

The Ophiuchi Hotline Short Guide

The Ophiuchi Hotline by John Varley

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Characters

The search for self is an important task for the characters of *The Ophiuchi Hotline*. Some define themselves by their goals. For instance, Boss Tweed has made himself sexually neuter so that he may pursue his goal of liberating Earth without the distractions of sexual desire and romantic love. Others, such as Lilo, seem destined to search endlessly for a sense of identity.

Lilo has chosen to be physically a woman because she feels more comfortable as a female than as a male.

However, her relationships with other characters are unsatisfying; heterosexual and lesbian sex are momentary pleasures at best, with no lasting emotional satisfaction.

Lilo's search for her own identity is further complicated by Tweed's frequent cloning of her. The original Lilo, as well as Lilo 1 and Lilo 2, dies early in the novel. Eventually Lilo's clones go on different adventures, each sharing a degree of consciousness with the others. The goal of creating humanity's future gives her a sense of direction, but for readers her role as an allegorical figure gives her character the most substance. One Lilo literally lives for ten years in the far future, while another discovers the means for humanity to escape annihilation, and another delays the attack of the Free Earthers on the Invaders that would trigger remorseless retribution. In her many forms, Lilo represents the future. Her open-mindedness, her flexibility, and her curiosity — an intense desire to know the mysteries of the *Ophiuchi Hotline* — are the traits humanity will need in order to survive.



Social Concerns

In the late twentieth century, humanity was evicted from Earth by the Invaders — an alien race that had evolved in a giant gas planet. For them, time itself is just another physical reality, the way three-dimensional space is for human beings. In their hierarchy of intelligence, the Invaders are at the top level, sharing it with other beings who, like themselves, had evolved in gas planets such as Jupiter. The second level of intelligence is occupied by whales and dolphins, and beneath them are land-dwelling races such as humanity. The Invaders routinely travel about the universe evicting land-dwelling civilizations in favor of species similar to whales. Utterly beyond human comprehension, the Invaders are invincible; humanity can never return to Earth and must dwell on the other planets and moons of the solar system.

Soon after its eviction from Earth, humanity began to receive scientific information from a laser signal emanating from the direction of the star Ophiuchi 70. More than five hundred years later, human civilization has changed radically from what it was in the twentieth century. For instance, surgery is routinely performed by technicians armed with equipment that makes the practice of medicine simple. In chapter 2, the protagonist Lilo's left arm is severed at the elbow, and she is given a new forearm with a genotype that will allow her to pass undiscovered through customs. Sex changes are also commonplace, as is cloning. When a person dies his mind may be transferred to a genetic duplicate.

In a search for identity, human society has concluded that the DNA in one's genes defines the individual person. Thus, manipulating DNA is taboo. To even study genetic engineering has become a criminal offense punishable by death. Lilo is caught studying genetic information that had been transmitted over the Ophiuchi Hotline, and she is sentenced to eternal death; there will be no clone to receive her mind.

Society's attitude toward genetic engineering not only threatens Lilo's life, but the future existence for all humanity. Clinging to DNA as the definition of "human being" has made the race static. As becomes amply clear, humanity must take its evolution into its own hands or perish. This makes *The Ophiuchi Hotline* a sophisticated allegory. On its primary level, the novel asserts that growth is necessary for survival. The past is not just irretrievable, as symbolized by the Invaders' domination of Earth, but attempts to retrieve it are suicidal. This common literary idea is given a sense of immediacy by Varley's absorption of modern trends into his novel. In the late twentieth century, genetic engineering, new sexual mores, intelligent computers, and other technological and social innovations seem to point to a frightening future in which past moral values and traditional definitions of what makes a person a human being will be meaningless. In Varley's vision of the far future, humanity's choices dramatize those that must be made in the present. To move forward, the novel emphasizes, is to find a future for the human race; to turn back to the past is to have no future.

Techniques

One reason why critics have sometimes called John Varley a "young Robert Heinlein" is the skillful plotting of his fiction. In fact, some critics see him as a throwback to a literary era that is now out-of-date. Most readers, on the other hand, note the inventiveness of setting and situation in Varley's writings. The Ophiuchi Hotline offers to readers a world that is dazzlingly different from their own. The careful construction of the plot helps readers follow events that could be confusing out of context. For instance, having different Lilos on different adventures could turn the novel into a vague and wandering morass of unexplained details if not for the unifying problem of the Ophiuchi Hotline. By directing the plot toward the goal of discovering the secrets of the Hotline, Varley gives his imaginary society order; that is, the details arise logically, not at random, and are therefore easy to understand.

Themes

The novel focuses on Lilo's search for knowledge, as well as her search for her own identity. The search for knowledge is enhanced when she becomes three Lilos. One eventually uncovers the source of the Ophiuchi Hotline and discovers humanity's only hope for a future. Another is flung several thousand years into the future by the Invaders, where she discovers the meager life left to primitive and superstitious people on Earth. The other helps thwart the plans of the tyrannical Boss Tweed, leader of the Free Earthers, whose plans to retake Earth from the Invaders would result in the extermination of humanity. Each learns and subliminally shares with the others, giving the Lilos an understanding of what her race must do to survive.



Key Questions

The Ophiuchi Hotline is an exciting read, filled as it is with multiple adventures and imaginative depictions of people and places. Its social ideas are particularly inviting to discussion. Will physicians become merely lowly technicians when medicine becomes more advanced? Will genes be used to define who we are as human beings? Are there aspects of the universe that humanity will never be able to defy? Are there limits to what we as a group can achieve? A good novel of ideas should spark many interesting questions and inspire many imaginative answers. If you are part of a book club that discusses science fiction and you need a good novel for inspiring debate and imaginative ideas about the future, The Ophiuchi Hotline would fulfill your needs admirably.

1. Often in science fiction, human beings are confronted by hostile forces far greater than themselves. Their stories tend to focus on how they battle these hostile forces. Yet in The Ophiuchi Hotline, the hostile forces are beyond the ability of human beings to harm or even interfere with much. How does the inability of humanity to fight its enemy affect the narrative? How does it affect your expectations for the novel?

Does it make the novel too dark and unhappy? Is humanity's helplessness disturbing?

2. Is it credible that a culture that relies heavily on medical miracles would be hostile to genetic engineering?

3. Would the ability to change gender easily affect a culture the way it does in The Ophiuchi Hotline?

4. In the future depicted in The Ophiuchi Hotline, what of our present-day morals and mores would have to be discarded? What would take their place?

5. How do the multiple Lilos affect the flow of the novel's narrative? Is their interplay interesting? Which is the real Lilo?

6. Is the novel's plotting a throwback to the science fiction of the 1940s and 1950s? Would this be bad?

7. How complete is Varley's depiction of the imaginary future of The Ophiuchi Hotline? Is it complete enough that you could create your own characters and have them have adventures in The Ophiuchi Hotline's universe?

8. Will the humanity of The Ophiuchi Hotline genetically engineer itself so that it can survive and perhaps expand into the universe beyond the Solar System?

9. Why is sexual intercourse treated as emotionally unsatisfying or even a hindrance?

10. Why would those who seek to fight the Invaders be bad guys? Is fighting against oppression not good?

Literary Precedents

In 1948, A. E. van Vogt's seminal novel *The World of Null-A* was published. Its main character Gosseyn has extra matter in his brain, allowing him to integrate his intellectual and animal thoughts and feelings better than other human beings. Thus, he represents the next step in human evolution. He has an unknown number of dormant clones scattered around the solar system, and when he is murdered, one of these clones awakens and retains all the memories of his predecessor. *The Ophiuchi Hotline* is also concerned with the future of humanity; genetic engineering is necessary for humanity to take its next evolutionary step into the cosmos. Furthermore, Varley's characters are reborn in their clones when they die. In both *The World of Null-A* and *The Ophiuchi Hotline*, the ability of the main character to survive death is important for plot development.

On the other hand, the novels differ in important ways. Van Vogt's novel suggests that humanity will be able to positively affect its own future by understanding itself better. A seemingly invincible alien army is stalemated by people schooled in the NullA philosophy. In Varley's novel, people must react to their environment rather than control it; the universe is largely indifferent to their survival. Indeed, the universe represented by the timemanipulating Invaders is beyond humanity's comprehension. Evolution in van Vogt's novel is an advancement in human powers, but in Varley's book it is an adjustment to circumstances that are beyond human control. In the one, humanity's destiny is chosen by humanity, but in the other, humanity's destiny is forced on humanity.



Related Titles

The Ophiuchi Hotline is part of a group of stories set in a future in which the Invaders have forced humanity off of Earth. The short stories usually use this imaginative future as background for themes and ideas that relate to developments in society and technology during the 1970s and 1980s.

For instance, "Overdrawn at the Memory Bank" (1976) is a funny tale of a person, Fingal, whose personality is accidentally trapped inside a computer.



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