

Man O' War Short Guide

Man O' War by William Shatner

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Characters

Benton Hawkes, the hero of *Man O' War*, is a highly successful diplomat. At the end of a distinguished career, Hawkes is assigned to solve the political problems on Mars where most of Earth's food supply is produced. Although he would prefer to stay on his Montana ranch with his horses, mining interests are trying to dig the land right out from under him. He suspects that the assignment to Mars (devised by his many enemies) is a ploy to get him out of the way. Moreover, he feels the mission will end in disaster and ruin his otherwise perfect diplomat record. Since he is not a man who runs from anything, Hawkes takes the assignment and boards the Mars shuttle.

He survives repeated assassination attempts and must determine which side is trying to kill him and sabotage his mission.

Michael Carri is Hawkes's chief opponent, even though he spends only a small amount of time at center stage. One weakness of the novel is the sketchiness of this shadowy manipulator: He holds a powerful office in Washington, D.C., and he pulls strings across the solar system to obstruct progress in the Martian negotiations, but he is not fully developed. His motivations seem to be lust for power and greed, but why these goals possess him is never made clear.

Since he is always removed from the violence he sets in motion, holding him accountable is a difficult but cherished objective Hawkes pursues with cold calculation and decorous, polished manners.

On the way to Mars, Hawkes acquires a capable and beautiful young assistant, Dina Martel, and begins unraveling the tangled skein of Martian politics as the colonized planet edges toward a revolution for independence from Earth. Dina assumes the role of the perfect diplomatic assistant: circumspect, efficient, silent, and prescient.

She also keeps her distance emotionally, even though her more than professional attachment to Hawkes becomes increasingly apparent to the reader.

While Samuel and Glenia Waters are representatives of Martian management, they turn out to be useful to Hawkes. They, too, are objects of manipulation from afar.

In the smaller scale of Martian life, they share most of the hopes of Martian workers, such as Vincent Pebelion, who want their children to have better lives than they did and who want to develop cities to live in on the surface of the planet. Hawkes is able to delineate the shared interests of the colonists who have migrated from Earth and have no hope of ever returning as well as those born on the red planet who have no reason to think of any other place as "home."



Social Concerns

William Shatner's science fiction novel *Man O' War* is a departure from the "Tek" series which first brought him popularity as a writer rather than as an actor. In this story, Earth has well-established colonies on the Moon, in orbiting space stations, and, most importantly, on Mars. A new food source has been discovered on Mars, called sponge/mush (smush), which is grown in the seemingly endless underground tunnels and caverns carved out by the first settlers. Smush is so abundant and nutritious that it is now the primary food source not just for the Martian colonists, but for Earth as well. Conditions on Mars, however, are brutal, and the colonists who grow the food that Earthlings depend on are virtual prisoners on their adopted planet. Workers are beginning to realize that Earth's dependence on imported smush gives Mars a bargaining advantage. The corporation that owns and runs the planet, however, is dominated by Earth and is actively suppressing the nascent labor movement on Mars, sometimes by violent, surreptitious, or duplicitous means.

The lines of the conflict seem to be clearly drawn, and yet the problems resist all efforts to solve them: Earth wants an uninterrupted and steadily increasing food supply from her colony; Martian workers want better conditions and freedom from their slavelike existence deep underground; interplanetary corporate managers want higher productivity in order to secure greater profits. These conflicts echo many of those voiced during the founding of various labor unions within the United States.

Benton Hawkes, the Earth ambassador selected to resolve the Martian situation, must take bold and decisive action to prevent the large-scale starvation on Earth that will follow any interruption in the supply ships from Mars. He finally prevails, resolving the Martian situation in an unexpected manner and preserving his own Montana ranch from a destructive mining conglomerate along the way.



Techniques

Man O' War is a character-driven novel with a much more thoughtful and introspective tone than is found in Shatner's earlier "Tek" series. The central character is a reluctant hero rather than a whole-hearted man of action: He is older, wiser, harder, and more controlled than the likes of "Tek" protagonist Jake Cardigan. The reader sees the world of the novel through Benton Hawkes's experiences, attitudes, and values, which are relayed by the device of a third-person narrator. Hawkes's personality is complex and multilayered, and it develops as the events of the novel unfold. In the place of Jake Cardigan's witty irony the reader will find Benton Hawkes's bitter cynicism—an attitude developed over years of diplomatic double-dealing and political back-stabbing. Hawkes is a thinking man who also happens to be competent with whatever weapon is handy when a fight breaks out or a would-be assassin breaks in.

He is a private man in a highly public position, but he performs his unwelcome duties with consummate professionalism.

One of his many qualifications as a diplomat is his capacity to gauge the true thoughts and feelings of those with whom he must negotiate. The novel demonstrates this talent in the section where the shuttle makes its slow way to Mars; the passengers divert themselves with a parlor game of quotations. Hawkes plays the game—a metaphor for the larger diplomatic project he has undertaken—while also observing his fellow travelers carefully in an effort to sort out motives and intentions that others may be trying to hide from him. Ultimately he succeeds in averting disaster by virtue of his experience, his courage, his imaginative problem-solving skills, and his evenhanded treatment of all parties concerned.

Themes

Man O' War focuses on the problems created when economic and political realities bring human beings into conflict with one another. The desire of Martian workers to earn a decent living and to develop the surface of the planet rather than remaining sealed in the underground tunnels will be expensive. In order to attain their goals, profits from their only product, smush, must increase. Yet, rising costs on an overpopulated Earth will lead to social upheaval, rioting, and possibly even widespread famine. Attempts at negotiation have been futile, leading to the assignment of Benton Hawkes, the most successful negotiator in Earth-bound national and ethnic conflicts, to the project. Diplomacy and negotiation between seemingly irreconcilable opponents are key themes throughout the book, although when diplomacy fails, or when saboteurs are determined to subvert the peace process, violence erupts with sudden brutality.

The larger political issues are reflected in the smaller sphere of Hawkes's personal life. His ranch is adjacent to a mining operation that threatens to destroy the surrounding delicate mountain ecology. Hostilities have broken out between rancher and miner in the past; Hawkes's father, in fact, was killed by a mine disaster, and his personal loss fuels his hatred of mining and strengthens his determination to preserve his land in as natural a state as possible. When a fullscale guerilla assault on his ranch occurs before he even announces his decision to undertake the Mars mission, he knows that there is some hidden connection between mining on Earth and the labor dispute on Mars. He decides that he will not be able to preserve his home until he resolves the larger problems on Mars.

Even at the very small level of Hawkes's private thoughts and feelings, diplomacy and negotiation between irreconcilable opposites dominate the scene. Hawkes sees the double nature of every utterance and gesture directed toward him, wrangling out the positive and negative options of his interactions with others, both public and private. A lifetime of diplomacy has made him distant in spite of his perfect cordiality, and earlier betrayals have left him determined to keep an impenetrable wall between his personal feelings and the interest of others in him. He is attractive to his assistant, Dina Martel, but she will have to hone her own diplomatic skills to reach him; their personal relationship will not develop until the resolution of the larger political issues.



Key Questions

Conflict abounds in William Shatner's *Man O' War* when a new food source called "smush" becomes a bone of contention for the colonists on Mars who mine it and for the people on Earth who depend on it.

1. Benton Hawkes has two distinct faces: the one he shows in diplomatic negotiations and the inner one that the reader sees frequently. Compare and contrast these differing aspects on this hero. Is this a believable and attractive combination?

2. What exactly is smush? Use your imagination to describe the appearance, growth habit, life cycle, processing methods, and taste of this new food staple.

3. The founding of labor unions in the United States was no easier than the same process is on Mars in *Man O' War*.

Look for some basic information about the IWW (International Workers of the World—the "Wobblies"), for example, and compare this bit of real labor history to the fictional troubles on Mars.

4. Space pirates attack the shuttle to Mars in chapters 12 through 14. What would it take for space pirates to stay in business given the circumstances in the novel? What must the rest of the future be like for these criminals to maintain their operations?

5. Examine the enmity between Benton Hawkes and Michael Carri. What are the grounds for deciding that one of these characters is a hero and the other a scoundrel?

6. A vivid and gruesome scene occurs at the opening of the novel when a resistance cell is annihilated underground on Mars. How does this scene compare, in its impact on the reader, to similar depictions of violence in science fiction films?

7. How does Dina Martel rate as a love interest? Is she a pumped-up futuristic heroine like Ripley in the "Alien" series, or a more traditional nurturing figure, or somewhere in between?

8. How are environmental issues on Earth intertwined with Martian labor negotiations? Does the establishment of the Martian embassy suggest a conflict of interest for Benton Hawkes?

9. How does eating meat function as a metaphor or symbol in *Man O' War*?

10. What does it take to be a colonist of other worlds? What personal and social characteristics are required? What benefits are expected?

Literary Precedents

Novels and short stories about Mars have been a staple of science fiction and fantasy writing from its beginning. Edgar Rice Burroughs, better known as the creator of Tarzan, wrote novels set on Mars. The famed "canals" of Mars suggested to him an entire civilization which he developed in a series of titles. Ray Bradbury, one of the science fiction authors William Shatner most admires, set *The Martian Chronicles* (1950; see separate entry) on the red planet.

Shatner's novels, including *Man O' War*, are "soft" science fiction, which focuses more on characters than on science. The stories, however, are also closely related to the lesser-known genre of men's action-adventure novels since they focus more on fist fights, tough talk, weaponry, and sentimentalized romance than on science, technology, or future worlds. Like Shatner's popular "Tek" series, *Man O' War* subordinates science to the hero's adventures, which differ little from the adventures of numerous other larger-than-life, two-fisted heroes of page and screen. The science fiction elements are present to season the story, but they could all be eliminated without changing the basic nature of the plot. *Man O' War* differs from Shatner's previous novels because of his more mature, complex, and cynical hero; that hero, however, gets into just as many fights and survives just as many explosions as does every other action-adventure hero.

Related Titles

Unlike Shatner's other novels, *Man O' War* is a stand-alone title. It resembles other works by Shatner primarily in belonging to the category of science fiction. Shatner's "Tek" series is one interconnected story that follows the adventures of Jake Cardigan throughout the following nine titles: *Tekwar* (1990), *Teklords* (1992), *Tek Vengeance* (1993), *Teklab* (1994), *Tek Secret* (1994), *Tek Power* (1995), *Tek Money* (1995), *Tek Kill* (1996), and *Tek Net* (1997). Another set of novels is Shatner's series with teenaged hero Jim Endicott, called "Quest for Tomorrow". The series includes the titles *Delta Search* (1997) and *In Alien Hands* (1997).

Endicott may be a gesture of recognition to Shatner's many youthful fans, who are perhaps more likely to identify with an actionadventure hero of their own age.



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