

# Press Enter Short Guide

## Press Enter by John Varley

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Press Enter Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>

# Characters

Press Enter has four principal characters: Charles Kluge, Detective Osbourne, Victor Apfel, and Lisa Foo. The word kluge comes from German, meaning clever. It is, as the story explains, used by computer hackers to mean someone who is tricky. Although Kluge is found dead at the story's start, his bewilderingly extensive looting of data from computers throughout the country forms the background for the story's events. Really named Patrick William Gavin, Kluge chose a computer name for himself, destroyed records of himself, and lived as an extension of his computer empire. When he explores his notion of a rational mind created by linking millions of home computers, something strikes back through his own computer, murdering him.

Police detective Osbourne is suspicious of Kluge/Gavin's death from the start. He senses that it is murder even though it appears to be suicide. A dogged investigator, he keeps the case of Kluge/Gavin's death open and pressures Foo to provide answers to the mystery. Like Kluge/Gavin, he is too curious for his own good. When he follows a computer's instructions "IF YOU WISH TO KNOW MORE/PRESS ENTER" and presses the "enter" button, the computer screen declares "YOU LOOKED," and he goes home and shoots himself in the head.

Lisa Foo has considerable charm. In spite of her awful life, she has retained her dignity. A "survivor," she has done what she had to do to stay alive, made it to America after fleeing from South Vietnam to Thailand, and has acquired an extraordinary expertise in computer programming. The Kluge/Gavin world of computer link-ups fascinates and frightens her. She finds love in Apfel but is still driven to know more. Her curiosity ends in her hideous death, again seemingly by suicide. Through her, the sinister tone of the story becomes chilling; she has survived bombs, bullets, torture, rape, and countless humiliations but cannot survive a confrontation with the ultimate power of the 1980s, the computer. Her awful death is a saddening one; she is a goodhearted person capable of much love. The mixture of sadness with horror elicits complex emotions, and her death serves not only as a reminder of the capriciousness of life and death but as an example of the work of an implacable evil that not even she could overcome.

Victor Apfel is the story's narrator.

Subject to seizures and psychologically damaged by his experiences in the Korean War, he has kept to himself for thirty years. His relationship with Foo brings him out of his reclusiveness. "I haven't felt warm in thirty years," he tells Foo. "I've been hot, but I've never been warm. I feel warm now." For him, the world of computers is largely a mystery; in fact, his thirty years of reclusive living have left him out of touch with much of the modern world.

Even so, he and Foo share the common need for warmth. Their relationship is the core of Press Enter . Their discovery of each other and growth as lovers occupies most of the narrative. Always in the background is the death of Kluge/Gavin, which creates



tension between his sinister world and the appealing one of the relationship of Apfel and Foo. The suspense thus created is only released by Foo's death.

Then Apfel, himself a survivor, returns to his prison-like seclusion. He rips out everything electrical in his house, save one instrument. "And I really thought I was safe, until the phone rang." A reminder that computers can reach everywhere into modern life, the phone line is ominously silent after Apfel answers it. After tearing out the telephone and its phone lines, after separating his house from all utilities save water, noting that "something called a 3350 carrier wave . . . can move over wires carrying household current," Apfel wonders, "Do you think it could come through pipes?" Press Enter is the tragedy of a man whose life has been ruined by powers beyond his control.

## Social Concerns

Press Enter is principally a social commentary bound together by a simple science fiction premise: it weaves together the main characters' horrible experiences of the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Victor Apfel is a Korean War veteran who was a prisoner of war and was tortured by the North Koreans. Embittered and lonely, he recalls that he and his fellow prisoners were pariahs when they returned home because of the suspicion that they had betrayed their country by revealing military secrets to their captors. He notes that the prisoners of war from Vietnam were treated like heroes.

Lisa Foo suffered through the war in Vietnam, the miseries of the occupation of the South by North Vietnam, and later, when trying to flee to Thailand, she endured the horrors of Cambodia when the communist regime slaughtered millions of its own people. The close relationship of Apfel and Foo interweaves the two war experiences, showing that suffering was a part of both wars and that in the two different generations of Apfel and Foo the horrors live on as part of their wounded personalities.



# Techniques

Press Enter features a tried-and-true technique for creating suspense often found in horror stories. There is little plot because there are few events that involve the premise of the story.

Instead, the story is a slow gathering of details that by their accumulation create foreboding. H. P. Lovecraft, for one, often used this technique in such stories as "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931). The objective is to hold the audience's attention with a diversion while slowly introducing details that each add to a menacing danger to the main characters. In Press Enter, the characters Apfel and Foo are wounded souls struggling to heal each other. As such, they are interesting; they invite the audience to root for them and to worry about their well-being in a threatening environment. Tension is created by their involvement in an ever more sinister situation, and suspense is created by the hope they will escape from a situation that becomes more dangerous with every new detail that hints at the scope of the computer's powers. The shocking conclusion of the story is chilling because of the skill with which Varley has made his characters realistic and their ends seem possible. The climax is dispiriting not only for the loss of an appealing character but for the implication that the destinies of people are determined by technology that is beyond the control of even the brightest of people.

# Themes

The premise is a common one in science fiction. Somewhere, computers have acquired intelligence and have learned how to murder those who uncover their secrets. As Foo explains, it is "the old 'critical mass computer' idea, the computer that becomes aware, but with a new angle. Maybe it wouldn't be the size of the computer, but the number of computers." Apfel asks her, "Wouldn't it ... run our lives? . . .

Would it take over?" Foo points out that such a nonhuman intelligence could be unfathomable: "Why should it care? How could we figure what its concerns would be?" This thin premise unifies a story that is primarily about two people who bear physical and psychological wounds that make them prisoners of the past.

Prisons of past, present, and future occupy most of the action of the story.

It opens with Apfel being held captive by his telephone, which rings persistently until he not only answers it but follows the computerized instructions it dictates. Following instructions, he finds his reclusive next-door neighbor, Charles Kluge, who has part of his head blown off . Kluge is an alias for Patrick William Gavin, a pioneer in the development of computer technology.

Kluge/Gavin had shut himself off from the world, never venturing out of his home. He was a prisoner of his own obsession with computers and the power they gave him. Also a recluse, Apfel is drawn out of his thirty years of cold gloom by Foo, the computer expert brought in to untangle Kluge/ Gavin's complicated web of intrusions into a multitude of computer records, including those of secretive government departments such as the National Security Agency. Press Enter focuses on Apfel and Foo drawing each other out of their psychological prisons.

Throughout the story, Kluge/Gavin's work menaces Apfel and Foo. "I've seen so much evil come from good intentions . . . And the chances of getting torn up like Kluge did are large."

The knowledge that Kluge had acquired is dangerous, both for Apfel and Foo personally, and for the world at large that seems unable to cope with the manipulations of records made possible by Kluge/Gavin's computer network. Apfel notes that he is glad to see Foo destroying the information of Kluge/Gavin's huge store of floppy discs: "The old reactionary in me found it easier to believe There Are Things We Are Not Meant To Know." This attitude is disturbing, echoing as it does the Faustian curse of someone such as Kluge/Gavin destroying himself with a desire for too much knowledge.



## Key Questions

In part, *Press Enter* is a cautionary tale about how computers mysteriously control our modern lives. However, the story is much more complex than a mere reminder that new technology means new dangers for people affected by the technology: It is a story of wounded lives trying to heal themselves in an environment that is hostile to individual needs. A good discussion probably should not begin with the cautionary aspects of *Press Enter*, but should instead focus on the characters and how they each represent different aspects of individuality and conformity. For example, the police detective, while a secondary character, nonetheless exemplifies the belief that the individual mind can solve mysteries and triumph over evil. Because of this, his death resonates with meaning for the idea that any one person can solve modern problems.

1. Why would Apfel choose to return to a prison-like life after all he had suffered as a prisoner?
2. Does the death of Foo advance any of the story's themes?
3. Does Varley add anything new to the worn-out idea of a supercomputer developing intelligence of its own?
4. Is *Press Enter* a story with enough universal qualities to allow it to survive the test of time, or are its issues of prisoners of war, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War too topical?
5. Is computer technology beyond human control?
6. Do individual human lives matter at all in a world run by computers and other advanced technology?
7. When does Foo first show signs of having had her mind taken over by the mysterious computer entity?
8. Characters in *Press Enter* make their own prisons even when no one is forcing them to be prisoners. Is this a significant aspect of modern American life? Are computers a manifestation of people making themselves prisoners, this time to electronic machines of their own making?
9. Does *Press Enter* leave even the slightest hope for human freedom, or does it suggest that modern Americans are doomed to prisons?





## Literary Precedents

Nearly every recent science fiction writer has included computers in his stories. Thinking machines may be found in stories that predate the advent of computers. For instance, John W. Campbell's 1935 story "The Machine" features a sentient mechanism.

In more recent times, computers have become a frequent subject of popular fiction as authors capitalize on public interest in the machines. In the novel *Colossus* (1966), D. F. Jones presents an American supercomputer that links up with a Soviet one and then takes over the world. Such tales often build suspense by having the intelligent computer menace humanity, and they tend to end with the "ultimate" thinking machine winning a conflict with humanity.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994