

The Mammoth Hunters Short Guide

The Mammoth Hunters by Jean M. Auel

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Characters

Ayla does not advance or develop as a character from her portrayal in the earlier novels. She makes more discoveries (the needle), tames more animals (a wolf this time), and even uses the Heimlich maneuver to save a choking child. But she does not grow emotionally because Auel seems to want her to be the perfect woman. For example, having been raised in a culture which communicates with gestures, Ayla does not know how to lie. She has been so hurt and alienated from others that she seems unable to hurt anyone. The only thing she cannot do well is sing.

The most interesting portrayal of Ayla is her assimilation into the CroMagnon community. Ayla learns to drink alcohol and has to learn to interpret people's moods, especially Jondalar's jealousy. In the presentation of an isolated person coming to live in a civilized community, Auel has great opportunity to explore the issues of humans and society. It is unfortunate that this exploration remains on a simplistic level.

Social Concerns

with the earlier novels in the Asseries, *The Mammoth Hunters* includes contemporary issues such as racism and feminism. Raneë, a black man living in the white mammoth hunter's society, is easily accepted. In this primitive society, racism manifests itself as Cro-Magnon contempt for Neanderthals or "flatheads," who are viewed as little more than animals.

Jondalar worries how Ayla, who has lived among the flatheads, will be accepted in Cro-Magnon communities.

The Mammoth Camp has already taken in a Neanderthal child, with whom Ayla is able to communicate by means of gestures and signs. The camp members learn that the child is not stupid, just different, and they, too, learn the signs and to communicate with him.

Despite Ayla's acceptance into the Mammoth community, made easier by her beauty, her ability to tame animals, her medical skills, and her inventions of a needle and flint for making fires, Jondalar agonizes over whether his own people, the Zelandonii, will accept her. His major conflict throughout the novel is whether to ask her to be his mate and come home with him or to leave her to mate with Raneë and stay in the Mammoth Camp where she has been accepted.

The Cro-Magnon communities are much less sexist than the Neanderthal, where the women were not allowed to hunt or to question traditions and were supposed to submit to the men's sexual urges. The mammoth hunters worship the Great Mother, and their society is matriarchal with the family gaining its status from the woman. The camp itself is governed jointly by a sister and a brother, although the brother is a more active leader while the sister counsels from the background. Auel does not make the Cro-Magnons as gender-differentiated as she says they are. She claims, for example, that the Mammoth Camp has no separation of tasks based on sex, but in the story the women are still the primary cooks, clothing-makers, and child-raisers.

Techniques

The plot of *The Mammoth Hunters*, based on the misunderstandings and conflicts between Ayla and Jondalar, is loose and simple. The story moves through various ceremonies, including Ayla's acceptance into the camp, a summer meeting, and several hunts.

Although the characters are flat, Auel does shift points of view so that the reader hears how Talut feels about his role as clan leader and how Latie feels abandoned when her male playmates will not play with her any more. These glimpses into the minds of many characters provide a varied view of a primitive society but also lead to a lack of focus and lack of depth in the presentation of any one character.

As with the earlier novels in the series, one of the most interesting parts of *The Mammoth Hunters* is Auel's inclusion of material from her wide reading about early humans. The reader learns about leather processing and coloring, beadwork, hunting, cooking, and freezing meat; various ways animal parts were used; and home building. At times Auel skillfully interweaves this material into her narrative; but at other times her narrator provides the information in the form of a short lecture given from a modern point of view. For example, when Ayla adopts the wolf cub, the narrator steps out of the story to explain how wolves evolved into modern household dogs. Although these intrusions are frequently interesting, they disrupt the flow of the narrative and remove the reader from Ayla's fictive world.

Themes

As alienation was an important theme in *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980) when Ayla separates from the Neanderthals, so acceptance becomes an important theme of *The Mammoth Hunters* as Ayla desires to join people of her own kind. Ayla is beautiful and gifted, but her background and her superlative skills make her stand out among people of her own kind as much as she stood out among the Neanderthals. The question is both one of social class — can she be accepted after living among people who are considered subhuman — and one of genius — can a person with talents and understanding far beyond the norm still be received as an integral member of a community and allowed to develop her talents and practice her skills?

Related to the theme of acceptance is the theme of romantic love. The love between Ayla and Jondalar was an important event in *The Valley of Horses* (1982); now their love is tested as Ayla receives attention not only from Raneë but from the headman of another camp.

Auel has room here to explore the nature of love, jealousy, and lust, but her presentation remains on the level of a romance novel with repetitious, graphic scenes of sexual intercourse.



Related Titles

First-time readers of the Earth's Children series can read *The Mammoth Hunters* without too much confusion because Auel repeats important information and recreates scenes from the earlier books. *The Mammoth Hunters* opens with Ayla and Jondalar, the lover whose life she saved in *The Valley of Horses*, traveling and meeting a clan of people called the Mamutoi. *The Valley of Horses* primarily describes people separated from their community. Ayla lives alone in her valley after being pronounced "dead" by the clan, and Jondalar travels only with his brother. *The Mammoth Hunters*, however, is very much a book of community.

While *The Clan of the Cave Bear* is also a book of community, it depicts a closed community in which Ayla has few friends and in which her skills are unappreciated and feared. In *The Mammoth Hunters* she forms friendships with other women and is herself a woman whom many men desire. Mamut, the chief seer and wise man of the tribe, adopts her. Mamut is Auel's recreation of Creb from *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, the gentle and wise man who accompanies Ayla on her mystical journeys into the human unconscious.



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