The Riverworld Series Short Guide

The Riverworld Series by Philip José Farmer

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Characters

Most science fiction is a modern reworking of the Romance Quest, in which, traditionally, character development is subordinated to theme and plot. This kind of fiction depends less on "psychology" than the way in which the characters are organized into a pattern which ultimately expresses the author's values. Although Farmer goes to unusual lengths to create psychologically complex characters in the Riverworld series, even slowing down his plot with their frequent interior monologues, his characters are rarely as interesting as their historical counterparts. Often they seem to be speaking directly to the reader rather than to each other, articulating ideas Farmer wishes to emphasize. They are basically "types" rather than "individuals," present in the series to replace science fiction's conventional concept of the hero with Farmer's own, much more idiosyncratic version.

The protagonist is Sir Richard Francis Burton, based on the famous British linguist, author, explorer, and adventurer who lived from 1821-1890. Farmer's choice of this controversial writerexplorer as his main character reveals his concept of the hero as someone who, whether in art or in life, is never satisfied with traditional patterns of thought and behavior. Like the real Burton who discovered Lake Tanganyika in the heart of Africa and who entered the Moslem sacred city of Mecca in disguise, Farmer's Burton is a relentless seeker of truth and adventure. Like most fantasy heroes, he is intelligent, strong, resourceful, and courageous. However, as a possessed, driven adventurer who has no true home, Burton is hardly a pleasant person. Even Farmer's supermen, or perhaps, especially Farmer's supermen, have their roots in their natural animal natures, and some readers are likely to be troubled by Burton's ruthless survival ethic, alienation from community, and compulsive sexuality.

Surrounding Burton is a teeming swarm of secondary characters — everyone who ever lived, including you and I — whose various flaws prevent them from achieving hero status. Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), for example, is a writer-explorer like Burton, but is cowardly and tormented by guilty memories of his lost wife. Joe Miller, an eight-hundred-pound prehistoric giant, is physically brave, but lacks Burton's cool, analytical intelligence. King John has the qualities necessary to be a hero, but like all fantasy villains, perverts his great gifts to achieve evil goals. Alice Liddell Hargreaves is a fitting mate for Burton, but never quite manages to overcome the limitations of her repressed Victorian background. It is not that Burton is "perfect" and the other characters are not. Rather, Burton best approximates Farmer's view of the true superman, as explained in The Dark Design (1977).

Social Concerns

The basic premise of the series is that the Ethicals, scientifically advanced superhumans from the distant future, have resurrected along the banks of a meandering river on an artificial planet all thirty-six billion people — excluding the retarded and those who died under the age of five — who lived on Earth from 99,000 BC to AD 1983. The resurrectees are given twenty-fiveyear-old naked bodies entirely free of blemish and disease, and provided with all the necessities of life. This imaginary framework allows Farmer to isolate, as if in a laboratory, two fundamental human motivations: the erotic and the hunger for power. As the great majority of Riverworld's inhabitants quickly turn to their old destructive behavior of Earthly life, they pass from Eden to barbarism to industrialization, with all its attendant problems. Instead of cooperating in their attempt to reach the Ethicals' tower at the mouth of the river, the resurrectees prey upon each other. Their constant warfare requires more and more sophisticated weapons and transportation, resulting in the airplanes, dirigibles, and riverboats which eventually allow the humans to reach the Ethicals. Thus, chaos and violence finally bring a kind of progress, just as on Earth, mankind's relentless desire to have more and know more has resulted in our present form of technologically advanced society.

The world of Riverworld, therefore, is based on an analogy to all of human history, rather than on some simple extrapolation of an existing discovery or situation. Farmer's analogic model provides a mirror of the real world which both reflects and distorts, giving him the opportunity to answer some basic questions from a radically new perspective. How would people manage to form a viable state out of anarchy? How would they manage to cooperate with each other? How would traditional religious beliefs change once the nature of Riverworld was understood? As these and other related questions indicate, The Riverworld Series extends far beyond any limited social concerns into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought.

The series is a diagnosis, a warning, and a call for understanding.

Techniques

The first two Riverworld novels are very close to being straightforward adventure novels, with episodic plots structured around a series of violent encounters. What maintains the reader's interest is the originality of the basic premise and the technique of using historical figures in the context of fiction. Farmer has devoted considerable energies to an assault on the distinction between history and fiction, revealing that they cannot be considered as mutually exclusive. His Wold Newton series, for example, places the products of fiction into "real" biographies. In The Riverworld Series, he reverses this process: all his characters are "real" people placed into fictional stories. Even Farmer himself is present as Peter Jairus Frigate, so that the author exists both outside and inside of his novels, looking out at us as we read them.

The remaining Riverworld novels are noticeably more complex in style and structure than the first two, interweaving an intricate pattern of symbols and allusions into their multiple plots. (The metaphor of weaving suggested by even the title, The Dark Design, is central to the Riverworld series.) Farmer's interest in religion and mythology provides allusions and parallels to The Egyptian Book of the Dead, the teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the fables of Sufi mystics. These are supplemented by an equally complex network of allusions to and symbols from such varied works of literature as John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," Edgar Allan Foe's Narrative of A. Gordon Pym (1838), and Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, "Hunting of the Snark." Farmer is a very deliberate writer who leaves little doubt that a particular allusion or symbol has been carefully chosen to illuminate its context. For example, the inclusion of Carroll's absurdist poem is obviously relevant in a story in which the characters are almost completely ignorant of the possible outcome of their quest. More generally, Farmer's symbolic and allusive pattern has the effect of enriching and universalizing his plot: throughout all of human history, Farmer suggests, mankind has been on an endless quest — for adventure, for love, and for truth.

Themes

The theme of The Riverworld Series is probably most succinctly expressed in Chapter Thirty-One of The Dark Design by the character Peter Jairus Frigate, Philip Jose Farmer's surrogate in the series. Frigate explains that man is a creature stretched between animal and superman, with a superman being a man or woman who is free of prejudices and neuroses, who realizes his or her full potential, who acts on the basis of love, and who refuses to follow the herd. As few or none of Farmer's char acters satisfies these requirements, we are given the strong impression that they are the victims of both external and internal forces. First, they are the helpless pawns of the Ethicals, the powerful beings who represent the cosmic pressures of an inscrutable universe. Second, they are the victims of their own fragmented selves. With a few exceptions, they are a conniving, greedy, narrow-minded people who repeat all the evils of their Earthy history. Again and again, these characters illustrate Farmer's belief that people are basically irrational, acting strictly in accord with their heredity and the pressures of the moment. Yet at the same time, one can perceive a glimmer of the divine in the very best of them.

True, they require much pain and suffering as a prelude to learning love and compassion, but the potential for heroism and transcendence is always present and is infrequently realized. In its entirety, the massive Riverworld Series implies that man's capacity for evil and violence is basic to his nature, but once recognized, this recognition can lead to a significant improvement. Until then, we must continue to struggle, searching for answers while being manipulated by mysterious external forces and driven by our own inner demons.

Adaptations

The first novel in the Riverworld series, To Your Scattered Bodies Go, is available on audiotape. This two-hour reading of a condensed version of the novel was released by Random Audiobooks in 1985. The reader is Richard Clarke.

Key Questions

First-time readers of the Riverworld series face a challenging task. Not only does the cast of characters include almost every person who ever lived, the narrative structure becomes more and more rambling as the series proceeds, until it almost completely disintegrates in the final novel. Perhaps the most useful way of approaching an analysis of the series is to begin by considering the two main male characters, Richard Burton and Sam Clemens, and comparing the values and attitudes they seem to represent. Then discussions should deal with the series' religious and ethical themes, which become increasingly central during the unfolding of the series. Finally, another major topic for discussion could be the series' ambivalent attitude towards reason, science, and technology. On the one hand, the characters' ability to master technology results in the appalling destruction of the Riverworld war; on the other, Burton's technical skills and problem-solving ability allow him to complete his quest and reach the source of the river.

1. In the story "Riverworld," how do Tom Mix and Yeshua represent opposed reactions to Riverworld and to life itself? Which reaction does Farmer obviously prefer? How does he use Yeshua and Bithniah to correct perceived Biblical errors and distortions of history?

2. How is Richard Burton the archetypal Farmer hero? How does he illustrate the major strengths and weaknesses of Farmer's typical male protagonists? Is he convincing as a character?

3. How do Burton's comments in the final chapter of To Your Scattered Bodies Go summarize Farmer's general attitude towards humanity, as illustrated throughout his work? How does Burton's determination to reach the river's source compare with the concerns of most of Riverworld's inhabitants?

4. What can we deduce about the self-styled "Ethicals"? Are they perfect divinities, and if not, what are their weaknesses? Is their name ironic, given the nature of their experiment on Riverworld?

5. How does Sam Clemens of The Fabulous Riverboat differ from Burton?

How does the use of Clemens as a protagonist alter the tone of the series?

6. In The Dark Design, how effective is the characterization of Jill Gulbirra, the feminist airship pilot? What is she like, and how does she compare with Alice Hargreaves, the other major female character in the series? Generally, how does The Dark Design differ from the two previous Riverworld novels?

7. Compare the two central conflicts in The Magic Labyrinth: Clemens's struggle against King John and Burton's expedition against the Ethicals. Consider such elements as the violence in each conflict and the outcome of each.

For example, how does the Riverworld war compare with the duel between Burton and Cyrano de Bergerac?

8. Is Gods of Riverworld as effective or entertaining as the previous novels in the series? If not, what are its weaknesses? Does it seem to illustrate the problems inherent in using the "anatomy" as a model for structuring fiction?

9. Attempt to sort out the religious themes in the series, particularly in the last two novels. What is being said about the nature of the human soul? Is the series illustrating the evolutionary growth of human powers?

10. Analyze in detail the conclusion of Burton's quest in The Magic Labyrinth. What is the symbolic function of his confrontation with Loga and of the help Burton receives from Alice Hargreaves? What is he like at the end of his quest, and what does his success imply about Farmer's view of human nature and human potential?

Literary Precedents

Mark Twain (as Sam Clemens) is a major character in the Riverworld series, pointing the reader towards its most obvious precedent, Huckleberry Finn (1885), the classic account of a difficult river journey laden with symbolic overtones. In addition, Farmer has written fondly of Lord Dunsany's Tales of Three Hemispheres (1919), in which the characters travel on the boat "Bird of the River" down a fabulous legend-and-demon-haunted river. He has also drawn attention to A HouseBoat on the Styx (1895) by John Kendrick Bangs, consisting of a series of satirical dialogues between resurrected historical figures such as Shakespeare and the Emperor Nero. Bangs's book, in turn, has its roots in the tradition of the "imaginary conversation." Some critics believe that the very first science-fiction works are of this genre, which can be traced back at least to the Greek satirist Lucian, who in the second century AD wrote two volumes of dialogues satirizing famous persons and mythological heroes. His Dialogues of the Dead (tr. 1913) portrays great historical figures bickering and whining, while Dialogues of the Gods (tr.

1913) gives the same debunking treatment to the gods of Olympus. Lucian's dialogues anticipate the main intellectual premise of the Riverworld series: the resurrection of the dead in a secular setting and interaction among characters from different historical eras.

The sprawling structure of the Riverworld series can also be traced back to distant times, to the "anatomy," a literary form rarely found in science fiction for the reason that few authors have the learning necessary to write one.

First used by Aristotle in the figurative sense of "logical discussion" or "analysis," the term "anatomy" came into common use in England after Robert Burton published his Anatomy of Melancholy in 1621. (Robert Burton should not be confused with Richard Burton, Farmer's protagonist.) Burton's anatomy is an enormous, loosely structured prose work of almost half a million words. Its chief feature is its endless digressions on almost every conceivable subject, including the quaint and fascinating lore of all times. So exhaustive is Burton in his treatment of melancholy and its related subjects, that if all of ancient and Elizabethan literature were lost, we could still obtain a remarkably clear idea of their contents just by reading the Anatomy.

Eventually the anatomy merged with the novel, resulting in rambling works of fiction which attempt to exhaust their subject by piling up masses of learning around their main themes. The best-known examples in English are Laurence Stern's Tristram Shandy (17591767), Herman Melville's Moby Dick (1851), and James Joyce's Ulysses (1922).

Like these earlier authors, Farmer has a magpie's instinct to collect esoteric information, and also like them, he loves to show off his learning. The result is the Riverworld series, an encyclopedia of all Farmer's major interests, from the pulp novels of his childhood to the most abstract issues of metaphysics. Although some critics have objected to the loose structure of the Riverworld series, its learned digressions, catalogues, monologues, and discussions make perfect sense when placed in the tradition of the anatomy.

Related Titles

The story "Riverworld," was expanded and reprinted in 1979 as River world and Other Stories. The first novel in the series was To Your Scattered Bodies Go (1971); sequels include The Fabulous Riverboat (1971); The Dark Design, (1977); The Magic Labyrinth (1980); and Gods of Riverworld (1983).

Everything that Farmer has ever written is directly related to the Riverworld series, which is the product of a lifetime of speculating, reading and writing. The basic idea for the series first appears in I Owe for the Flesh, the prize-winning novel Farmer wrote in 1953, only to be cheated out of his award money. In addition, the series is filled with countless spin-offs from Farmer's previous fiction, so that the Riverworld novels are actually a grand elaboration of earlier ideas and situations. However, some works may be singled out as Farmer's best-known previous attempts to explore Riverworld's basic premise: some alien, controlling force is at work in the universe, manipulating mankind for mysterious, probably sinister purposes.

This motif dominates the stories collected in Down in the Black Gang (1971), where, for example, the human characters in "How Deep the Grooves" discover that someone or something has completely programmed all their thoughts and actions and then allowed them to discover the programming. The hero of Inside Outside (1964) finds himself in a nightmare world controlled by the Immortals, who, like the Ethicals in Riverworld, feed the population with a mannalike food. In Dare (1965), the humans are transported to another planet by the Arra, a super-powerful race who leave after promising to return in four hundred years. In A Feast Unknown (1969), Lord of the Trees (1970), and The Mad Goblin (1970), an ancient organization called the Nine manipulates the protagonist so that he achieves sexual satisfaction only through killing. Farmer's most elaborate use of the "alien powers" motif appears in the Wolff-Kickaha series: The Maker of Universes (1965), The Gates of Creation (1966), A Private Cosmos (1968), Beyond the Walls of Terra (1970), The Lavalite World (1977), and More Than Fire (1993). Here, the Lords, godlike beings with the worst human vices, create small, artificial worlds occupied by real and imaginary creatures, including the befuddled human protagonist.

Readers new to science fiction might wonder about such a gloomy preoccupation. In part, it reflects the paranoia running throughout a genre that delights in conjuring up hellish future worlds as a warning against present trends and conditions. Farmer has written his share of this kind of political dystopia, but generally, the source of anxiety in his writing is more "cosmic" than "social." Typically, he places his flawed hero in a dangerous world that is really a gigantic trap, opened and snapped shut by unknown beings.

The hero rarely succeeds in completely mastering his world, and usually (as in the Riverworld series), the conclusion is open-ended, suggesting that the hero's quest is endless.

Although such conclusions can be frustrating, they do not compromise the ironic world-view of Farmer, who recognizes that personal, social, and cosmic pressures can defeat even the most modest ambitions. Farmer's novel Dare (1965) concludes with the observation that there is as much hate as love in this world. "It won't be easy," a character concludes. "The only easy thing is to give up."

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