon her husband and her son, not fully using her skills. Now the effects of that disuse, combined with her advanced age, make her a less formidable opponent than Choria. Even so, both Petriana and Willowill serve as positive role models for Theora.

The male characters show almost no individuality. Orinath is the wise and just ruler, whose courage provides a worthy example for his daughters.

Bethor is the noble and skillful warrior, but Choria's love for him seems to be based more upon hero worship than upon any personal quality he exhibits.

Garrier, Bethor's father, is the stereotypical faithful yeoman; he follows Orinath's orders and defends Choria to the death. The other male characters are either vain fools like Theora's tutor Glagio or crude bullies like Keren and Helloren, the mercenaries who have joined the Searchers of Algonath.



Topics for Discussion

1. Theora and Ellida claim that Theora has been given inadequate training and Choria has received knowledge she cannot legally possess. Is there any truth in their accusations? Was Theora interested in extensive training? Would greater knowledge have improved her character? Was Orinath right in passing on to Choria the Gift of the Makraitis?

How did he ensure that she would not use her power unnecessarily?

2. Why does Choria give up her superhuman powers? Her decision is inconvenient, but is it wise? Why or why not?

3. Orinath and Choria agree that Theora is not totally evil, and Choria suggests that others' suspicion and dislike may explain her sister's cruel disposition. Overall, the effects of heredity and environment may not be completely explained by the story, but in the case of Theora, what do you think are the most important elements in forming her personality?

4. Do you find Theora's transformation believable? How does Mayhar prepare you for these changes?

5. Which of the characters do you admire most? Why? On the other hand, which of the characters do you like least? Why?

6. Describe some specific changes in plot and characters you would make if you were rewriting this story. Why would you change these particular elements and not others? What elements could not be changed without ruining the story?

7. If you were making a movie of this novel, would you use human actors or animation? Why? Would your movie be rated G or PG? Why would it earn this rating?

8. Mayhar has classified this novel as "metaphysical." What does metaphysical mean? Do you agree with Mayhar's description? Why or why not?

9. Mayhar has also described her attitude toward the characters and incidents as "objective and logical." Is she really objective toward her characters?

Cite some examples of bias or objectivity. Does the plot follow a logical sequence of cause-incident-consequences? Where is this pattern evident?

Where is it not present?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mayhar presents the events of her novel largely from the perspective of Choria. Choose a single episode in the novel and tell what happens as that episode might be told by one of the other participants. Be sure that your account reflects your character's personality and attitudes.

2. Setting is a key element in *Makra Choria*. Explain how the story would be different if the action took place in a modern setting. Rewrite one scene or create a new plot outline which reflects the changes you would be forced to make.

3. In some ways, Choria's adventures seem to resemble those of the young King Arthur, and in fact both stories could be classified as romances. Read some accounts of the young Arthur, and write an essay in which you compare or contrast these two characters and their heroic adventures.

4. *Makra Choria* can also be compared with other fantasies including familiar fairy tales such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," or "Beauty and the Beast." Reread one of these fairy tales, and write an essay in which you compare or contrast elements such as the characters, plot, and tone in the two works.

5. Because of her extraordinary powers and abilities, Choria could also be compared with modern fantasy heroes and heroines such as Superman and Wonder Woman. Reread some of the Wonder Woman stories or watch some of the videos; then write an essay pointing out some of the most important similarities and differences.

6. All of the fantasies mentioned in questions 4 and 5 have been made into movies or television series. Suppose you were asked to film *Makra Choria*.

Write the script (complete with stage directions) for one scene, or construct a script outline for the entire movie.

Some scenes will probably be shortened or omitted entirely. Remember that the director will be working solely from your script, so you may need to add scenes to supply needed information.

7. Mayhar has written novels (under the name Ravenna Cannon) which are set in East Texas. Read one of these novels, and compare the characters and plot with those of *Makra Choria*.

8. At the end of *Makra Choria*, the heroine becomes the ruler in Sherath.

Read accounts of the life of a famous real-life woman ruler (for example, Catherine the Great of Russia or Elizabeth I of England), and write an essay comparing Choria to her. As an alternative, you may choose to invent a story about one episode in the life of Catherine or Elizabeth. Remember that the story need not necessarily relate an incident



which you find in a biography, but it should not be something which could not have happened.

9. Recently a number of novelists have completed or written sequels to well-known novels. Outline a sequel to *Makra Choria*, or put yourself in the place of Mayhar as she was writing this novel. At some point insert a new episode, or rewrite the conclusion.

For Further Reference

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Commire, Anne. "Mayhar, Ardath." In *Something About the Author*. Vol. 38.

Detroit: Gale, 1982: 141-142. Outline of biographical and career information, list of writings, and selected comments by the author.

Kay, Ernest, ed. "Mayhar, Ardath." In *International Authors and Writers Who's Who*. Cambridge, England: International Biographical Centre, 1986: 438. Essentially a directory listing with limited biographical information as well as lists of works, and professional affiliations.

Related Titles

Among Ardath Mayhar's other novels, *Exile on Vlahil* resembles *Makra Choria* in its choice of an adventuresome heroine as the central character.

Khi to Freedom is similar in the superhuman powers used by the characters.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996