

# Psion Short Guide

## Psion by Joan D. Vinge

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# Characters

Psion has two major characters, Cat and Jule ta'Ming. Although most of the action and exposition is focused on Cat, Jule ta'Ming serves as an example of how even wealth and privilege cannot protect a person from prejudice.

Jule has two psi talents: She is both telekinetic and empathic. Discovery of these "shameful" talents, which indicate less than pure blood, causes Jule's estrangement from her wealthy and powerful family. The family pays her to go away and stay away, so she has wealth without power or position.

Ultimately, Jule uses her money to fund the psi experiments of Dr. Siebeling's Sakasse Institute. Jule's empathic power allows her to make contact with the feral Cat and calm him down. Cat develops a crush on Jule and stays with the Institute both to be near Jule and because the alternative is a return to his marginal existence in Oldcity.

Cat's experiences teach Jule how large conglomerates like the powerful ta'Ming contribute to the miserable existence of the underclass which they "mine" for forced labor on undesirable and often deadly worlds. Ultimately, to please Jule, Cat volunteers for a dangerous mission to capture a renegade telepath, Rubiy, who is threatening the existence of the human race. When Cat's life is threatened, Jule uses her telekinetic power to transport herself to the deadly planet where Cat is "undercover" as a forced laborer and saves his life. While on the mission, Cat manages spiritual contact with long gone Hydrans which changes his outlook on life. He begins to understand the connection between all sentient beings and to deplore the violence possible between nontelepathic humans and their aggression against the nonviolent Hydrans. Hard on this realization, Cat must confront and kill Rubiy.

His new understanding of the connection between himself and all thinking beings almost costs Cat his life as he hesitates at a critical point. Ultimately, Cat does kill Rubiy but at the cost of his newly won telepathic powers. He "hears" Rubiy's brain/ spirit die and the shock shuts down his telepathy, reducing him to communications with words and cutting him off from Jule.

His shock and hurt is compounded when Jule announces her engagement to Dr. Siebeling. Cat's material reward for saving humankind is a databand — he finally exists a real person.



## Social Concerns

In Psion, Vinge uses Cat, the protagonist, to show the personal and sociological destruction caused by prejudice.

Cat is hated and mistreated because he is a mixture of Terran and Hydran.

Unfortunately for Cat, he has inherited from his Hydran mother distinctive eyes with elliptical pupils (hence his name) as well as telepathic powers.

Any "pure" Terran can tell instantly from his eyes that Cat has Hydran blood. Fearing the Hydran telepathic powers, Terrans shun Cat, or try to hurt him. In his short life Cat has been both physically and psychologically abused by those of "purer" blood. He has become a junkie, selling himself and the opportunity to abuse him to maintain his habit. Cat also has blocked out his ability to use his talent because it is the cause of his horrendous mistreatment.

Along with other outcasts, Cat lives in Oldcity, a slum literally buried beneath the shining new city, Quarro, built above it. There is no protection for the inhabitants of Oldcity, who are used casually as entertainment by the privileged inhabitants of the new city.

Officially, the denizens of Oldcity do not exist because they have no data bands. They cannot leave Oldcity without one, and they can be, and are, used, abused, and killed with impunity by "real" citizens who regard them with a mixture of fear and loathing.

The parallels to our own society's prejudices and mistreatment of the underclass are unmistakable.



## Techniques

Except for a brief prologue, *Psion* is a first-person narrative told by Cat shortly after the events he has participated in. The first person narrative accomplishes two things. It puts the reader into the protagonist's head — in a sense allowing the reader to become a telepath like Cat. It also allows the reader to make his own judgements on Cat's outlook, since the reader is not an unsophisticated street rat. Since Cat is a teen-ager, between 16 and 17, the point of view is unsophisticated and often self-serving. But this makes Cat's description of his marginal existence even more horrifying. The descriptions of his life prior to his "volunteering" for the psi project are told with a childish matter-of-factness that can make a reader cringe. This technique engages the reader's sympathy for the abandoned child who grew up under a torrent of abuse. The reader can understand why Cat prefers to be used by the Sakasse Institute to living on the streets of Oldcity. Cat's childish desire to be part of a family is also engaging and his fantasy that he is Dr. Siebeling's lost half-Hydran child is moving.

This makes Dr. Siebeling's rejection of him more poignant. Cat's fantasies about Jule also arouse sympathy, since the reader can clearly see her empathy which Cat wrongly interprets as love.



# Themes

Communication is a major theme in Vinge's work. Most often her protagonist is cut off from society and must manage to communicate or face extinction. Most of her protagonists also learn that communication does not invariably make them happy. Cat is no exception. At the start of the novel, Cat is a teen-age junkie well on his way to an early death. Even in Oldcity, a haven for outcasts, Cat is shunned. Because his Hydran eyes proclaim him a telepath, people fear Cat. No one wants to have his mind spied upon. Ironically, Cat has instinctively blocked off his telepathic powers as the source of all his problems. Furthermore, Cat has retreated into a drug-hazed world to ease his rejection. Cat is saved from certain death by an organization devoted to research in psionics. He is forcibly "volunteered" for an experiment in telepathy, empathy, and telekinesis. He also develops a crush on his female mentor, Jule ta'Ming. In order to please Jule and his captors, Cat must learn, painfully, to undo both the barriers to his mind and to his emotions.

Once Cat has accomplished the former, the latter comes more easily. Unfortunately, Cat learns that communications can hurt, too. He loses his friend Dere to death and his adored Jule to another man. He also learns that his talent can hurt him when he uses it to kill a dangerous villain, Rubiy. Despite his villainy, Rubiy is a human being, and the killing temporarily wipes out Cat's telepathic ability. The novel ends with Cat desiring the fuller communication allowed by telepathy, yet confined to the everyday world of words where misunderstandings are common.



## Key Questions

Vinge's concern in Psion is two-fold.

She is concerned with the toll prejudice takes on individuals as well as society.

She is also concerned with alienation and its solution — communication.

When considering Psion, groups would do well to take into consideration the 3400 sequel, Catspaw, as well as some of Vinge's short works, particularly "Phoenix in the Ashes" (1985), and "Mother and Child."

1. Why do you think people fear Cat's telepathic powers?
2. Once Cat's powers are released, do you think that Cat is completely happy with the results?
3. What lesson do you think Jule learns from Cat's experiences?
4. How do you feel about the treatment of Cat and the other inhabitants of Oldcity?
5. What problems would people with psionic powers cause in society and what solutions do you see?

## Literary Precedents

Psion follows the traditions of science fiction. Its underpinnings involve interstellar travel, the fuel for the engines that allow such travel, various exotic nonterrestrial locales, psionic powers and their uses, and aliens whose DNA makes human-alien halfbreeds possible. The basic plot is also pure space opera — a bad guy threatens life as we know it and the underdog hero, after much physical suffering, prevails. In this, Psion resembles the Star Wars movies as well as various novels by Robert Heinlein, especially his juveniles. What sets Psion apart from the usual space opera is Vinge's attention to characterization. An inward looking character such as Cat is unusual in the plot-driven world of science fiction. Vinge lets the reader know how Cat's past life affects his decisions and his outlook. He is at heart a street rat trying to survive and to impress the woman he thinks he loves. On the other hand, Luke Skywalker, hero of the Star Wars trilogy, acts with a surety that Cat will never know. Luke embarks on his adventure out of a vague dissatisfaction with his rural life and the romantic notion of saving a princess. Cat is not a superhuman hero, despite his telepathic ability.

He nearly dies and is scarred for life by his adventure, both physically and mentally. Luke does go through his share of physical trauma, even losing a hand, but the hand is replaced and all other physical wounds are healed by modern technology. At the conclusion of the Star Wars trilogy, Luke is serenely triumphant, and all loose ends are happily tied up. At the end of Psion, Cat is spent. His body is scarred, and his talent is lost to him through the trauma of killing another human.

Although he is assured his power will return, Cat knows he will never be able to forget the past.



## Related Titles

Cat's adventures continue in *Catspaw*, published in 1988. Although Cat had thought himself safe once he had acquired a databand, he soon discovers that money is more powerful than citizenship. Cat is once again forcibly employed, this time by the ta'Ming combine. He is supposed to guard a politically active member of the combine, Elnear. By the end of the book Cat has attained a certain amount of serenity and security as absolute as Elnear can manage. Cat also appears in a short story "Psiren," published in the 1985 collection *Phoenix in the Ashes*.

"Psiren" is set after the events of *Psion* but before *Catspaw*. In this story, Cat rescues a Hydran woman from slavery.

In the end, she rejects him because he has seen too deeply into her soul, leaving him hurt and still "deaf" to telepathy. Both *Psion* and *Catspaw* were published in an omnibus edition *Alien Blood*, 1988.

In *Dreamfall* (1996) Cat, who is mainly human, has lost his telepathic powers, and has returned to the home of his alien mother as part of a scientific expedition to exploit economic resources of the planet. The alien race is technologically in decline, as well as hated and oppressed by humans. Cat finds himself caught up in the strife between humans and aliens in an independence movement among his mother's race. His personal story is an empathetic narrative about prejudice and injustice from the victim's perspective.

Cat's survival is testimony to the resilience of the human spirit, and his innate goodness proves the importance of judging everyone by their character.



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