

Ringworld Study Guide

Ringworld by Larry Niven

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Plot Summary

In Ringworld, 200-year-old human Louis Wu is recruited by a two-headed alien named Nessus to join him, a catlike warrior alien named Speaker, and the infinitely lucky human Teela Brown to explore an alien artifact. They find a Ringworld, a ribbon millions of miles long built around a distant sun. The civilization has fallen into savagery, though, and after crashing into the Ringworld, Louis must come up with a clever plan to get back to known space, hundreds of light years away.

Nessus is a member of an infamously cowardly race of aliens called puppeteers that fled known human space hundreds of years ago after discovering that the stars at the core of the galaxy had exploded into supernovae 10,000 years ago, meaning the harmful radiation will hit civilization in about 20,000 years. Nessus, who is mad enough to ride on spaceships, has stayed behind. Now, he needs help. On Louis Wu's 200th birthday, Nessus recruits the adventurous human to help him on a mysterious mission. Then, Nessus finds a warlike kzin, a catlike alien, named Speaker-to-Animals, who is an ambassador to Earth. Nessus offers them both the technology of a super-fast hyperdrive that travels a light year in five-fourths of a minute in exchange for their help.

Nessus has problems finding the fourth member of his crew, until he accidentally runs across the girl he's looking for at Louis's birthday celebration. Teela Brown is the daughter of six generations of lucky lottery winners, bred for luck. The group takes off for the puppeteer home world. They've taken their planet with them, moving it across the galaxy to escape the coming core explosion.

On the puppeteer world, the party learns that their destination is a ring built around a sun. It can provide enough living space for any race, making population problems obsolete. Speaker, Louis, Nessus, and Teela take off to explore the alien world. They find the radio waves are dead near the Ringworld, and as they approach it, the world appears deserted of civilization. As they are exploring, they crash into the alien world and find themselves in the middle of a desert, next to a giant mountain.

The party travels toward the rim of the Ringworld to try to find help. On the way, they realize that the puppeteers have been manipulating both the human and the kzinti races, trying to breed the kzinti to be more peaceful and the humans to be luckier. Teela is a result of the luck breeding, and she proves that she does have the power of luckiness when she saves herself from certain death by accidentally passing out on the exact controls that will save her.

Louis realizes that all the party's problems, including their ship's crash, are part of the plan of Teela's luck, designed to bring her to Ringworld. She falls in love with a local hero and plans to stay. Meanwhile, Louis realizes that the mountain they crashed near is a crater, a thousand miles into the sky. Louis and Speaker finally pull their ship up to the opening and launch back into space to get back to civilization.



Chapter 1, Louis Wu

Chapter 1, Louis Wu Summary

In Ringworld, 200-year-old human Louis Wu is recruited by a two-headed alien named Nessus to join him, a catlike warrior alien named Speaker, and the infinitely lucky human Teela Brown to explore an alien artifact. They find a Ringworld, a ribbon millions of miles long built around a distant sun. The civilization has fallen into savagery, though, and after crashing into the Ringworld, Louis must come up with a clever plan to get back to known space, hundreds of light years away.

The story begins on Louis Wu's 200th birthday, and he's left his daylong party just before midnight to hop through time zones in general-address transfer booths, which are public teleportation devices. Louis moves from time zone to time zone to stretch out his 200th birthday, leaving each zone just before midnight. He travels to Beirut, where he sings and buys drinks in a bar. In Budapest, he dances and drinks wine. In Munich, he walks the streets, noting how much all the cities seem alike. Teleportation has resulted in merging cultures.

Louis heads into a transfer booth to his next destination, but he ends up in a hotel room, face-to-face with a strange alien. Louis recognizes the alien race. He's seen them in books: the two-headed Pierson's puppeteers, known for their cowardice and their vast commercial empire. The race disappeared two hundred years ago, when it was discovered that the galactic core had exploded and would reach them in 20,000 years. The alien explains that he remained behind after his race left, and that he's hacked the transfer booths to talk with Louis.

The alien, named Nessus, says that the puppeteers, on their way out of the galaxy, are in trouble and shows Louis a picture of a sun with a ring around it. He knows that Louis is restless, a natural explorer, and he recruits Louis to help him on a mysterious mission. He explains that the puppeteers have a ship that travels a light year in just over a minute, and that they will use the ship to get to their destination. The plans for the ship will be Louis's payment for his services. Then, Nessus and Louis travel to a restaurant, where Nessus insults a group of cat-like aliens called kzin to recruit one of the warrior race for the trip. He recruits Speaker-to-Animals, a kzinti ambassador to Earth, but not before Louis barely escapes a to-the-death battle with the warrior.

Chapter 1, Louis Wu Analysis

The opening of the story introduces Louis Wu's character. He is restless and independent. Niven shows these traits by having Louis Wu jump from time zone to time zone across Earth on the night of his 200th birthday. Louis is also someone who craves newness and difference. He is disappointed in the sameness of all the cities on Earth. Teleportation has made cultures fuse. Louis craves something that he's not used to. His



restlessness comes from him searching for newness. Nessus thinks that Louis is perfect for his mission, since he is a seasoned explorer with good sense and intelligence. The mission is also perfect for Louis, who needs to interact with new kinds of people and go places that he's never been.

Nessus keeps Louis's ultimate destination a secret, showing Louis only a blurry photo. Nessus might be trying to further lure Louis by activating his sense of curiosity, since Nessus is essentially a manipulator. His first action is manipulating the teleportation system to bring Louis to him. His second action is manipulating Louis to come on the mission. Still, the mysterious mission and blurred photograph are also planned to interest the reader and spark the reader's curiosity as to what Louis will find. As Louis is being manipulated by Nessus, the reader is being manipulated by the author.



Chapter 2, And His Motley Crew

Chapter 2, And His Motley Crew Summary

Louis goes back to his party with Nessus and Speaker, who make a splash. No one has ever seen a puppeteer. The kzin have a long history of bloody wars with humans, which left the kzin population depleted, but now Speaker is a novelty. Louis and the aliens have come to Louis's home to talk privately in Louis's office, which is protected from spy beams.

In the office, Louis questions why someone from a race of cowards would insult a Kzin in public, and Nessus confesses that his race considers him, and anyone willing to travel in a spaceship, mad. He tells Speaker that at first, the puppeteers considered wiping out the dangerous kzin, but after the Kzin-Man wars, the only survivors were those who were less war-like. The kzin evolved to be less dangerous, to themselves and others. Nessus chose a warrior to come on the mission to protect him.

The puppeteers' fast quantum II hyperdrive engine is useless to the inventors, since they are afraid of space travel. They sent the prototype ship, manned by a human pilot, to the galactic core, and that's how they discovered the explosion traveling outward to the populated part of the galaxy. Speaker believes that if he brings the technology to his people, the Patriarch leader will let him have a name. He accepts the mission. Nessus is still looking for a fourth party member before departing.

The beautiful, twenty-year-old Teela Brown is at Louis's party. She looks exactly like a woman who broke his heart long ago, Paula Cherenkov, and he learns that Teela is the woman's descendant. When Nessus discovers her, he is astounded. He's been searching for Teela as the fourth party member. Human beings control population through a birth-control lottery, and Teela is the descendant of six generations of lottery winners. Nessus claims that human beings have been breeding luckiness, and he wants a lucky crewmember.

Chapter 2, And His Motley Crew Analysis

The kzin and the puppeteers function as literary foils, as races. From a behaviorist standpoint, the kzin use negative reinforcement to get what they want. They use the threat of punishment and force to conquer others. The history of the Man-Kzin wars shows that the kzin are set on conquest through force alone. Speaker's first instinct is always to battle and dominate, and his weapons are instilling fear and using force. Nessus points out that Speaker's instinct to use negative reinforcement is much less strong than his race's historical use of force.

The puppeteers considered wiping out the kzin, but the puppeteers are more interested in using positive reinforcement than negative reinforcement. To get Speaker and Louis to join his party, Nessus tries to lure them with promise of reward. To Louis, the reward



of the hyperdrive means saving his people from the core explosion 20,000 years in the future. To Speaker, the reward of the hyperdrive means being allowed a name by his people. The puppeteer has also use a more subtle type of positive reinforcement on Louis: the promise of adventure and new things.

Teela Brown is surrounded by coincidence from her first introduction. She looks exactly like the woman who once broke Louis's heart. She happens to be her great-great granddaughter. She happens to come to Louis's 200th birthday party, where she happens to run into Nessus, who has been desperately searching for her. She also happens to be the child of six generations of lottery winners. Nessus believes that Teela has inherited luckiness, and the number of coincidences that bring her together with Louis Wu and the expedition indicate that he might be right.



Chapter 3, Teela Brown

Chapter 3, Teela Brown Summary

Louis denies that it's possible to breed for luck, and further, says that there must be other candidates besides Teela. Nessus has been unable to find many of the thousands of possible candidates through a series of unlikely events. Others have rejected the offer, as Teela now rejects it. Even after Teela leaves, Louis objects to her as a candidate. She's too young and uninterested in travel. Later, Louis wakes from a nap to find that Teela's let him oversleep, to catch up on his rest. She questions him about the mission, but she's really interested in Louis himself.

Teela stays with Louis, while Nessus searches for another crewmember. The search has been unsuccessful. Nessus visits Louis. He's absorbed by fears, part of his alien hormonal cycle, and he describes the bizarre coincidences seeming to prevent him from contacting other potential candidates. After talking to Nessus, Louis finds that Teela has been reading about the galactic core explosion. She realizes that humanity will need the quantum II drive to escape the effects of the explosion when it reaches them. She's made up her mind to come on the trip, and Louis can't talk her out of it, though he tries to convince her that the puppeteer is mad and is holding something back, and that it's a suicide mission.

Chapter 3, Teela Brown Analysis

Louis immediately, almost instinctually, doesn't want Teela to go on the expedition. He seems to be protective of her. Teela is young and knows nothing of the world. She is comfortable and sees no reason to leave known space. Even after Teela has rejected the offer, Louis goes on objecting to her as a candidate, which shows how his protective feelings toward her have grown. It is easy to accept that Louis wants Teela as a lover.

However, Teela's prominence as a character and the coincidences surrounding her may easily lead the reader to believe that she will become the fourth party member, despite Louis's objections and her own refusal. The bizarre coincidences that prevent Nessus from contacting other potential candidates, such as calls not going through and searchers just missing their quarry at every turn, are an indication that a powerful force is guiding events. It is no surprise when Teela finally accepts the mission.



Chapter 4, Speaker-to-Animals

Chapter 4, Speaker-to-Animals Summary

When Louis and Teela report that she's agreed to go on the mission, Nessus howls with terror, afraid of the upcoming mission. That night, Teela confesses that she loves Louis, and that's why she wants to go with him. Louis realizes that Teela's never been truly hurt, physically or emotionally. She has no fear, and he feels the need to protect her. Still, he comes to terms with her joining the crew.

The four crew members go the Sol system settlement of the Outsiders, a trading species who buy and sell technological knowledge, where the quantum II ship, called the Long Shot, is waiting. The ship is cramped, with hardly any extra room, and built for a human pilot. Speaker, Nessus, and Teela will travel in stasis, while Louis pilots. Speaker objects but is overruled. At the last minute, Louis sees an opportunity for negotiation and demands the location of the puppeteer home world. Nessus says that Louis will not find the information valuable, but that he will learn it before they reach their destination.

As the crew is getting ready to board the Long Shot, Speaker-to-Animals pulls a variable sword, a thin wire weapon that will cut through nearly anything. He plans to steal the Long Shot. Nessus subdues Speaker using a hidden weapon called a tarp, which activates the pleasure centers of the brain remotely. Speaker is incapacitated with pleasure. If Nessus must use the weapon too many times, he explains, Speaker will become enslaved, dependant on the pleasure producer. The party finally boards the Long Shot. Louis fixes Speaker's stasis compartment so that he won't wake up, even in an emergency. Speaker won't get another opportunity to steal the ship.

Chapter 4, Speaker-to-Animals Analysis

Teela seems a little off to Louis from the moment that he meets her. None of the aliens understands human behavior well enough to see what's different about Teela. She has never been hurt, and at first, Louis puts this down to Teela's youth. She is unable to understand fear. Teela is only driven by love and desire. Speaker's negative reinforcement would be useless on Teela because she does not understand negative consequences. Only positive reinforcement draws Teela. Nessus, unfortunately, has nothing of worth to offer Teela. Her desire to go on the mission stems from one thing only: love. Teela is driven by her wants, and she wants Louis.

In the confrontation where Speaker tries to take over the Long Shot by force, Speaker and Nessus show their different approaches to getting what they want. Speaker uses negative reinforcement: the threat of his variable sword. Nessus has a weapon of his own, a tarp, the ultimate "positive reinforcement." Nessus gets what he wants through providing pleasure. Ultimately, the pleasure is a threat, however, since Speaker is afraid

to become addicted to the task. Louis is different from the other two. He tries to get what he wants through negotiation. He is a mediator by nature, and he will act as a mediator throughout the story.



Chapter 5, Rosette

Chapter 5, Rosette Summary

Hyperspace can only be accessed away from large masses in space, which create singularities in hyperspace where ships disappear. Once the Long Shot is outside the singularity created by the solar system, Louis takes it into hyperspace, headed toward the coordinates of the puppeteer migration. The ship is transparent, but Louis does not want to look down into hyperspace. What's called the Blind Spot drives people mad. Louis finds driving the fast ship tiring, but quickly he's out of known space. He drops out of hyperspace to see the unknown stars and exercise his muscles. In his solitude, he thinks about Teela. He's sorry to have brought her. She's beautiful and a wonderful lover, but she doesn't understand pain and fear. She's somehow undeveloped.

When the ship arrives in the vicinity of the puppeteer migration, Louis wakes Nessus, who navigates them toward the puppeteers. As the ship approaches, Louis sees five lights in a Kempler rosette, balanced in equilibrium in elliptical orbits in a pentagonal shape. A transport ship comes to meet them. Before waking Speaker, Louis disables the instrument panel so that Speaker won't get a chance to try to steal the ship again. After waking Speaker, though, Louis is distracted by the Kempler rosette passing, five planets in a pentagon, speeding through space, and Speaker takes Louis's weapon. His pride restored, Speaker disembarks peacefully.

On the transport ship, Nessus explains that abstinence is the only way that his species can avoid reproducing. Their species battles a huge overpopulation problem and learned to move planets to create more space for farming, using some technology bought from the Outsiders. Now, they've used their technology to move their whole system of five planets, since puppeteers are afraid to travel in space ships.

Chapter 5, Rosette Analysis

Louis is introduced to the first truly amazing technological advancement of the story. The Long Shot's capacity for quick deep-space travel is amazing, but it is an extension of existing hyperdrive technology. The puppeteer migration, however, is on a completely different level. The puppeteers have manipulated their environment completely to allow them to bypass the constrictions of nature. They have not confined themselves to their planet. Instead, they have gathered planets together to provide for their needs, and they've found a way to move their whole system of planets through space at their whim. The puppeteers take control of their environment. They don't only manipulate people; they manipulate nature.

Although the puppeteers have command over nature, they don't have control over one of the most basic aspects of their own existence. They can't control their reproduction. The puppeteers control nature, but at the same time they are enslaved to nature

through their bodies. They also can't control their psychology and overcome their fears. The need to move planets comes from their inability to control their own bodies and minds.



Chapter 6, Christmas Ribbon

Chapter 6, Christmas Ribbon Summary

Louis now has his useless information, the location of the puppeteer home world, hundreds of light years from Earth. The party lands on the puppeteer planet, which is filled with tall buildings. They walk through a park to a dome. Nessus leaves Louis, Speaker, and Teela, saying that he must visit see those-who-lead. Before leaving, he gets Speaker to say that if Nessus does not return, Speaker will not go on the mission.

In the dome, a forest is projected on all walls. A puppeteer appears on one of the walls and introduces himself as Chiron. The other wall goes blank, and Chiron uses it to show the crewmembers images of where they're going, a ring built of some new type of material, circling an orbital path around a sun, providing a huge surface living area. The puppeteers passed this Ringworld, and they're sending Nessus, Louis, Speaker, and Teela to investigate it. The ring rotates fast enough to have near-Earth gravity. It has breathable air and a comfortable temperature. Twenty rectangles orbit closer to the sun, creating shadows on the ring to imitate night. The ring is around six hundred million miles long and a million miles across. The puppeteers found no evidence of similar rings on nearby stars and conclude that whoever built it does not have interstellar travel.

When the kzinti first contact humans, humans learn from the kzin that they can use their ship drives as weapons. The humans use different drive technology than the kzinti, and so the kzinti believe the humans are unarmed. Still, humans are outmatched until they buy hyperdrive technology from the Outsiders. The humans are able to defeat the kzin in three wars. Humans were able to defeat kzin, and the other two races they contacted, puppeteers and Outsiders, were only interested in trading. Louis is worried, though, about whoever built the Ringworld. Teela, on the other hand, seems only excited.

Chapter 6, Christmas Ribbon Analysis

On the exotic puppeteer world, the characters learn about the Ringworld that they're going to explore. All of the characters exhibit some fear of the race that built this incredible technological accomplishment. Louis is keenly aware of the fact that the aliens may be as warlike as they are advanced. However, Teela shows no fear. She does not know to be afraid of anything new.

Chiron only exists as a projection on the dome. He comes after Nessus leaves the group, and he departs before Nessus returns. Louis explains that Chiron does not want to meet Nessus, who the puppeteers deem insane. Still, the party meets no puppeteers on their stop at the puppeteer home world. Are all the puppeteers shy, afraid of meeting new species and even of interacting with Nessus? The notable absence of puppeteers could be due to their fearfulness, but it leaves the puppeteers as vague, mythical

creatures. What assurances do the reader or the characters have that any puppeteers besides Nessus still exist at all?



Chapter 7, Stepping Discs

Chapter 7, Stepping Discs Summary

As Nessus approaches, Chiron leaves abruptly. Louis explains to Speaker that the puppeteers must be interested in the Ringworld because it's a potential solution to their population problems. Nessus gets close to the dome, but he goes into fearful hysterics. Louis goes to calm him down and learns that Nessus convinced those-who-lead to let him mate. He threatened that if he were taken off the mission, Speaker would refuse to go. If he comes back from the mission, he will get to mate with the leader, called the Hindmost.

Nessus leads the party out of the park, and they travel through the puppeteer city on stepping discs, open transport pads that jump a block at a time. Teela runs out ahead of everyone else, fearlessly exploring. The party does not see any puppeteers as they go through the city. Finally, they cross the water to an island where their ship is waiting. It is a large, spacious hull, with one huge wing containing most of the ship's engines and other hardware. If there is danger, the hull is enclosed in a stasis field, protecting the passengers. The ship is designed to be piloted by a kzin.

The ship is stocked with items that could be used as weapons, but that also have plausible peaceful purposes, so that the party can deny any aggressive intentions. Louis suggests calling the ship the Lying Bastard, and the others agree. After a week's travel, they arrive at the Ringworld.

Chapter 7, Stepping Discs Analysis

Nessus has his own reward that he looks forward to, if he completes the mission successfully. In his overpopulated world, mating is limited. Nessus is guaranteed a mate, the leader of the puppeteers, if he is able to return from the mission. Nessus only takes risks if he sees a reward. He is guided by positive reinforcement, just as he uses positive reinforcement to manipulate others.

The stepping disks are a new piece of alien technology. Louis approaches them with some caution, trailing behind the others. However, Teela shows her reckless character by skipping forward, running ahead of all the rest. She gets lost on an alien world, but she easily finds herself again. Nothing bad can happen to Teela, but Louis can't help worrying about her. His protectiveness surges up.

The Liar's weapons are all in disguise. There is a flashlight whose beam can be condensed to a deadly laser and a drill that can be used to disintegrate anything. These represent the manipulative nature of the puppeteers. Nothing is as it seems. The puppeteers take trouble to hide their manipulation in the guise of normal events, just as the ship's weaponry is disguised as everyday, useful objects.



Chapter 8, Ringworld

Chapter 8, Ringworld Summary

The Lying Bastard, known casually as the Liar, comes out of hyperspace heading toward Ringworld. Speaker checks the radio, but finds no signals on any wavelength. As the crew approaches Ringworld, they see a thousand-mile-high wall around the edge, holding in the atmosphere. Louis explains to Teela about Dyson spheres, a theoretical way to capture all the energy from a sun by building a spherical shell around it. The Ringworld is a modified version of a Dyson sphere, requiring less raw material.

Speaker is frustrated at the lack of radio communication, and Nessus suggests that the occupants do not use radio. Speaker wants to land on the Ringworld, but Nessus is fearful and forbids it. They compromise and fly past the giant ring. They see a spaceport on the rim, with rings for landing ships. Ships taking off use the velocity of the Ringworld and drop into space. Everything is dark and deserted.

The Liar flies beneath the Ringworld, and they see that the underside is contoured with the topography of the inside. The crew sees mountains, seas, and rivers, surmising from bays along the edges of the water that the occupants are land-dwelling but come from a world with water and use boats. Louis notes that there are meteor craters in the bottom of the Ringworld, some of them quite deep.

Chapter 8, Ringworld Analysis

Even after the crew understands where they are headed, the Ringworld retains its mystery through the silence and lack of contact as the Liar approaches. Speaker interprets the silence as a purposeful insult, because he is interpreting it through his cultural perspective. An insult seems the most likely reason. Nessus approaches the Ringworld with caution and fear, and he is able to think of dozens of possibilities for the lack of radio communication.

As the Liar explores the Ringworld, so does the reader. The Ringworld is a fascinating feat of technology, but it is introduced slowly. The reader's first glimpse of the landscape is not from above, but from below. Like the characters, the readers must interpret what the hidden topside of Ringworld is like from the patterns it creates below. This level of interpretation is true in approaching any culture. The qualities of the culture are seen from outside, and the observers must interpret them, rightly or wrongly, according to their own experience.



Chapter 9, Shadow Squares

Chapter 9, Shadow Squares Summary

Nessus is fearful of being attacked by the Ringworld and wants Speaker to fly toward the sun so that they can get a good look at the interior without appearing threatening as well as getting a good look at the shadow squares above the Ringworld. The puppeteer believes that the shadow squares gather sunlight and convert it to power. Speaker disagrees with the plan. To end the fight, Louis recommends taking a closer look at the shadow squares through the telescope to see what they can find out.

While Louis sleeps, Nessus and Speaker learn that the shadow squares are moving faster than expected and agree to go in for a closer look. Part of the world has turned to desert, an indication that the Ringworld may have reverted to savagery. There are two oceans on opposite sides of the ring, balancing each other. When Louis awakes, Nessus is piloting the ship toward the shadow squares to find out more about them. Speaker is sleeping. When he wakes and takes over the controls, he's furious. Nessus has set a course that will take months, in order to avoid alarming the Ringworlders. Speaker changes course so that they are headed toward the sun and should not alarm the Ringworld but will arrive at the shadow squares in hours.

The ship is suddenly hit by something. The stasis goes on, stalling the cabin in time. Nessus rolls up in a ball, catatonic. The wing, with most of the ship's equipment, has been destroyed. Speaker's instinct is to hunt down the attackers, despite the fact that they have no propulsion systems or weapons. Louis points out that the shot was probably an automatic anti-meteor weapon. The crew's course is set to miss the sun, and as long as they don't hit the Ringworld, they will fly away from the system, where they can activate the hyperdrive to escape.

Teela tries to coax Nessus out of his ball but fails. Everyone is frightened but Teela. Speaker covers his fear through activity. Nessus rolls into a ball. Louis is simply afraid, but Teela doesn't understand fear because she's never been hurt. Louis believes that her luck is a statistical anomaly, not a power that could be bred. The ship should pass two shadow squares and then go on past the ring. Between the shadow squares, though, they hit something. The stasis field goes on again. When the ship exits the stasis field, Nessus has uncurled. Speaker goes out to investigate. They've hit a thin, strong wire line of a new, advanced material that ties the shadow squares together. The next day, the ship crashes into the surface of the Ringworld.

Chapter 9, Shadow Squares Analysis

Louis again shows himself to be a negotiator and a mediator, as Speaker and Nessus conflict. Speaker is confrontational and wants to approach the problem of the Ringworld head-on. If there is a problem, he will control it by force. Nessus is fearful and wants to



avoid conflict. If there is a problem, he will find a solution that uses manipulation from a distance, so that he is not in danger of being hurt. Naturally, as they approach the Ringworld, these two characters conflict. Louis acts as the mediator and negotiator, suggesting that they gather more information. He settles the conflict easily. However, it soon flares up again, as Speaker chooses a route to investigate the shadow squares which will take months.

The crash into the Ringworld instigates a new phase of the story. The adventurers have gathered together and set out to find new information. Now, they must travel into a new world, without a means of escape. Much of their technology has been destroyed on the crash. While the puppeteer ship has kept their lives safe, it has left them with a puzzle. There is no obvious way to get back to civilization.



Chapter 10, The Ring Floor

Chapter 10, The Ring Floor Summary

The stasis field has protected the crew during the crash, and now the Liar is nearly upside down on the surface. Fearlessly, Teela rushes outside. Louis follows, putting on his space suit to check the air. When he gets outside, he finds the air is breathable, but lectures Teela on her carelessness. The ship lies in a long gully created by its crash. The edges are lava, melted by the ship's crash and then hardened again. The bottom is the slippery core material of the ring. Louis goes to climb the lava in his protective suit, and Teela carelessly follows barefoot. Louis, instead of warning her, lets her burn herself and drop down to the bottom of the crater as a lesson. Teela pouts about his treatment of her.

Outside of the crater, Louis sees that they are in a desert, near a single, giant mountain. Nothing else is visible. The crew needs to get the Liar off the ring, so that they can get to free space to use their hyperdrive. They decide to leave the ship near its landmark and fly to the nearest edge to get help. They unpack their flycycles, packing them with everything that might be useful, including a water extractor and everything that might be a useful weapon. They take wrist communicators that connect to the ship. Although the ship is not working, its computer will act as a translator. As they are finishing packing, the shadow of one of the shadow squares approaches. Though the sun is still at its peak, night is falling.

Chapter 10, The Ring Floor Analysis

Louis tries two tactics to get Teela to overcome her recklessness. First, he scolds her, warning her of all of the dangers of running out unprotected into an alien world. Then, he lets her injure herself by running up the lava slope without protection from the heat. Teela reacts childishly to Louis's lessons. She listens as he lectures her, but she immediately forgets to be careful. Then, when he allows her to injure herself, Teela pouts. At twenty years old, Teela is immature. She does not take danger seriously. In a world where every party member is dependent on the others for help and support, Teela might be a danger to others, if not to herself.

The shadow squares act as an always-present reminder that the adventurers are on an alien world. Night and day are much different on the Ringworld, and even the horizon is disconcerting. The sun is always directly overhead, no matter where the characters are, and the only difference between night and day is a hard-edged square of shadow that passes overhead.



Chapter 11, The Arch of Heaven

Chapter 11, The Arch of Heaven Summary

The flycycles are contoured to different shapes for the kzin, the puppeteer, and the humans. They can be set to automatically follow one of the cycles. The communications system shows holographic images of the other crewmembers in their cycles. Night has fallen, and the crew can see the ring walls far away and the arch of the Ringworld heading into space. Nessus goes catatonic from stress, and Speaker declares himself in command. The Liar has crashed approximately in the center of the ring, but Speaker makes a command decision to head to the port.

Louis tests his cycle, settling in for a month-long ride. He tastes the water and food and makes sure that nothing can fall off. The cycle is surrounded by a field of air pushing in. Teela and Speaker are sleeping, but Nessus wakes from his coma. Louis convinces him to let Speaker remain in charge. Nessus is depressed and believes he was wrong about Teela's luck. Otherwise, they would not have crashed. He believes that he couldn't contact any of the truly lucky humans because they were too lucky to get included in such a dangerous mission.

Louis turns over the driving to Nessus and drops to sleep. When he wakes, the hard line of dawn is over them, the division between night and day. He sees the cloud of dust behind them left by their crashing ship, although they are thousands of miles away. In the far distance, Nessus points out a gleam that could be anything. When Louis opens his communicator with Teela, he sees that something's wrong. She's got Plateau trance, a kind of road hypnosis from staring into the horizon. They pull down to land, but at their first landing place, they see native people and pull away. Louis is stunned. The natives are humans.

Chapter 11, The Arch of Heaven Analysis

The Ringworld is completely different from anything the characters have experienced before, and they each have psychological reactions to the difference. Change is stressful. In Nessus, the stress manifests itself in hysterical episodes where he periodically loses consciousness. In Speaker, stress manifests itself in a desire to take command and take action. In Teela, the stress of the unknown world manifests itself as hypnosis. She loses control of herself, giving herself over to whatever happens.

In all of these instances, the characters lose control, to some extent. Nessus can control nothing while curled up in a ball. Speaker reverts to his military training, so that training is controlling him. Teela gives over control in self-hypnosis. Louis describes hypnosis as a complete trust and relinquishing control, and in Teela's case, she is giving control up to her unconscious mind.

The adventurers discover that the planet is inhabited by humans. The alien world is not so alien after all. However, humans have the capacity both for peace and for war. They are a known quantity but also an unpredictable one. Unlike the predictably warlike kzin and the predictably fearful puppeteers, the humans leave the adventurers with an element of uncertainty about how the natives will react.



Chapter 12, Fist-of-God

Chapter 12, Fist-of-God Summary

Louis, Teela, Speaker, and Nessus land in the forest, and Louis tries to explain hypnosis to the aliens. The vegetation is Earth-like, as well as the natives. Nessus wishes he had a starseed lure, a device that attracts starseeds, which in turn attract Outsiders. Teela wakes from her trance, unable to remember landing. As Speaker runs off after a rabbit-like creature, Teela and Louis go into the woods to make love. When they return to the cycles, Speaker has killed the first prey he's hunted with claws alone, and Nessus worries over eating the local wildlife, urging an anti-allergy pill on Speaker.

Speaker confirms that the natives smell like humans. When the crew takes off again, they find a crumbling city that once had flying buildings now crashed to the ground. The ground is covered with new soil from discarded, crushed trash. The flycycles land, and the aliens are greeted by a crowd of the natives. They are short, blond, hairy humans. Five delegates approach the visitors and speak to Louis Wu.

The wrist communicators quickly begin translating the language. The natives think that Louis and the crew are the engineers that built the city. They call the city Zignamuclickclick, and the great mountain by the crash site is known as Fist-of-God. The natives live in the destroyed city because it's easier to maintain and protect than any structures they could build. The leader hopes for a return of the great past, and he asks for a miracle from Louis. Louis demonstrates one of the light lasers, but fighting with light is taboo for the people. Louis says he didn't know, and the leader asks if he is not one who raised the "arch," meaning the visible Ringworld rising in the distance. Unwisely, Louis laughs, and the leader hits him in the nose.

Louis flees to his cycle. Speaker slaughters dozens of attackers. Nessus turns from an attacker, and at first, Louis thinks he's running, but actually Nessus has turned to use his hind foot as a weapon, killing the attacker. The visitors get on their cycles and escape. Louis convinces Speaker not to destroy the whole village with a disintegrator weapon that is ostensibly a digging tool.

Chapter 12, Fist-of-God Analysis

Nessus casually mentions the starseed lure to Speaker and Louis, but the starseed lure is hardly a minor device. The puppeteers have had these lures for many years, and they are an example of how the puppeteers manipulate those around them. They are lures, not so much for starseeds as for Outsiders. The puppeteers know what the Outsiders want, so they use a lure to bring the Outsiders where puppeteers want them to go. The starseed lures will acquire a greater significance in the history of humans, puppeteers, and kzin as the story develops.



Speaker's natural instinct is to hunt, and so when he lands on the alien world his greatest pleasure is to race after a small rabbit-like animal. Louis's (and presumably humanity's) natural instinct is sex, and so Louis and Teela go off to make love. Nessus finds no joy on the alien world. He has no pleasurable activity to comfort him. All he can do is worry about Speaker eating something that might harm him. Nessus's race is a herd race. He is separated from the herd, in a naturally vulnerable position, so Nessus cannot find relaxation or pleasure in his current circumstances.

The first contact with the natives shows another instinct of humanity, the instinct to turn to gods. The natives make gods out of the Engineers who built the Ringworld. They have invented a myth about the "arc" that rises up over the sky, not realizing that it is actually an extension of the world and not an arch at all. Like early humans who thought the Earth was flat, the Ringworld natives have no way of understanding the actual topography of their world. Since the Ringworld is many times the size of Earth, they may never understand its true shape and scale.

One of Louis's coping mechanisms emerges when he is talking to the natives. The native priest asks Louis, didn't he as a god raise the arch above the world as a covenant with man? Louis laughs, suddenly realizing how different the priest's worldview is. Laughter, and humor, are defense mechanisms with Louis.



Chapter 13, Starseed Lure

Chapter 13, Starseed Lure Summary

Louis realizes that the natives had thought the crewmembers were gods. He shouldn't have laughed, but he thinks it's funny that the people have forgotten they live on a ring and believe the distant ring is an arch. At least they can run from their mistakes on the cycles. Louis also realizes that the puppeteers' "cowardice" in turning from danger is an instinct to use their most powerful weapon.

As Louis is piloting the cycles, he begins ruminating about the starseed lure that Nessus mentioned. He thinks about the Man-Kzin war. Could the puppeteers purposely have attracted the Outsiders to the human settlement with a starseed lure, so the humans would buy advanced technology and defeat the kzinti, curbing their warlike people and forcing them to evolve into more peaceful people? Speaker overhears Louis talking to himself and has suspected the same thing. He confronts Nessus, who admits the puppeteers tampered with the kzinti to make them more peaceful. Nessus flees the group on his cycle to avoid retribution from Speaker.

Louis is also upset with the puppeteers' conniving, but Teela defends it, saying that otherwise humans would be the slaves of kzinti. Then, Louis suddenly realizes that the puppeteers have been breeding humans, too. They arranged the lottery system to control human reproduction, so that humans would evolve the trait of luckiness. Speaker is the result of breeding more peaceful kzinti, and Teela is the result of breeding more lucky humans. Teela is horrified, and unfortunately, Louis laughs at her horror. Finally, Louis and Speaker cut off contact with Nessus.

The cycles travel on, and Louis notices bare spots where the ground has eroded away over the Ringworld floor. Finally, in his loneliness, he contacts Nessus again. Nessus wants to reunite with the others, and Louis questions and criticizes him about the puppeteers' experiments with breeding other races. Louis finally says that he has a way to reunite the group, but he doesn't tell Nessus what it is and cuts off contact.

Chapter 13, Starseed Lure Analysis

Ringworld shows how people's behavior is governed by their inherent nature. When Louis realizes that the puppeteer's instinct to turn away from danger is also an instinct to use its most powerful weapon, its back foot, to attack danger, he recognizes that the behavior and psychology of the puppeteers is related to their evolutionary background. Their very nature is to turn from danger. Nessus is too close to his own behavior and culture to clearly see how it is related to his biology and evolution, but he is still bound and constrained by his nature.

Though the puppeteers are constrained by nature, they also try to manipulate nature. They don't change their own behavior, though. They focus on manipulating the behavior

of others. Behind the scenes, the puppeteers have guided the evolution of both kzin and humanity to create creatures that they think will be useful. Teela and Speaker are the results of the manipulation, and they are both horrified at their own plights. Louis's defense mechanism resurfaces: he laughs. He will continue to be the mediator between the other members of the party.



Chapter 14, Interlude, with Sunflowers

Chapter 14, Interlude, with Sunflowers Summary

Louis, Speaker, and Teela land. Louis tries to convince Speaker to contact the natives, pretending to be gods, to get help moving the Liar to where they can launch into space. Speaker will be the god, Teela and Louis his servants, and Nessus will be a demon. He says they need Nessus to use his tasp to provide reward to the natives. Speaker riles at the idea of allowing Nessus back into the party and refuses.

Meanwhile, Teela is annoyed because Louis laughed at her horror at what the puppeteers did. She goes off to cry under a waterfall in a cold pond. Louis follows her out and jumps into the unexpectedly cold water. They swim to shore, and Louis apologizes. He tries to convince her to let Nessus back into the group, and she also refuses. He tells her that they need Nessus so that they can get the Long Shot, for the good of humanity when it comes time to escape the galactic core. She still refuses, but they make love under the freezing waterfall. Later, she recants, though she warns that Speaker will never allow Nessus back.

The party takes off, and Louis tries to convince Speaker to allow Nessus back, saying that they need more viewpoints. Speaker still refuses. A little later, he sees something shiny in a break in the cloud and flies out to investigate. He's hit with a burst of burning light. His fur is burned off over most of his body, and he's blinded. The group lands to give first aid. They have been flying over a field of Slaver sunflowers, which focus light to kill all other plants and animals nearby. Only the cloud cover saved them.

Chapter 14, Interlude, with Sunflowers Analysis

Louis, in his role as mediator and compromiser, tries to reunite the group. He proposes a plan to Speaker that combines positive reinforcement (in the guise of the tasp) with negative reinforcement (in the fearsomeness of Speaker) to get what they want from the natives. Speaker does not see the value of positive reinforcement. His culture is built solely around fear and negative reinforcement, so he refuses Louis's idea.

Teela, however, cannot refuse anything. She is not truly afraid of anything, so it is easy for her to get over being upset. However, she has changed. Teela is deeply affected by learning that she is the result of a puppeteer experiment. There is no more hurtful information for her in the universe, and she finds herself confronted with it. This is another unlikely coincidence. How likely is it that Teela would run into one of the puppeteers responsible for manipulating her?



Chapter 15, Dream-Castle

Chapter 15, Dream-Castle Summary

Using the disintegrator, Louis digs a burrow to hide from the sunflowers, while Teela treats Speaker's wounds. Speaker has only a patch of hair over his eyes and another on his rump. His vision has returned. Louis calls Nessus to report the incident. Nessus, he has guessed, is flying behind them. Nessus passes out from fear during Louis's report. When protective darkness falls, Louis, Speaker, and Teela fly away, keeping under the cloud cover so that they can see when they're out of range of the sunflowers. They pass the sunflower fields while it's still night.

The shadow squares are still above the party when Louis spots another light in the distance. The party goes to investigate and finds an opulent castle floating in air. They see a dry pool with the skeleton of a large, fierce water beast, a bandersnatch, probably kept as an exotic pet. The castle apparently still has power, since there are lights within. After finding no way in, Teela threatens to break in, and Louis has Speaker break one of the windows with the disintegrator.

The structure truly is a castle, with a huge banquet hall, a throne, and a wire statue of the presumed leader, a straight-nosed, bald man with the aspect of a leader. Everything is rich and indicates the seat of power. They find only stairs, not escalators or elevators, and so they explore downward. Teela and Louis sleep in a huge bed in the bottom of the castle. The next morning, Louis sees the loose wire from the shadow squares falling to Earth right on the castle. He climbs upstairs to find food. The kitchen is empty of useable food, and he gets food from his cycle in the dining room. Speaker joins him, saying that he's found a map room.

Chapter 15, Dream-Castle Analysis

Like the characters, the sunflowers are natural creatures that only act in their own self-interest. They have a mechanism to get what they want. Louis's mechanism is mediation and negotiation. Speaker's mechanism is force. Nessus's mechanism is manipulation. The sunflowers' mechanism is a deadly laser. Like Speaker, they use force to get what they want: space to grow and mulch to grow on. What would truly happen, though, in a field of such flowers, where nothing else can grow? Wouldn't the nutrients in the soil become depleted, like a farm where the same plant has been planted year after year? Is total destruction of others really the best mechanism for survival?

The opulent castle in the air is a fantasy place, but like all fantasies, it clearly couldn't survive in reality. The days of the floating castle are long past, and its glory is now unreal. Everything about the castle speaks of wealth and power almost beyond imagination. Something so lavish implies a significant imbalance in the economic



system. Could anyone live so luxuriously without a large underprivileged class? The name of the skeletal beast in the pool, a "bandersnatch," is an allusion to the poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carol in the book *Through the Looking Glass*.



Chapter 16, The Map Room

Chapter 16, The Map Room Summary

Louis follows Speaker to the map room. There is a huge holographic ring and video screen displays showing tape of the ring. The controls are heavily ornamented. Speaker thought they were live images until he tried to find Fist-of-God and the crashed ship. The huge mountain isn't on the video tapes. Speaker has located a linear accelerator, accessed by elevators and used to travel around the Ringworld. Speaker has also found their location, and there is a huge ocean bay between them and the rim wall. In the ocean, there are islands that mimic the geography of the planets represented around the map room.

The nearest spaceport is 700,000 miles farther than the rim, but Louis hopes that there may be signs of civilization there, from returning spacecraft. Speaker has also found blank areas on the tape, either places worn away by time or hiding secret locations. Louis and Speaker hear a noise and go to investigate. They find Teela, who has accidentally figured out how to get the stairs to move.

A thousand natives gather below the castle, singing in worship, attracted by the falling wire from the shadow squares. Speaker suggests trying to pass themselves off as gods, but since Speaker's fur is burnt off leaving only pink skin, Louis says it won't work.

Louis goes out alone to meet the villagers. He talks to the priest, telling the leader that he isn't a god. The priest calls the castle "Heaven." Louis learns that most people don't speak the language of the Engineers who built the city and that there is a legend of a great leader named Zrillir who was overthrown by the people before the city fell. As Louis tries to question the priest about the transport system, a warning comes through his translator to get off a protected wavelength. Then, the translator turns hot, burning Louis's hand. He takes off toward the castle.

Chapter 16, The Map Room Analysis

The video tapes of the Ringworld civilization provide information, but they also provide mystery. Why can't speaker locate the giant mountain Fist-of-God on the tapes? What happened to destroy the bustling civilization? Why are some parts of the tapes blank? The mysteries are left unsolved for the present, leaving the reader to try to put together pieces of the puzzle and decide what is and isn't important, much as the characters at first deduce the topography of the Ringworld from the indentations underneath.

The shadow square wire is a coincidence, but it also has an explanation. Since the ship hit the wire, it makes sense that the wire would fall near the ship. Still, the wire is part of a web of coincidences that will allow the characters to ultimately escape the Ringworld. The characters already have all the knowledge and materials they need to escape, but they don't know it yet.



Chapter 17, The Eye of the Storm

Chapter 17, The Eye of the Storm Summary

Speaker's hand has also been burned by his translator, and Teela's translator burned its case. They are now useless. The party now flies on, below the clouds in case of further danger, like another sunflower field. Louis calls Nessus and tells him about the castle, learning that Nessus's translator is also useless. They'll need to learn the language. Louis mentions a theory that the original builders died from a bacterial epidemic. Nessus says that once the original inhabitants could no longer transmute matter, civilization could not recover, since there is no ore to mine. There are no raw materials on the Ringworld.

Teela, Louis, and Speaker see a giant human eye in the sky before him. Teela screams. Louis at first thinks it's a vision or hallucination, but Speaker sees it, too. Once his shock is overcome, Speaker wants to fly through the figure. On his world, there is a religion called Kdapt that says humans are made in the image of the creator. When he first saw the eye, he wondered if it were true. Now, he must go through the eye and prove it is just a formation. Teela decides to go, too.

Louis calls Nessus, telling what the others plan. Nessus agrees that it sounds dangerous. Still, he speculates that the cloud formation is over a meteor hole in the Ringworld and convinces Louis to go with the others and look. Nessus believes it will be safe to go directly through the iris. They fly in and discover that the eye truly is a storm. Teela foolhardily runs her cycle down to investigate the hole at the bottom of the storm and gets sucked into the storm. There is nothing anyone can do. Then, Teela passes out onto the instrument panel, and suddenly, her cycle goes rocketing out of the whirlpool of air. Impossibly, she has accidentally hit the controls that would save her.

Chapter 17, The Eye of the Storm Analysis

The Ringworld is an unnatural construct. It is entirely created by humans to meet their needs, taking the place of a natural environment. Ironically, because the Ringworld is unnatural, it does not give the humans everything they need. When civilization falls, humans have nothing to rebuild from, Nessus states. At least, the humans on the Ringworld have no traditional materials to rebuild from. The only chance of rebuilding lies in finding new materials or reusing existing materials on the world itself.

The giant eye in the sky is a symbol of god. Louis at first believes that it's a vision, and Speaker relates it to the blasphemous religion Kdapt on his own world. The eye is a human-centric vision, but the existence of humans in this distant system so far from Earth makes the universe seem like a human-centric place. The eye turns out to be a storm system, but it still represents god. It is the power of nature. The storm is caused by a meteor hitting the Ringworld, nature attacking this man-made creation. When Teela

flies into it, she is flying in the face of the power of God, or nature. Impossibly, her luck seems more powerful even than God.



Chapter 18, The Perils of Teela Brown

Chapter 18, The Perils of Teela Brown Summary

Speaker agrees for Nessus to rejoin the group. Teela is unconscious, speeding away from the group. Nessus assures them that her ship will not crash. Teela regains consciousness, and Nessus tells her how to regain control of her cycle. She starts back toward the others. Teela is upset that Louis is not mad at her reckless behavior, and Louis realizes that recklessness is a way to get attention.

Louis and Nessus are forced to agree that Teela does have supernatural luck. Why, then, did their ship crash? Louis speculates that for some reason, Teela needed to come to the Ringworld, so her luck arranged it, even making her fall in love with him. What's lucky for Teela, unfortunately, is not always lucky for those around her. The dangers of the Ringworld are not dangerous for someone so lucky. Nessus is terrified at the thought and loses consciousness. Now, they don't have a way to track Teela. Trying to find her bearings, she says that she's passing over a city and sees lights. Then, they lose all communication.

Nessus, who has regained consciousness, does not want to go after Teela, but Louis threatens to kill him if they don't rescue her. Speaker, Louis, and Nessus head toward her last known location. They find a city, with lights. They stop at one of the houses to make plans. Nessus wants to wait to go after Teela, but Louis wants to search right away. Speaker agrees, and he and Louis leave. Soon, though, they find their cycles out of their control, caught in some sort of tractor beam.

Chapter 18, The Perils of Teela Brown Analysis

Teela's unnatural escape shakes everyone in the group. Speaker recants and allows Nessus back into the party, something that could be considered a moment of weakness. Louis's belief that luck cannot be inherited is shaken to the core. A barrier has gone up between him and Teela. He has always known that she was different somehow, without fear or understanding of pain. Now, he sees how deep that divide truly is.

The emotional barrier is quickly followed by a physical barrier. Teela disappears. Louis shows that he's still protective of her, even though he must admit to the power of her luck and even though he realizes that she is, on some level, not human. At least, she is not the same kind of human as he is. Louis is still willing to fight to save her, which leads him into even greater danger.



Chapter 19, In the Trap

Chapter 19, In the Trap Summary

Speaker contacts Nessus to let him know that he and Louis have been captured. Nessus concludes that a signal is pulling them in and burned out all working equipment. They try to interfere with the signal, but they fail. Louis's protective crash balloons go off and his cycle turns upside down. Speaker and Louis find themselves trapped in a floating building, a prison. A force field is holding up their cycles, but it won't hold up their bodies. If they fall off, they will fall 90 feet to their deaths. A number of other cars and vehicles are trapped their, and the remains of their occupants are skeletons around the building. The central area is surrounded by a cone of prison cells. The lights on the vehicles are working. Only systems that were active failed.

Someone is listening in on the party's communications, but without a translator, the listener wouldn't be able to understand the conversation. Nessus comes up with a plan for Louis to climb up and disable the beams that ruined the equipment. When Louis climbs precariously on top of his bike, though, he sees a mostly bald woman watching him, who looks like she could be from the race of Engineers. She watches quietly for a while and then goes off. Nessus is afraid to show the woman that they have weapons, so he changes the plan.

Nessus flies into the trap, but he shuts down all his systems before the beam can disable them. When he arrives, his cycle is functional. The woman returns and throws fruit at Louis, as if he is an animal in the zoo. He's too precariously balanced to risk catching it, though he's tortured with thirst. Nessus asks Louis if he can seduce the woman, but it's impossible. When she returns, Nessus talks to her, using his tasp on her on low power, to lure her to return again and to enjoy talking with him.

Chapter 19, In the Trap Analysis

Louis and Speaker are completely incapacitated in the prison. They have no way to help themselves, and so Nessus is in complete command. Nessus does not hesitate to give Louis an incredibly dangerous task, to climb on top of his flycycle so that he can destroy the machinery. Although it's much less dangerous for Nessus to sneak into the prison, being careful to turn off his systems on his way in, his first choice is to put Louis in danger. Nessus is willing to help Louis and Speaker, but he puts his own safety before theirs.

The woman is the first sign of civilization that the explorer have seen. She knows enough to tap into their conversation and to operate the flying prison. However, her motives remain unclear. Even her motives in throwing fruit at Louis are hazy. Does she realize that he cannot catch the fruit without falling? If so, her actions are cruel torture, instead of an offer of food.



Chapter 20, Meat

Chapter 20, Meat Summary

Speaker is unconscious, and Louis feels he is dying of thirst. However, the woman returns, and Nessus continues to court her. She lets him up into her area, and she turns off the field, lowering the vehicles to the ground and letting Louis off his. Speaker is unconscious but alive. Louis gives him some water. Louis also sees Teela's cycle among the cars, and he believes she is dead.

Speaker wakes. He is starving, and he is looking at Louis strangely. He tells Louis that he needs fresh meat. Louis says that they both know fresh meat is available. The question is, will Speaker eat it? Speaker says that he will starve before he eats Louis, a matter of honor. Louis is surprised that he is able to sleep.

Louis and Speaker break into some of the cells. They see a spectacular view of the city, the ocean, and the eye storm from the floating building. With binoculars, Louis can even see Fist-of-God. Speaker sleeps, and Louis worries that Nessus may not return for them. Later, though, Nessus returns with meat for the two prisoners and with the information that their captor is a crewmember from one of the Engineer society's ships.

Chapter 20, Meat Analysis

Nessus's use of positive reinforcement, pleasure from the tarp, is successful, though it takes much longer than Speaker's use of force. If Speaker were in a position to face the woman, he would surely attack her and tear her up with his claws. Like his approach to the shadow squares, his tactic is both quicker and more dangerous. Nessus chooses the longer route, which is a torture to Louis in his condition. Still, the long route is safer and ultimately successful.

Speaker is able to overcome his nature when he refuses to use Louis as a food source. Though hunting and killing is fundamental to the nature of a kzin, Speaker is able to overcome his own instinct. He has other instincts that also guide him, and one of those is honor. It would be dishonorable to kill Louis for his own survival.



Chapter 21, The Girl from Beyond the Edge

Chapter 21, The Girl from Beyond the Edge Summary

The woman who has the adventurers captive is Halloprillalar Hotrufan, a member of the crew of the Pioneer, a supply ship running between five worlds and the Ringworld for supplies. She was a ship's prostitute. Because of time dilation, her twenty-four year tours were several hundred years on the Ringworld, and on her last journey, Prill returned to a destroyed world. Her ship was able to land, but the crew killed the captain for endangering them. They were trapped outside the Ringworld, but were able to build technology to get in.

The society was in shambles. A mold which attacked superconductors used in the Ringworld technology destroyed the society. The members of Prill's crew set off to explore but found nothing. Prill journeyed to her home city, walking 200,000 miles from the rim and trading on being a "god." She is ancient, staying young with a drug her people invented. She took residence in the abandoned police station and turned on the rays that caught speeders and other traffic violators to catch any passing Engineer in a flying car, since he would certainly be civilized. Prill has been living as a god, taking offerings from the city. She has gone slightly mad, thinking herself a god.

The adventurers can expect no help from the natives, but Louis is beginning to form a plan. They will need a vehicle, and Nessus says he will see if the floating police station can be used as a ship. They plan to use Nessus's flycycle to move the station and head toward the flying castle. Louis won't tell anyone his plan, but it involves Fist-of-God and shadow square wire. He wonders if he's crazy. Prill seduces Louis expertly. She is using him to try to recover the tarp and escape Nessus's control, but Louis is able to resist.

Chapter 21, The Girl from Beyond the Edge Analysis

Prill reveals the truth about the Ringworld to the adventurers. They have finally gained the knowledge that they sought, but they realize that they will find no help in getting off the Ringworld. Louis's plan is ill-formed, and he thinks it is crazy. He does not tell Nessus, Speaker, or even the reader what the plan is. The reader is kept in suspense and left to guess how Louis plans to get the Liar back into space so that the adventurers can return to civilization.

The mighty civilization of the Ringworld was destroyed by a simple mold. The mold is, in effect, nature coming back to destroy what mankind has made. The Ringworld frees men from the confines of nature, but nature can never be completely escaped from. The occupants of the Ringworld ultimately succumb to the smallest bits of nature that

slipped in under their guard. The meteor hits are more evidence of nature impinging on the Ringworld.



Chapter 22, Seeker

Chapter 22, Seeker Summary

Prill is terrified of Speaker, but Nessus convinces her to let Speaker out of the basement. They cut off the bottom part of the building to make it lighter and easier to move. They test using Nessus's flycycle to move the building and find that it works. They head to the floating castle to gather shadow square wire. Louis begins to learn Prill's language, but he's slow at it. Prill seduces him again and tries to get the tarp. She's disappointed to learn that it's imbedded in Nessus. While they are making love, though, Nessus uses the tarp on Prill, and her seduction turns into a mutual affair. Louis is angry at the puppeteer's continued meddling, and the puppeteer uses the tarp on Louis in defense. Louis is able to break through its power to kick the puppeteer, but he realizes that he must help Prill overcome her addiction somehow.

On the way, they find that they've caught a car in the police station's tractor beam. It's carrying Teela and a native named Seeker, who has the clear look of a hero. Teela was never caught in the police station. She got out of the beam and landed, but then her cycle was captured by the beam, probably for a parking violation. Seeker found her and took care of her. Seeker is traveling the Ringworld on a quixotic quest to find the "arch," not realizing that it's merely the continuation of the ring. Meanwhile, he has adventures and brings stories to the people.

Teela is in love with Seeker, and Louis realizes that all her luck has landed her on Ringworld to meet him and adventure here. She fell in love with Louis, joined the expedition, crashed on the Ringworld, and even almost got pulled through the eye storm just to be saved by Seeker. Nessus is horrified at the thought that all their trials are part of Teela's luck controlling them all and rolls into a ball. Louis is hurt by Teela's love for Seeker, but he knows he's lost Teela. Seeker believes that Teela is Louis's property, and Louis pretends to sell her to make things easier.

Chapter 22, Seeker Analysis

Prill has her own version of the "tarp," and like Nessus, she is a manipulator. She uses her sexuality to manipulate Louis, but Louis is not angry at her. He is angry at Nessus for doing the same thing. For Louis, Prill is using a natural ability, skill, and talent, but what Nessus is doing is unnatural. Where is the line drawn between the two?

Louis is able to resist Prill, and he is also able to resist Nessus long enough to use physical violence. Although the tarp is powerful, it is also resistible. However, Teela's power is not something that can be resisted. The whole universe is invisibly manipulated to fall into place around her. Even Teela herself is not conscious of it.

When Teela finds seeker, her ultimate destination is fulfilled. Everything in the journey has served a purpose. Teela's luck has been behind everything, including her own



feelings. Teela's luck has controlled Nessus, even though he initially set out to control and use Teela. He has meddled with forces that he could not truly understand, and Louis terms this arrogance. A more exact term for it is hubris. Castles in the sky, a Ringworld around a sun, flying planets, inducing pleasure directly into the brain, and manipulating evolution are all hubris. Ultimately, they all fall. The castles crash to the ground. The Ringworld reduces to savagery from a simple mold. The flying planets and the tarp may not be sufficient to save the puppeteers. The luck created by the puppeteers lands Nessus in a dire situation.



Chapter 23, The God Gambit

Chapter 23, The God Gambit Summary

The flying police station, which Louis has named Improbable, arrives at the castle. Shadow wire is covering the city in a cloud. They don't know how they will get some of the wire, since it cuts through flesh when handled, but they get off the ship to examine the wire and talk to the natives. Seeker acts as a guard, as part of his "payment" for Teela, in addition to a vial of longevity drug. When Speaker attempts to cut the wire, the natives attack. A bloody battle ensues, and the party retreats to the castle.

Nessus is caught in a trap of the shadow square wire, which cuts off one of his heads. Louis realizes that this might not be deadly for a puppeteer, and he makes a tourniquet with a scarf that Teela hands him. The party returns to the Improbable, but they leave Teela and Seeker behind in the flying castle. Speaker has retrieved the end of the shadow square wire from where the natives set the trap, and they pull the wire along behind them as they travel, making their living pretending to be gods.

Nessus is hooked up to life support, but he remains unconscious and seems comatose. Without the tarp, Prill must go cold turkey. Louis tries to comfort her, learning some of her language. When they reach the last outpost of civilization before the desert, Louis offers to leave her there or take her along. Prill wants to come with them to the Liar, to see civilization again.

Chapter 23, The God Gambit Analysis

Nessus's head is cut off. Louis postulates that Teela needed to be in a situation of extreme emergency to grow up and become more human. For the first time, Teela acts under the pressure of an urgent situation, providing Louis with something to make a tourniquet. However, Nessus's disaster has another positive consequence. If the adventurers had not discovered the trap set by the natives, they would not have known how to recover some of the shadow square wire. Speaker is able to find the end of the wire by virtue of the trap. Perhaps Teela's luck is interested in saving her friends and sending them back to civilization.

Prill has taken the place of Teela as a lover for Louis. Perhaps Teela's luck took care of that as well. When she finds Seeker, Louis is put in Prill's expert sexual hands. Although Louis is hurt when Teela goes off with Seeker, he is also caught up with Prill's story and with his desire to cure her of the addiction to the tarp, which he feels responsible for. Louis cannot help or protect Teela, but he can help and comfort Prill.



Chapter 24, Fist-of-God

Chapter 24, Fist-of-God Summary

Louis realizes that the Ringworld, with its unique material, will protect its occupants from the core explosion, once it gets that far into space. He postulates that Teela's luck was great enough to put her there 20,000 years in advance of the danger. With her luck, she'll live that long and remain protected even from the core explosion. Louis also talks to Speaker about what the puppeteers did. Letting the kzinti know about it will mean certain war, and Speaker realizes that ultimately the war will destroy the kzinti. He agrees to keep his knowledge secret.

When the Improbable reaches the Liar, Louis puts his plan into action. He pulls the wire through the Liar from one end to the other, and using the Improbable, Louis and Speaker pull the wire all the way up to the top of Fist-of-God. At the top of the giant mountain, so high that it reaches above the atmosphere, Louis finds what he expected: a meteor hole. The mountain was created by a meteor hitting the ring and pushing the ring's base material upward into a cone. Then, the meteor pushed through, creating a hole.

Louis has Prill close the airlock on the Liar, stopping the movement of wire. Then, the Improbable can fall through the hole, pulling the Liar after it. Louis and Speaker, in their space suits, can board the Liar again once they're in space, and they can use the hyperdrive to get back to civilization. Before they set off into space, Speaker agrees that he must not steal the Long Shot, because it would give the kzin a way to dominate other races, but ultimately, domination would lead to the destruction of the kzin.

Chapter 24, Fist-of-God Analysis

Speaker shows that he truly is different from the kzin of many years before, when the Kzin-Man wars happened. He can see further down the road, to envision the problems that would ultimately befall the kzin if they remain warlike and try to dominate everything around them. Perhaps Speaker's nature, and the very nature of the kzin, has changed. It is an adaptation that will help his people survive. Speaker is able to control the forces of his own nature.

In the final chapter, Louis's plan is revealed. The ship has (through Teela's luck) been near its exit point from the Ringworld all along. The journey is circular, like the shape of the ring, leading the characters back to their starting point. They created the tool they needed, the shadow square wire, in the act of their crash. All Louis needed was to figure out what the Fist-of-God really was and how to use the shadow square wire to launch the Liar back into space.



Characters

Louis Wu

Louis Wu is a 200-year-old human adventurer, with an Asian look about him enhanced by dyes, decorations, and depilatory chemicals while he is on Earth. In actuality, like most humans, he is not noticeably one race or another. He loves new things and alien things. He gets restless with a normal life, and so when he meets an exotic alien who offers him a chance to travel into deep space, he is instantly hooked. Louis is protective, and he tries to protect Teela until he realizes that there is nothing he can do against her luck. Louis is smart, and he ultimately uses his intellect to realize how he can launch the Liar, the puppeteers' spacecraft, back into space.

Louis is also a mediator. He mediates arguments between Speaker-to-Animals and Nessus, two very different beings from different races who often conflict. Louis is content to allow Speaker to take charge of the expedition, but when it comes to the end of the story, Louis is the one who leads the adventurers to safety and off the Ringworld. Louis is also willing to let Teela go, once he realizes that she does not need or want him anymore.

Louis is kindhearted, as well. He feels obligations to others. He would not leave a party member behind him. Even though he knows of Teela's incredible luck, he goes after her when she might be in danger. When Nessus enslaves Prill to the tasp, Louis feels responsible and wants to help Prill overcome her addiction. Although Seeker has all the earmarks of a hero from Louis Wu's perspective, Louis himself is a true, but modest, hero.

Nessus

Nessus is a Pierson's puppeteer. He is considered mad by his own race, since he is willing to face the dangers of spaceship travel. Puppeteers are herd creatures, with two heads connected to one brain in a lump at the meeting of their necks. They use their mouths as fingers, and they have three hoofed feet. The rear foot makes a formidable weapon. Puppeteers are notably fearful and manipulative, and Nessus has both of those traits. After the puppeteers discovered that the galactic core had exploded in supernovae, and that the radiation would arrive in 20,000 years, the puppeteers took their planet on a migration away from the galactic core. However, Nessus stayed behind to monitor the situation in known space.

Nessus is the brains behind the expedition to the Ringworld. He chooses all the members of the expedition, and his race is responsible for manipulating two of them. Nessus has made Teela lucky and Speaker reasonable. He flees from trouble, but he is constantly plotting, planning, and manipulating to get what he wants. Nessus is willing to wait indefinitely to reach his goal, but he is also willing to put someone else in danger to



get what he wants. He will only risk his own safety when it's absolutely necessary to achieve his goal.

One of Nessus's main goals is to breed. His race is overpopulated, and Nessus has been promised breeding rights with the puppeteer leader (known as the Hindmost), if he comes back from his mission alive. Whether Nessus will achieve this goal is unknown, since at the end of the story Nessus has suffered decapitation of one of his heads and seems to be in a coma.

Teela Brown

Teela Brown is lucky. She was born lucky. She was bred to be lucky. In fact, Teela is the result of a puppeteer experiment on humanity. The puppeteers postulated that humanity had a luck gene, and they used political manipulation to get humankind to implement a birthright lottery to give people the right to breed through random luck. Teela is the daughter of six generations of lucky birthright lottery winners.

When Louis first meets Teela, she does not understand fear or pain. She has never been hurt in her life, emotionally or physically. She is incomplete and undeveloped as a human being because she has never even been in danger. The entire journey to the Ringworld seems to be designed to give Teela life experiences of fear and pain, and to bring her to the Ringworld where she can live happily ever after with a new lover, Seeker.

Teela falls in love with Louis and so goes on the expedition to the Ringworld to be with him. The ship crashes, and they are trapped on the Ringworld. Teela foolhardily rushes toward the center of the eye storm and then through sheer impossible luck accidentally falls on the controls that will save her, and incidentally send her flying at incredible speeds toward the man she will ultimately fall in love with. Louis puts all of these intricate events down to Teela's luck. Even Teela does not know that she wants to go to the Ringworld or what she will find there, but her luck seems to know what's best for her. Seeming to control nothing, Teela unconsciously controls everything.

Speaker-to-Animals

Speaker is a result of a new generation of kzinti, tiger-like alien beings covered in orange fur. Because of the puppeteers' experimentation, the most warlike kzinti were killed off in wars with the humans. Speaker is not as warlike as his fearsome exterior seems. Though he urges Louis into a life-or-death challenge when they first meet, Speaker later admits that he would not have followed through, since killing a human would be a nasty incident, possibly even leading to war. The kzin know that war with humans leads to death.

Speaker enjoys hunting and fresh meat, but he is able to control his animal instincts. Speaker could kill and eat Louis when they are trapped in the police station basement without food, but he will not kill Louis as a matter of honor. Speaker is far-sighted



enough to see that he should not tell his people what the puppeteers have done by experimenting with his race, since it would lead to a deadly war. He is even far-sighted enough not to want to steal the Long Shot, because unchecked kzinti expansion through the universe would ultimately lead to his race's decline as well.

Paula Cherenkov

Paula is Teela Brown's great-great grandmother. Louis was once in love with Paula Cherenkov, and she broke his heart. He calls the wound "whiplash of the heart."

Chiron

Chiron is the only puppeteer that the characters meet, aside from Nessus. Chiron, however, is separated from the characters, only a projection on a screen. Chiron explains to the characters the Ringworld that they are going to investigate.

The First Native Priest

During the party's first contact with civilization on Ringworld, Louis talks to a native leader who takes him for an Engineer. Later, Louis realizes that the man was a priest and thought Louis and the other aliens were gods. When Louis laughs at the priest's beliefs, the villagers attack the party of aliens.

The Second Native Priest

Louis talks with a second native priest beneath the floating castle. Louis explains to this priest that he is not a god, but the priest pretends that he's talking to a god to raise his stature with his followers. The priest seems to have doubts about his religion.

Halrloprillalar Hotrufan (Prill)

Prill is a member of the race that built the Ringworld. She was a prostitute aboard a transport ship bringing supplies from other planets to the Ringworld. Her ship had a 24-year cycle, but because of time dilation, while she was gone three hundred years would have passed on the Ringworld. When the ship returned from its last voyage, the crew found the Ringworld civilization destroyed. Prill journeyed to her home city, now wrecked, and found a police station that she was able to operate.

For years, she has lived as a goddess in the floating police station, capturing flying cars that passed by, hoping to find a civilized member of her race. She has gone partially mad, believing herself to be a god. When Louis and Speaker are trapped in the floating police station, Nessus uses his tarp to enslave Prill and get her to free them. Prill is an expert in sex, and she tries to use her sexuality to get Louis to retrieve the tarp for her



and free her. After Nessus's head is cut off, Prill must overcome her addiction to the tarp as well as her mad belief that she was a god. She craves returning to civilization and accompanies Louis and Speaker back to the Liar.

Seeker

Seeker is a native of the Ringworld. He travels the world, trying to get to the edge of the "arch" that is actually the continuation of the ring around the sun. He is a hero, helping people and telling people of his adventures. Teela falls in love with Seeker and plans to travel with him around the Ringworld.



Objects/Places

Long Shot

The Long Shot is a one-of-a-kind ship built by the puppeteers. It has a quantum II hyperdrive engine that allows it to travel a light year in five-fourths of a minute. Nessus offers Louis and Speaker the technology behind the Long Shot in exchange for coming on the mission.

Lying Bastard (Liar)

The Lying Bastard is the heavily protected ship with one long wing that Nessus, Speaker, Louis, and Teela take to the Ringworld. Louis dubs it the Lying Bastard because it's filled with weapons that have some plausible other explanation. The Lying Bastard crashes into the Ringworld after losing all of its propulsion systems, which reside on its one wing.

The Puppeteer World

The puppeteers use their technology to move planets around to help solve their population problems. First, they move nearby planets toward their own to serve as farmlands. Then, they create a system of five planets that travels together through space. The puppeteers flee the oncoming explosion from the galactic core by moving their whole planet, along with four additional farming planets, through space at near light speed. On the puppeteer world, the buildings are tall and built tightly together because of the large puppeteer population. Stepping discs are available on each street corner to transport people instantly to the next block.

Ringworld

The Ringworld is a giant ring built around a distant sun. Few of the Engineers who built the Ringworld still survive. The humans that live on the Ringworld have lost much of their technology and civilization and worship the vanished Engineers as gods. The Ringworld has been pierced by at least two meteors.

Shadow Squares

Above the Ringworld orbit giant flying black squares, which block out the sun periodically, creating artificial day and night by their shadows.



Fist-of-God

Fist-of-God is a giant mountain in the middle of the desert, where the Liar crashes on Ringworld. Louis realizes that Fist-of-God is not a planned mountain but a giant crater created by a meteor crashing into the Ringworld from the other side. The party uses the hole at the top of Fish-of-God to launch the Liar back into space.

The Flying Castle (Heaven)

Over one of the Ringworld cities, the party finds an empty castle still floating over the ground. The natives on the ground worship the castle, calling it Heaven. The castle was once a seat of power and government. Inside, Speaker finds a map room that gives him information about the layout of the Ringworld.

The Police Station

Prill lives in a former police station, a floating tower that has an automatic tractor beam system for pulling in and disabling approaching vehicles. Speaker and Louis are trapped in the police station, and later they use it as a transport to get back to their ship.

Shadow Square Wire

Thin, strong wires that can cut through nearly anything connect the shadow squares above the Ringworld. The Liar crashes through one of these wires, creating the means of its own escape as it crashes toward the Ringworld.

The Eye Storm

The air leak through a meteor hole in the Ringworld has created a giant storm overhead. From a distance, the center of the storm looks like a giant human eye made of clouds and sky. Teela almost dies by being sucked into the whirlpool of air leaking out through the meteor hole at the bottom of the eye storm.

Social Concerns And Themes

Ringworld is Niven's most highly acclaimed book and also one of his most popular. The story has the simple quest plot structure that is the hallmark of much great science fiction and fantasy. Louis Wu, a two-hundred-year-old explorer, Teela Brown, a twenty-year-old, very lucky young woman, and Speaker-to-Animals, an ambassador to Earth from the catlike Kzinti, are recruited by Nessus, a centaurlike puppeteer, to explore the Ringworld, an enormous metal strip circling a star at ninety-three million miles. The Ringworld is one of the most bizarre yet logically designed and fully detailed worlds in science fiction. Since it is manmade it is also a remarkable feat of engineering. Part of the novel's appeal is the sense of wonder which such an object inspires in the reader. Traditional hard science fiction has always tried to instill this sense of wonder into its readers through the marvels of the universe or through those of technology and the Ringworld works on both levels.

During the late 1960s, the idea of improvement through science and space expansion, a central theme in hard science fiction, was challenged by growing disturbances over pollution, overpopulation, and standardization brought about by technology. This challenge shook the old confidence of American society in science and industry. Niven, however, is a defender of the traditional values of hard science fiction. Ringworld was apparently designed by its builders to provide a nearly limitless environment for a technologically advanced race with a growing population but without space travel. However one unforeseen malfunction had caused the collapse of the Ringworld civilization. The natives of the Ringworld now believe their world to be a natural phenomenon built by gods. The four explorers even masquerade as gods themselves for a time to impress the natives. Yet Niven reveals that the attempt to create a perfectly planned world is a way of playing god and is doomed to failure, that no one can set the limits of growth. Niven reaffirms the hard science fiction belief in the value of space exploration, of looking for new worlds rather than "perfecting" old ones. The travelers escape the Ringworld because Louis Wu has the imagination and flexibility gained from long years of exploring to analyze situations from different perspectives. These qualities can only come from an expanding frontier of human experience. The ability to encounter the unknown is a more important survival value than a planned society. The 1960s were a period when scientific progress came into disfavor in many quarters, but also when men began to realize the science fiction writers' dream of space travel. Ringworld's popularity is a sign that that dream can still inspire.

Techniques

Niven combines two traditional science fiction plots, the exploration of an alien world and the investigation of an alien artifact in Ringworld. The first exploits escapes, fantastic sights, rousing battles and other familiar space opera devices to heighten visceral excitement while the second creates intellectual suspense by requiring the hero to analyze the products of an alien mind. The Ringworld is both a world and a machine, it provides adventure and requires thought. Thus the novel appeals to readers on both levels and demonstrates Niven's skills as a master of both adventure narrative and logically worked out scientific problems.



Themes

Playing God

The characters all "play god" in one way or another, by controlling others in the world around them. The puppeteers are "playing god" by controlling the evolution of other races by manipulating the world. They work behind the scenes to create a birthright lottery to breed lucky humans, and they empower the humans to fight the kzinti so that the most aggressive kzinti will die, leaving a more peaceful species. The creators of the Ringworld "play god" by creating their own planet, a completely constructed environment. Speaker, Prill, and Louis literally play at being gods to the natives in exchange for offerings of food. They give advice and direct people's lives.

All of the ways characters "play god" come back to one element: control. They try to control their environment and the people around them. They impinge on others' abilities to make choices—on free will—in order to create a world that meets their needs and wants. The puppeteers are concerned with their own benefit, not the benefit of the kzinti or humans. Speaker, Prill, and Louis all want food for survival. Helping others is secondary. The Ringworld creators are concerned with their own comfort and safety. As gods, the characters are not altruistic. They may not mean harm, but they ultimately act for their own good.

Teela also exerts control on those around her. Her unconscious luck manipulates the world to her needs and desires. She is the most powerful "god" in the group, and she does not even choose her own actions. She is as controlled by her own luck as the others are. She thinks she falls in love with Louis, but it is her own luck controlling her. She thinks that she decides to come on the journey to Ringworld, but the decision really is made by luck. As with the other want-to-be gods, though, Teela's luck is only concerned with Teela's welfare, not with anyone else's good. There is no true godliness among the characters, because there is no true beneficence.

Conquering Nature

The construction of Ringworld is a conquest of nature. Humans (and aliens) are bound to their worlds. They must live in the natural environment. The creators of Ringworld go against this necessity and turn their back on nature altogether. They construct a world entirely of their own, made to their specifications and bypassing the need for nature. The Ringworld is man trying to wrench himself away from the limitations of the natural world. However, the natural world comes back to haunt the creators of the Ringworld. A simple mold is enough to fell their advanced society. The mold is representative of nature. Even in an entirely constructed world, nature cannot be avoided or ignored.

The same is true of the puppeteers. They monkey with nature by trying to control the natural process of evolution. They guide the evolution of humans and of kzinti to suit



their own desires and needs. However, nature will not be passively guided by puppeteers. Nature is always strongest. Teela Brown is the result. Her natural luck does not conform to what the puppeteers want from her. Instead, her nature is the same as all the characters' inherent natures: self-serving. Her luck works for her benefit, not for the benefit of the puppeteers, and in the end, the puppeteers fail at controlling nature.

Speaker is a more successful experiment. He is rational enough to realize that violence and war cannot always be the answer. The kzinti, like the puppeteers, desire conquest. Instead of conquering through manipulation, the kzinti conquer through war. However, any conquest is ultimately self-destructive. The Ringworld creators destroyed themselves by limiting themselves to a constructed world. The puppeteers face a fearsome problem in the lucky humans they created to help them. The kzinti, if they continue on a path of war, will ultimately face destruction. If it hadn't come through the Man-Kzin Wars, destruction would come through a powerful race like the puppeteers.

Speaker's adaptation, then, is more natural than Teela's, perhaps inevitable. Speaker shows that he can conquer his warlike nature when he refuses to eat Louis, and he shows the same restraint by not telling the kzinti what the puppeteers have done. Perhaps one's own nature can be conquered by free will, but one cannot truly conquer others or the environment.

Culture Clashes

The story of Ringworld is a story of alien races coming together. The puppeteers, the kzinti, the humans, the Engineers of Ringworld, and even Teela, the representative of the new lucky humans, are very different from each other. In order to work together, these races must learn to overcome their cultural differences. They must relate to each other and communicate with each other, even though they don't fully understand each other.

The puppeteer's instinct in dealing with other races is to manipulate them to help him. He tries to use the *tasp* for manipulation and control, but ultimately this fails. Louis is able to kick the puppeteer, even under the influence of the *tasp*. Speaker's instinct in dealing with other races is to use fear and force to control them, but this ultimately fails, too. Speaker tries to dominate Louis when they first meet in the restaurant, but Louis does not back down from Speaker's challenge. Since Speaker cannot go through with his threats because of the potential consequences, he cannot dominate Louis through force.

The most successful way that the cultures deal with each other is not manipulation or force; it's compromise and communication. Nessus compromises by allowing Speaker to become the leader of the party. Speaker compromises when he admits that they need Nessus's insight and allows him back into the party. Louis learns that he cannot scold Teela for being careless, or even teach her caution by letting her injure himself. He finds that he can reason with Speaker, and he even learns the native language to

communicate with Prill. Compromise and communication allow the characters to escape Ringworld.



Style

Point of View

Ringworld is told in third person, with a semi-omniscient narrator from the point of view of Louis Wu. The reader follows Louis Wu's point of view because Louis is the most human of all the characters. He sees the puppeteer and the kzin from the outside, but Louis doesn't really understand how their minds work. They are alien to him, as he is also alien to them. The puppeteer and the kzin both confess to not fully understanding humanity. They can't fathom hypnotism or understand facial expressions. Similarly, as humans, Louis Wu and the reader cannot fully understand the aliens.

Teela Brown is as alien as the puppeteer and the kzin. Superficially, she is human, but she lacks the ability to understand fear and pain. The reader sees her through Louis's eyes, and so the reader sees Teela's deficiencies. Louis doesn't truly understand how Teela's mind works, and the reader cannot either. This serves to make Teela alien, much as the puppeteer and the kzin are alien in their thought processes. The semi-omniscient narration blocks the reader outside of Teela's and the aliens' minds, limiting the reader's understanding of their psychology.

The reader travels with Louis Wu, as an invisible passenger on the mission, and each new experience is revealed through Louis's eyes. Though Louis is used to technology beyond anything that exists in the reader's world, he is still filled with wonder and fear at some of the technology he finds on his voyage. The only time the reader is locked out of Louis's mind is at the end of the story, as Louis puts together his plan to launch the Liar back into space. The author blocks the reader out of Louis's thoughts to keep the details of his plan a mystery, and to leave the reader in suspense as to what will happen.

Setting

Ringworld is set in the far future. Mankind has spread throughout nearby stars and made contact with aliens. Humans have teleportation which allows them to travel around the Earth in moments, moving instantaneously from city to city, as well as a drug that gives them indefinitely long lives. However, even with all the technological changes, humanity has not changed much. Louis Wu is very human, understandable, and recognizable, despite superficial changes in style and longevity.

The futuristic setting allows Louis, the representative of humanity, to be immersed in an alien world. In many ways, the novel is about negotiating co-existence with incomprehensible alien cultures. The fearful, controlling puppeteers, the warlike, prideful kzin, and humanity must all learn to exist together, and must continue to find ways to exist with other races in an ever-expanding known universe. The futuristic setting also prepares the reader for even greater and more improbable wonders. The Ringworld is



an epitome of technological advancement, so much so that the characters fear the capabilities of a race that could build such an incredible structure.

The Ringworld itself is a central figure in the novel. It is an entirely constructed world. The builders have used technology to create a society as separate from the natural world as possible. They have not only constructed buildings and cities and social structures, but a whole world. Their air is manufactured, and their landscape is planned. However, even in this entirely constructed world, nature inserts its influence. It is a natural mold that fells the society that created something so spectacular; despite defenses, meteors push through the Ringworld itself. However powerful technology is, nature is more powerful.

Language and Meaning

Communication is necessary to the characters who work together to explore Ringworld, and although they never can fully understand one another, they are able to use language to communicate. The language of the characters differs because of their cultures. Louis is human, and he talks in a human way that the reader is used to. However, when he says he experienced "whiplash of the heart" after being rejected by his lover, Teela cannot understand him. Her personal culture, one where she never experiences fear or hurt, doesn't include a way to process his words.

Similarly, the aliens cannot understand Louis's description of hypnosis or giving up control completely to another. Speaker can't understand human attitudes, and neither can Nessus. They can communicate through words, but meaning is lost in the translation. Speaker uses formal-sounding language, perhaps through his lack of comfort with Interworld, the language that all the characters speak. His native language is one of yowls and hisses. Nessus's language is also formal and often calm and controlled, despite his sudden descents into paranoia and hysteria.

Since Niven is describing things that do not exist in his novel, he must create new language to describe them. Niven uses descriptive, familiar terms that make sense to the reader. The world created in a ring around a sun is called Ringworld; the flying cycles that the characters transport themselves on are flycycles. The discs that transport people from intersection to intersection on the puppeteer world are stepping discs. The squares that drop shadows on Ringworld are shadow squares. The technology becomes accessible through accessible names. However, the people of Ringworld are alien, and their names are alien, names like Halloprillalar.

Structure

Ringworld is the story of a journey. The first part of the novel is the gathering together of the party that will go on the quest. Teela is the last member to join the party, and this is an early indication that Teela is perhaps the most important member. On the surface, Louis and Speaker have much more to offer the mission, and this makes Teela unique from the beginning of the novel.



Once the party has gathered, there is a transition sequence, of the party members traveling to the Ringworld. They travel through several stages, seeing the world of the Outsiders, the revolutionary Long Shot ship, and finally the puppeteer home world, a miracle of engineering involving moving whole planets, to manipulate the universe to the puppeteers' needs. The miracles of technology escalate during this sequence, preparing the reader for the greater technology to come: the Ringworld.

When the party reaches the Ringworld, instead of being the end of a journey, it turns into the beginning of another journey. The journey, like the Ringworld itself, is circular, leading the party back to the very place they landed in order to escape. During their travels, the party finds out about the Ringworld and its history, but more importantly, they discover important truths about themselves and their own pasts. The novel is ended at the point where the Liar is about to be pushed out into space to travel back to civilization, on the cusp of yet another journey, the journey home.

Quotes

"The thought was intolerable. Not new; just intolerable. Louis Wu saw how thoroughly Munich resembled Cairo and Resht...and San Francisco and Topeka and London and Amsterdam. The stores along the slidewalk sold the same products in all the cities of the world. Teh citizens who passed him tonight looked all alike, dressed all alike. Not Americans or Germans or Egyptians, but mere flatlanders." —Chapter 1, page 2

"She wore the puzzled look, that puzzled look, the one that meant he'd used proper Interworld words in a nonsense sequence. Whiplash of the heart? Killed somewhere? Louis sighed within himself." —Chapter 4, page 48

"What kinds of stress situations might they face? The puppeteers were good businessmen. The did not overpay. The Long Shot was a fee of unheard-of value. Louis had the chilly suspicion that they would earn it." —Chapter 5, page 61

"There was nothing Louis could have pointed to, saying, 'That's a weapon.' But there were things which could be used as weapons." —Chapter 7, page 97

"Louis was surprised to find himself obeying orders. He was badly shaken. A moment ago this had been a spacecraft. Now it was little more than a glass needle falling toward the sun." —Chapter 9, page 122

"A moment later he realized that Teela was following him. He said nothing. The faster she learned to look before she leapt, the longer she'd live." —Chapter 10, page 136

"'We can study what we cannot understand,' said the puppeteer. 'We know that there is something in a man that does not want to make decisions. A part of him wants someone else to tell him what to do. A good hypnotic subject is a trusting person with a good ability to concentrate. His act of surrender to the hypnotist is the beginning of his hypnosis.'" —Chapter 12, page 162

"'The majority is always sane, Louis.'" —Nessus, Chapter 13, page 177

"But the priest only looked more bewildered. 'Then why are you half-hairless? How do you fly? Have you stolen secrets from Heaven? What do you want here? Have you come to steal my congregation?'" —Chapter 16, page 227

"He remembered the stairs of Heaven which had carried Teela Brown nine flights upward, while Louis Wu had had to walk. He felt the bandages on his hand, and remembered Speaker's hand charred to the bone, while Teela's translator burned in its saddle case. 'Her luck seems to protect her somewhat better than it protects us,' he said." —Chapter 18, page 248

"That wistful look...the hair stood up on Louis's neck. In a steady voice, he said, 'You know you have a food supply. The question is, will you use it?'" —Chapter 20, page 278



"Then you can go home to the puppeteer worlds and tell them that mucking with human breeding habits is a chancy business. Tell them that enough Teela Browns could make a hash of all the laws of probability. Even basic physics is nothing more than probability at the atomic level. Tell them the universe is too complicated a toy for a sensibly cautious being to play with." —Louis, Chapter 22, page 314



Topics for Discussion

Is Teela really in "control" of the mission to Ringworld? How could she manipulate luck to get something she doesn't even know she wants?

Is it possible to manipulate evolution the way the puppeteers seem to have? Are the puppeteers truly in control of their evolutionary experiments?

In what ways do Teela, Nessus, Louis, and Speaker all "play god"?

Why is Teela fearless at the beginning of the novel? Is fear something that must be learned?

In what ways are Teela, Nessus, Louis, and Speaker all puppets of other characters and forces?

What qualities make Nessus and Speaker truly alien? Is it possible to understand their characters and motivations?

Is it possible for the civilization of the Ringworld Engineers to rise again?

In the future, could it be possible to build a Ringworld like the one in the novel? What would be the reasons for and against doing so?

Literary Precedents

Ringworld is one of several works dealing with carefully worked out alien worlds, including Poul Anderson's *The Man Who Counts* (1958) (also published as *War of the Wing Men*) and Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* (1955). The art of world-building, of designing a fictional planet from geography down to its inhabitants' recreations, is one of the highest accomplishments of hard science fiction. The ability to take a concept like the Ringworld and work out the problems of gravity, atmosphere, and lighting requires great skill at extrapolation, of making logical deductions on the basis of a few givens. This is an essential part of science fiction, its ability to cause the reader to imagine other worlds. Science fiction can tap into people's desire to escape into realms that might be reached by new forms of technology. Much of science fiction's popularity springs from such a desire.

Related Titles

The Known Space series climaxes with Ringworld. The books in the series, arranged according to internal chronology, are World of Ptavvs, The Long ARM of Gil Hamilton, Protector (1973), The Patchwork Girl (1980), A Gift From Earth (1968), Ringworld, and The Ringworld Engineers (1980). The series also includes the anthologies Neutron Star and Tales of Known Space: The Universes of Larry Niven. (The latter has several useful appendices explaining the publishing history of Niven's short stories.)

The Known Space series is considered one of the best integrated of all future histories. Material from the other stories is carefully worked into Ringworld as part of its historical environment so that the reader is not confused nor the novel's pace slowed down by too much expository digression. The sequel, The Ringworld Engineers, does not attain the same high level as Ringworld. Rather it is a well-told adventure tale which explains some of the mysteries of the Ringworld. Niven has explained that with the development of the Teela Brown luck gene, humanity will become so lucky that there will be no interesting events worth writing about.

So the future history has ended, in effect, at the time of Ringworld.



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