

# Phoenix in the Ashes Short Guide

## Phoenix in the Ashes by Joan D. Vinge

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## Characters

The main characters in *Phoenix in the Ashes* are Amanda Montoya and Cristovao Hoffmann. Both are outcasts from their society. Hoffmann is outcast both because he is a loner by nature and because he is irreverent to his superiors. Hoffmann is tolerated, but not liked, because of his uncanny ability at "prospecting," finding abandoned cities in the devastated Northern Hemisphere to be mined by the Brazilian government. Hoffmann talks to himself and to his helicopter more than to anyone else. Amanda Montoya is outcast for refusing to marry the man of her father's choice. As a result, her father and mother no longer speak to her. Her only real contact with kinsmen comes from her sister Teresa's family, and only because Teresa's husband is a kind man. Because she is unmarried, Amanda is not allowed to socialize with anyone outside her family. She no longer even goes to church because she cannot bear the whispering of the townspeople who despise her as an outcast from her own family.



## Social Concerns

Vinge uses Phoenix in the Ashes to explore both the dangers of technology run amok and the dangers of a religion-dominated society. The novella examines a post-holocaust society in Sanpedro in the Los Angeles Basin where every aspect of life is controlled by a religion that condemns any "unnatural" use of metal, fuel, or technology. Fields are tilled by hand; the only power is horsepower; cloth is hand woven. Characters refer to the "Prophet Angel" and his "book" which prescribes their way of life. Apparently, the survivors of the holocaust 250 years earlier realized the dangers of technology and determined to see to it that their mistakes were not repeated. Unfortunately, the society they created is dominated by a religion with no tolerance for dissent. Families are ruled by males who may dispose of their kinswomen as they see fit. A woman's role is to be modest and submissive first to her father and then to her husband. Amanda, the protagonist, has been shunned by her father for refusing the man of his choice. As a result, she lives a beggarly existence in a dilapidated cottage on his farm, gleaning food from his fields, weaving cloth to sell at the market to supplement her meager supplies, and taking charity from her sister Teresa. When a helicopter from another pocket of civilization crashes in Amanda's father's field, the onlookers refuse to rescue the pilot because he has violated Angel's proscription against unnatural uses of metal. It is left to Amanda to tend the man when he crawls up to her door and to help him find a way to fit into Sanpedro society. Vinge clearly draws the results of the abuse of technology as well as the results of a society dominated by a narrow-minded religious sect.

# Techniques

Phoenix in the Ashes is told straightforwardly by a third-person narrator who has access to the thoughts of the main characters, Amanda Montoya and Cristovao Hoffmann. The novella is too short to have subplots although there are hints that other stories than Amanda's could be told. Perhaps Vinge is saving the stories of Teresa and Estella for another time and story.

# Themes

As in *Psion* (1982), the main theme of *Phoenix in the Ashes* is communication as a means of ending isolation. Hoffmann the helicopter pilot is a loner, tolerated by his employers because he is their best prospector for abandoned cities which can be mined for raw materials such as metal and other minerals. Hoffmann talks to himself both because he does not really like any of his employers and because he spends long hours alone on his journeys. He has no friends. In Amanda's case, none of her kin, except for her sister Teresa's family, speaks to her. Teresa has fortunately married a man who truly loves her and wants her to be happy.

Amanda is amazed and envious at the trust and unspoken affection between Teresa and her husband. She is also keenly aware that her other sister, Estella, is beaten by her husband for imagined transgressions. In her youthful ignorance, Amanda had foregone her chance for marriage by refusing her father's choice. Now, although she is lonely and overworked, Amanda is conscious that she is better off than Estella, if not so well off as Teresa.

Amanda realizes the extent of her isolation and loneliness when she is forced by circumstances to care for Hoffmann. When Hoffmann recovers from his injuries, he talks to Amanda as an equal and offers to help with the endless work necessary for survival. At first wary of a man who would willingly do "women's work," Amanda eventually comes to enjoy Hoffmann's company. Later, he asks her to find a way to marry him, which she does. Her father gives her to Hoffmann for the bride-price of the scrap from Hoffmann's helicopter. Amanda reverts to a proper Sanpedro wife's role, which angers Hoffmann. She finally understands that he wants a marriage of equals with full communication, not deference on her part. After Amanda realizes this, she and Hoffmann are happy. In fact, when his more technologically advanced employers arrive to rescue him, Hoffmann refuses to go, choosing the harder life of Sanpedro with Amanda.



## Key Questions

Vinge depicts Sanpedro society as male-dominated. Men make all the decisions and are deferred to by the women. Women wear veils and corsets and are protected by their male kin.

Unprotected women are, for the most part, relegated to begging or prostitution in order to survive. Amanda's father is regarded as exceptionally merciful for allowing her to live in a hovel on his land and glean from his fields. When Amanda sees a group of the mayor's men talking to her father, she wishes to hide because the mayor's men sometimes demand women along with tribute.

Sanpedro society also subscribes to a repressive religion that sharply limits the use of technology. Clearly, this religion grew out of the fear that the same forces that destroyed the North American continent would arise again unless they were held in check. All the benefits of technology were discarded along with its abuses making life hard and punishing except for the very few wealthy landowners.

Clearly, too, the Brazilian government that employs Hoffmann wants him to find not only mineral deposits, but also an exploitable native population to work in the polluted, radioactive, or otherwise hazardous "mines."

Neither Hoffmann nor the government regards these "gooks" as human. When Hoffmann meets Amanda, he sees the native labor pool in a new light.

1. In spite of the fact that they are sheltered and protected by their men, how much real value do you think is placed on women in Sanpedro society?
2. What comparisons can you draw between the treatment Hoffmann's civilization metes out to "locals" at its prospecting sites and the treatment of Third World laborers today?
3. What do you think the story is saying about the limits and uses of technology?
4. What point do you think the story is making about the limits and uses of religion?

## Literary Precedents

According to Vinge, *Phoenix in the Ashes* was inspired by an old folk song, "Take Me Out of Pity." It also owes much to both "Cinderella" and "The Ugly Duckling." Although at least one of Amanda's sisters is kind to her, she is the family outcast who works much harder than her sisters just to survive.

As a result of her hard labor, she is, like Cinderella, often tired and harried.

Like the title character in "The Ugly Duckling," she considers herself unattractive because she is too thin by the standards of her society and because she is too old now to be attractive. She blossoms when the "right" man obviously finds her physically attractive, wants her despite her lack of dowry, and is even willing to pay a bride price for her.





# Copyright Information

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