

Master of Fiends Short Guide

Master of Fiends by Douglas Hill

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Overview

In *Master of Fiends* Hill creates a suspenseful and engaging fantasy that also addresses the issues of growing from childhood to maturity. The hero, Jarral, fights with the aid of his friends to rescue the good wizard Cryltaur Tabbetang from a horde of demons who rule the world in which he lives. While the weirdly grotesque monsters and magic spells may remind readers of a *Dungeons and Dragons* game, Hill also explores several issues that are traditional in "coming of age" tales: personal courage, the importance of friendship, and the ability to confront fear and death. While the events of the story are magical and improbable, the humanity of the characters with their virtues and faults, hopes and fears, keeps the tale believable.

Like many fantasy writers, Hill also uses his story to talk about the nature of cruelty, evil, and tyranny in the real world. Great courage is needed to overcome the evils of our own world, says Hill, but that courage may be found even in the most ordinary people. It is found in people like Jarral, and people like ourselves.

About the Author

Douglas Arthur Hill was born on April 6, 1935 in Brandon, Manitoba and was raised in rural Canada in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The jacket of one of his books quotes the writer as stating, "The backwoods of Canada were a great place to grow up in but a lousy place to be an adolescent." A self-described "dreamer," Hill began reading science fiction at an early age.

Staples of his reading diet included the Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers comic strips, whose influence can still be seen in his fast-paced futuristic adventure stories for young people.

Hill left home at the age of seventeen to attend the University of Saskatchewan at Saskatoon; he graduated and continued his studies at the University of Toronto. At age twenty-three he moved to London, England, where he still makes his home.

Hill's interest in science fiction has continued through his adult life. In 1963, he became a science fiction critic for the London Weekly Tribune, where he also spent several years as Literary and Arts editor. He has edited poetry and folklore anthologies, and he has written nonfiction books on mythology, the supernatural, and the history of Canada and England. He now spends most of his time writing young adult science fiction and fantasy. His books include the Last Legionary quintet, five books about a futuristic warrior named Keill Randor, and the ColSec Trilogy, about some teenage rebels on a distant planet. Master of Fiends is a sequel to Hill's Blade of the Poisoner.



Setting

The story is set in a fantasy world that is ruthlessly governed by an evil wizard, Maeleccirik, also known as the Master of Fiends. Maeleccirik uses his sorcery to command an army of demons, and he delights in enslaving and torturing innocent creatures and people. The only opposition to Maeleccirik's rule comes from the good wizard Cryltaur Tabbetang, assisted by a handful of good spirits and four humans who possess special mental powers or Talents. These extraordinary humans are the heroes of Hill's story.

As the book opens we meet these four warriors: twelve-year-old Jarral, who possesses the power to summon forces of nature; young Mandra, a girl who can cloud the minds of others and alter perceptions; Scythe, physically blind, whose psychic vision makes him a swordsman without match; and Archer, a female giant who can move objects with her mind, and whose skill with the bow and arrow is unmatched.

These four friends embark on the difficult task of freeing their friend and leader, Cryltaur, from the powers of darkness that have imprisoned him inside the palace of the Master of Fiends. Without Cryl's sorcery to help them, the four humans have little chance of success, but since they are already being hunted by Maeleccirik's demon horde, they decide to take the risk of entering the Master's castle.



Social Sensitivity

Hill offers women an equal role with men in this fantasy-adventure. Both Mandra and Archer play crucial roles in saving the lives of their friends. Archer, in particular, being large and husky, as well as an expert with the bow and arrow, breaks the stereotype of women as helpless creatures that need to be rescued all the time.

Nor are the male characters stereotyped. Jarral is not presented as less masculine because he feels fear. Hill emphasizes that fear is only natural in some situations. Courage is the ability to face fear, not the inability to feel it.

Scythe also, while in many respects a standard male warrior-hero, displays gentleness and concern for his friends at crucial moments. It is clear that his feelings are deeper than he usually lets on.

Racial harmony is emphasized by the cooperation between the humans and the Brulnii. While Archer and Scythe debate the ethics of slaying these creatures early in the book, the humans and the Brulnii are able to help each other when they become aware of the values that they hold in common.

The violence in the book may cause concern for some parents. The battle scenes, while not excessive, are realistic. The demons are described in all their grotesque detail, and most of their deaths are fairly grisly. Younger readers may find these aspects of the book frightening or disturbing.

Parents who object to fantasy roleplaying games such as Dungeons and Dragons may dislike the book's elements of magic, and the presence of demons, wizards, and spirits in the story.

Literary Qualities

Above all, *Master of Fiends* is an absorbing adventure with interesting characters. Although the book is written in the third person, rather than the first, the reader's perceptions are all filtered through the character of Jarral.

As an ordinary person in an extraordinary situation, Jarral is a good focal point for the story because it is easy for the reader to empathize with him and share his experiences. The reader will admire Scythe's skill with the sword, Archer's great strength, and Mandra's selflessness because Jarral admires these qualities. This point of view also helps emphasize the theme of Jarral's growth to maturity. Fear and stress may cause Jarral to panic, but gradually he learns to confront his fears. Through Jarral, Hill is also able to touch on other issues of growing up, such as the budding romantic feelings Jarral has for Mandra.

Hill writes in a style that reads quickly, with many colorful action verbs and skillful descriptions of settings and strange monsters. He displays humor through the characters and their relationships as the story progresses. Mandra gets upset when Jarral calls a soaking rain shower to ward off the demons, drenching her clothing in the process. Scythe is ever ready with grimly humorous remarks.

The humor helps to lighten the tension in the story.



Themes and Characters

The characters in *Master of Fiends* include many fantastic creatures in addition to the four human heroes. The wizard Cryltaur Tabbetang plays an important role, as does his enemy, the evil Maeleccirik. The leader of the demons is a crystal giant called Annihilannic, who commands a horde of grotesque and wildly varied monsters.

Opposed to Annihilannic is the demigod Iridial, who has been living in self-imposed exile after a humiliating defeat by the demon horde. Although opposed to the demons and their master, Iridial is also arrogant and not always concerned with the welfare of humans. Also important are the Keeper of the Chasms, a creature made of darkness, and a race of enslaved but noble creatures called the Brulnii, who live in dark caverns beneath the mountains known as the Barrier Peaks.

The book draws a distinction between "true magic" which resides in supernatural spirits and demons, and the unusual, but perfectly natural powers of the mind, which are called Talents. Jarral and his friends are distinguished not only by their Talents, but by their personalities.

Archer, the bow-woman, is the most nurturing and parental of the group, frequently acting as mother to the young Jarral and Mandra. While courageous and a great fighter, Archer has a heart that is gentle as well as brave, and she is unwilling to harm creatures such as the Brulnii, who capture the heroes early in the story. The Brulnii wish the humans no harm and even come to admire them, but they are unwilling to let them escape the underground Chasms because they fear punishment from the evil Keeper and his magic sword, Shadowmaker.

Scythe, a more conventional hero than Archer, argues that the companions should attempt an escape whether they have to hurt the Brulnii or not.

This reaction says a good deal about his nature, for Scythe is a warrior at heart. He keeps most of his feelings to himself and has a grim, sometimes sarcastic wit. Nevertheless he displays genuine concern for Jarral and is fiercely protective of all his friends.

Mandra, or the Lady Mandragorina, is a blonde fourteen-year-old girl from a wealthy family. Perhaps because of her privileged upbringing, Mandra can appear spoiled and imperious at times, but she is always willing to run risks for the others.

The most important character in the story is Jarral, because the entire adventure is seen from his perspective.

Despite his extraordinary ability to summon raw forces of nature or Elementals, he is a rather ordinary boy with ordinary fears. Jarral's handling of his fear is an important part of the story. Although he is capable of neutralizing the powers of demons by calling on the forces of nature, Jarral must learn not to panic. For if his Talent runs wild, he is just



as likely to bring a rockslide, a storm, or an earthquake upon his friends as he is to harm the demons. Jarral learns self-control when he realizes that his three friends are just as frightened as he is, but more accustomed to confronting their fears.

Hill emphasizes, through Jarral, that fear is not a thing to be ashamed of, but something that simply must be faced. Jarral's squeamishness at the sight of demons and his pangs of boyish love for Mandra also make him seem more down-to-earth than the other characters. Because of this, he is a good stand-in for the reader, who is bound to feel as out-of-place amid all the monsters and spells as Jarral undoubtedly does.

The four heroes embody the virtues that Hill is trying to emphasize. Their differences in talent, age, gender, physical capability, and social background are important because Jarral and his friends must learn to ignore their differences and cooperate if they are to survive their dangerous mission. The heroes treat each other as equals, despite their external differences. They take turns at watch, assist each other with their Talents, and eventually they come to care about each other. They also respect the nonhuman creatures, such as the Brulnii, that they meet on their quest. After Archer saves the life of the Brulnii leader, Gradd, the creatures finally agree to help the four heroes escape from beneath the mountains. Jarral calls forth a fire from the depths of the earth, and several Brulnii, allowing the flames to catch on their own shaggy coats, surround the Keeper of the Chasms and destroy him with the fire's brightness. The self-sacrifice of the Brulnii is one of the book's most moving scenes. As a result of their courage and Jarral's talent, the surviving Brulnii are freed and the four humans are able to continue their quest.

The heroes' respect for the Brulnii and each other is a marked contrast to the behavior and attitudes of the demon horde, who exist in a hierarchy where the powerful abuse the weak, and control is gained through fear. The demons have no concern for each other, and even kill their own kind to further their ends.

While the heroes are selfless and care for others, the demons are selfseeking. The villain, Maeleccirik, is a portrait of total selfishness, a wizened old man who has kept himself alive for centuries through black magic. Jarral looks at him and sees "what was left of a once-human spirit after an age of depravity and murder, corruption and pollution, atrocity and depravity."

By this time the heroes have invaded Maeleccirik's palace, believing themselves shielded from the demons' eyes by Mandra's psychic Talent. The girl pours her very life-force into protecting her friends, until she is so weak that Archer has to carry her. But Scythe has taken the sword Shadowmaker from the realm of the Chasms, and the sword's magic is detected by the Master's horde. The demons allow the heroes to proceed into the Hall of Mastery, where they find the wizard Cryl, still alive, but encased inside an enormous jewel. A battle scene follows.

Archer and Scythe fight valiantly in the climactic moments, while Jarral comforts the dying Mandra. Cryl's jewelprison is destroyed in the cross-fire, and the wizard is flung



free. But he is apparently dead. When Archer and Scythe fall in the battle, Jarral is left alone to confront the Master of Fiends.

Having watched his friends, and previously, the Brulnii, sacrifice themselves so valiantly, Jarral is no longer concerned with his own life, but only with the lives of his friends. It is Jarral's concern that saves the lives of Mandra, Scythe, Archer and Ceryl. For as they all lay scattered about Maeleccirik's Hall, near death, the demi-god Iridial arrives to do battle with Annihilannic and his horde. Iridial defeats the demon, and sends the Master of Fiends to be tormented by his former demon-slaves, but as he turns to leave the palace, Jarral calls out to him "Don't leave. . .my friends.... " The good spirit is impressed by the nobility of this selfless plea and restores Jarral and his friends to health. With the Master of Fiends defeated, the world can finally become a place of happiness and freedom.

The meaning of courage, especially the courage to face death, is important throughout the book. Jarral and his friends fight nearly impossible odds to defeat the Master of Fiends. Their quest, from the beginning until almost the last minute, seems hopeless. Although they cheat death a number of times, the heroes are ready to die when the time comes. Jarral, awaiting his own death, realizes "that he [will] welcome that moment [of death], as a release from anguish and terror and despair." Hill suggests through his story that the courage to fight against evil is in itself a kind of victory, no matter how the battle itself turns out, for the heroes are saved—and able to save their world—because they are virtuous, not because of their superior physical or military capabilities.

Near the end of the book, when the demons' victory seems assured, the heroes are taunted by the evil creatures who say that he wasted his effort. But these efforts are not in fact wasted. As Scythe points out to Jarral just before he goes down in battle, "we've had the satisfaction of shaking things up in the enemy's palace, and wiping out some demons. . . Just killing [one of the demons] was worth it."

Scythe also tells Jarral that he's glad "not to die alone." The bond of friendship that exists between the heroes emphasizes the theme of comradeship, and the idea that evils can be more easily faced with the help of loyal friends. Jarral's personal loyalty to his friends is the force that saves the heroes from certain death in the end.



Topics for Discussion

1. Archer and Scythe have different opinions about whether or not to attack the Brulnii in an effort to escape the caverns. Archer is reluctant to hurt them.

Scythe is resigned to the notion that they must. Who is right? What do the differing responses show about each character?

2. At one point Archer is possessed by a demon and attempts to kill Jarral, but the others stop her. After regaining control of herself, Archer says she could not have forgiven herself if she had actually hurt the boy. "We couldn't have either," replies Scythe. Is his response fair to Archer? Why or why not?

3. At the end of the story, Mandra and Jarral agree to meet again when they've "grown up" and perhaps explore a romance together. Is it unfair of Hill not to reveal the outcome of their relationship in the book? Do you find this ending satisfying?

4. When the evil wizard Maeleccirik threatens to keep Jarral prisoner in a near-death state for a hundred years, Hill seems to be suggesting that some things experienced during life are worse than death. Do you agree? Are there any experiences in this world that might be considered worse than death?

5. Before the final battle, the demons taunt Jarral and his friends for having undertaken what they see as a futile quest, but the heroes are not shaken by these taunts. At the end of the book, Mandra congratulates Jarral for becoming good at risk-taking. What do you think Hill is saying about the willingness to take risks? What kinds of risks are worth taking and why?

6. Mandra eventually drains her strength attempting to shield the others from the eyes of the demons, but it does no good because the companions have already been detected through the presence of the magic sword, Shadowmaker. Is Mandra's self-sacrifice without value because she fails to hide her friends from the demons?

7. The Brulnii admire the humans, yet because they are slaves of the Keeper, they hold Jarral and his friends prisoner. When Scythe asks the Brulnii why they do not rebel against their master, the creatures reply that past revolts have been unsuccessful and ended in the deaths of many Brulnii.

Are the Brulnii being practical or cowardly in giving up their fight for freedom?

8. Scythe and Archer are stricken with grief at the loss of their weapons, as they would be at the loss of old friends. Scythe later falls in love with the magic sword Shadowmaker. Do you think Hill is guilty of romanticizing weapons and war?

9. Do you agree with Iridial that the sacrifice of Jarral and his friends was remarkable? If Iridial had not arrived, would that sacrifice have been less worthwhile?



10. One reviewer charges that *Master of Fiends* is merely a "wish fulfillment" story, in which the heroes do not really earn their victory over evil. Do you agree with this evaluation? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Because Hill casts the struggle between good and evil as a battle and presents the warriors as heroic figures, some people might argue that the author advocates violence as a good way to solve problems. Do you think this is the case? Find incidents in the story that support your conclusion.
2. Many writers present nature as a source of goodness and wisdom. How important are the powers of nature in *Master of Fiends*? How does Hill distinguish nature from the unnatural and the supernatural in his story?
3. Even though there are thousands of demons in Maeleccirik's horde, they eventually are defeated through the efforts of the humans. What is it about the demons' own behavior that contributes to their downfall? How is the behavior of the heroes different from that of the villains?
4. Hill has created a fantastic world in *Master of Fiends*, which includes supernatural magic, as well as the mental powers of the heroes, which are called Talents. What rules does Hill set up that govern the use of magic and Talents in the story? Are these rules applied consistently?
5. Compare this story with Douglas Hill's earlier novel about the same characters, *Blade of the Poisoner*. Which do you think is the better book? Has the character of Jarral matured at all in the second book, as compared to the first?
6. If you were writing the further adventures of Jarral and his friends, what would happen to them and their world? Would Scythe survive his soldiering career? Would Mandra and Jarral marry? What do you think will happen when the four friends meet again?



For Further Reference

Review. Booklist (September 15, 1988): 160. The critic praises Hill's gift for suspense and adds, "individualized characters and imaginative settings keep the story from being overly sensational."

Review. British Book News—Children's Books (March 1988): 30. The critic comments that "the language of the telling is often over-spiced; but the tale is never less than compulsively readable."

Review. Horn Book (March/April 1989): 234. Notes the book's "excitement, action, and peril."

Review. Junior Bookshelf (April 1988): 103. Praises Hill's vivid descriptions and action-filled plot.

Review. School Librarian (August 1988): 108. Praises Hill's "high skill in using setting, physical description, action and distinctive dialogue."

Also notes the thought-provoking elements of Hill's fiction.

Review. School Library Journal (November 1988): 125. Maintains that Master of Fiends while inventive, lacks character development compared to its predecessor, Blade of the Poisoner.

Review. VOYA (December 1988): 246.

The critic praises Master of Fiends for its "colorful creatures" and "suspenseful situations."

Related Titles

Master of Fiends is the sequel to Blade 3579 of the Poisoner, in which the boy Jarral is sentenced to death by a wound from an enchanted sword and meets the three heroic friends who eventually save his life. The wizard Cryl is captured by the forces of evil at the end of this book, and so the four friends' quest to save him is carried on in Master of Fiends.

Most of Hill's previous works for young people have been science fiction.

The books include the ColSec Trilogy: Exiles of ColSec, The Caves of Klydor, and ColSec Rebellion, as well as a set of five books about an intergalactic warrior named Keill Randor. Most of Hill's books feature young people in challenging settings, facing powerful villains and fantastic monsters. Most of these books are brisk, readable adventures with much action and suspense.

They often deal with issues of growing up, taking responsibility for oneself, learning to survive in harsh circumstances, and having the courage to act upon one's personal beliefs.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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