

# The Rowan Short Guide

## The Rowan by Anne McCaffrey

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# Characters

This novel, like many novels named after the main character, focuses on the growth and changes of that character, a bildungsroman. In *The Rowan*, the reader launches into the beginnings of a particular child who proves to be pivotal in the communications and transportation of her expanding culture and in that culture's first contacts with alien life.

This unique child lacks a family and roots: She is called "the Rowan child" after the Rowan Mining Camp where she was found in a mud slide. This loss of identity shapes her in indelible ways. As the ward of the state, she has a foster mother whose birth children resent the Rowan. As a potential Prime, she works very hard with an unsympathetic teacher to learn the skills and duties of Tower operations. As a brilliant Talent, she is also socially isolated; few normal humans or lesser Talents can bear the possibility that she may be prying into their thoughts, shaping their behavior, or exhibiting superior intelligence, although the Rowan is not manipulative, malicious, or boastful.

The Rowan is an accomplished person with many personal and emotional voids — thus springs the romance. Her companion and lover, Jeff Raven of Deneb, directly and indirectly helps her see the gaps she feels in her life and to fill them. Her love for Jeff enables her to overcome claustrophobia, which made space travel very difficult for her. Once this physical obstacle is conquered, she meets Jeff's rambling family of younger siblings and many relatives: a real revelation for her. They are noisy, self-sufficient, and united in the face of planetary disaster. After meeting the family, the Rowan has a greater comprehension of the sorrow and devastation the Hivers caused the Denebians, as well as of the stakes involved in the battle against the Hivers. Her restoring of the Tower and the infrastructure and economy of Deneb is a conscious effort to contribute to "her family."

At twenty-eight, she returns to the Rowan Mining Camp as the final exorcism of the claustrophobia and fear; a friend finds her own name and family: Angharad Gwyn. At the end of the novel, she renames herself: Rowan (not "the Rowan") Gwyn-Raven.

While the Rowan and Jeff are the dominant characters in the novel, other Talented people provide the novel's conflict. Peter Reidinger, head of the FT&T, is the Rowan's employer. A domineering old man, he has secret hopes for the future of FT&T and for the Gwyn-Raven couple in particular.

While his matchmaking to produce more Talents may seem repugnant, he is a good businessman and diplomat.

Another character is Siglen, the Prime of Altair, who finds the Rowan as a child and trains her in her duties.

She has no great ambition and is often denigratingly spoken of as a stevedore; she also has few redeeming qualities, especially for caring for a lonely child.

However, she is not a stereotypical villain. Her outrageous sense of color and texture in decorating, her awkwardness in handling other's feelings, and her painfully self-conscious attempts to be kind also help readers see her as a sympathetic character.



## Social Concerns

As it nears the end of the twentieth century, our culture current is exploring questions of discrimination, difference, equality, and tolerance. These issues also engross the attention of contemporary science fiction readers, who often confront through literature similar ethical dilemmas: the problems of the human with superior capacities being considered alien, being feared, hated and persecuted by others; the relationships, positive and negative, with these aliens. Developing positive relationships with the Other involves more than just understanding or mere tolerance. In *The Rowan*, McCaffrey creates a woman who has superior psychic talents, so superior she is rated at the highest levels and referred to as Prime; she has the power to transport huge ships, material, and messages across vast reaches of space while seated in her control tower. A woman with such power is an alien in her own world: Not only is she separated from normal, non-Talented humans, who barely acknowledge a being with tremendous telekinetic and telepathic powers in their world, but also she is set apart from other Talented humans, who do not understand the unique responsibility she bears.

McCaffrey compounds this emotional alienation by contrasting it with physical aliens: in this case, aliens whose thoughts and motives are so incomprehensible that they are collectively referred to as Hivers, like the communal insects which they resemble.

Later in the series, readers are introduced to the Mrdini, another alien culture who made first contact with humans through dreams, and whose extreme need for status and glory often confound their human allies. The developing relationship with the Mrdini reflects the complexities of human relationships with others, requiring a negotiation of differences and the acceptance of mutually beneficial values and strengths.



# Techniques

The Prologue establishes the scientific foundations of Talent: the psychic powers of telekinesis, telepathy, precognition, and others are real, and are great sources of social and economic power which has enabled the human population to expand to other planets.

The Rowan's plot is staged in four acts, like a series of short stories: each section complete with its own setting and its own contribution to the novel.

The first two sections particularly are very character-driven; the Rowan's personal development holds the novel together. Generally well-paced, the novel has a rich mixture of dialogue and narrative, sprinkled with italicized passages that denote telepathic communication. These sections, particularly, along with the dialogue contribute to a sense of voice among the characters.

Each chapter is named after the principal planet where the Rowan is stationed. Her life begins on "Altair," which covers the most chronological ground; vignettes cover her extensive training in Tower activities, including engineering as well as teleportation, her first lover and other rites of passage into adult responsibility at age eighteen. "Callisto" skips a sweeping eight or nine years, with little sense of time passing. One day, she makes telepathic contact with Jeff, an unknown talent from Deneb, and her life is radically altered. After this, the chronology of the novel becomes more compact.

She is confronted by an alien threat and meets her lover within a few week's time. This is the romantic section of the novel; her mental contacts with Jeff across the reaches of space resonate with long-distance petting and erotic longing. "Deneb" covers another few weeks, as she goes to Deneb to take care of Jeff and help rebuild the planet, which was devastated by the alien's invasion tactics. The final section, "Altair and Callisto" covers a year, including the Rowan's reassignment to Altair, her first pregnancy and temporary assignment to Callisto, the second confrontation with the aliens, now referred to as Hivers, and the beginning of her second pregnancy.

While the time periods involved in each section are widely various, the settings are fairly limited. Except for a vacation to the beach, to the mountains or a surprise visit to FT&T headquarters on Earth, the Rowan's life is carefully circumscribed by the Tower and its responsibilities. She can be found in the Tower, in her quarters near the Tower, or in a carrier pod in space between Towers. Even when she goes to a devastated planet, she's rebuilding their Tower. This limitation of her space, a social claustrophobia, helps the reader sympathize with the Rowan's constraint. The Tower is the dominant symbol in the novel, representing the overwhelming duties and responsibilities of a Prime, the social isolation in her "ivory tower." In opposition to this, the Rowan also has an alter ego, full of wisdom and humor, represented in her life by Purza, a stuffed animal intended originally to help control and comfort an often uncontrollable, Talented toddler. Purza is a friend and confidant whose image surfaces in the Rowan's psyche as a positive sign of her growth and happiness.

# Themes

McCaffrey explores the Rowan's alienation on two fronts. First, she illustrates the loneliness of excellence and great power; this is often stated in the truism, "it's lonely at the top." In the top of her Tower, the Rowan wields such psychic and telekinetic power that, in the hierarchy of the Talented, she is tapped as the successor to the current leader, Peter Reidinger. Additionally, while those who work with her respect her professionalism and kindness, they also feel her emotional isolation. This loneliness, this sense of being different from other young women of her age, also lends itself to the romance that best describes this novel. The novel is a romance about a young woman yearning for the love of her life and, as an orphan, the fulfillment she expects from family ties. As the Rowan exclaims: "Someday it would be nice to have something who loved me! Not the Rowan Prime, not the provider, but me! Someone preferably." The road to love is not a smooth one, even for the Talented, but it makes good reading.

Another theme explored in the novel is the almost-necessary exploitation of the Talented to maintain commerce and security. McCaffrey takes a businesslike approach in examining the difficulty of exploration and colonization across galactic distances, much like Peter Reidinger does in his concern for the future of the Talented and for the increased demand for their services, while the supply is sparse at best.

While many science fiction novels assume the fiat of easy commerce, McCaffrey integrates these concerns into the novel, giving readers the sense of watching a growing culture, as well as a growing child.

# Adaptations

Two in the series have been recorded as audio books: Damia, eight cassettes, eleven hours. Published by Brilliance; read by Jean Reed-Bahle. Reviewed as a difficult audio book: too many unusual names, characters and creatures to keep straight without prior familiarity with the story or a program; and Damia's Children, six cassettes, eight hours. Published by Brilliance; also read by Jean Reed-Bahle.



## Key Questions

Science fiction has sometimes been described as a derivative genre, adapting literary genres and non-literary, scientific disciplines to make its message. In this particular instance, McCaffrey seems to draw on multiple traditions of literature to create *The Rowan*; particularly her experience in the romance genre and her knowledge of the *bildungsroman* inform this text.

She also draws on our minimal knowledge of "esper powers," psychic phenomena and other speculated, often romanticized, abilities of the human mind. Consider the extent of McCaffrey's — and all science fiction/fantasy writers' — indebtedness to other genres and disciplines.

1. What are the Rowan's expectations regarding a family? How are they altered by her experiences with Lusena's children? With Jeff's family? With her own children?
2. What symbolic role does the Tower serve in *The Rowan*?
3. How does McCaffrey use the details of space travel and technology to create the futuristic setting?
4. How is the novel science fiction?

Could it also be considered fantasy?

5. How does the third-person omniscient point of view enable McCaffrey to create more sympathy for the Rowan?
6. What do you make of the Rowan's claustrophobia? Does it seem real to you? How does this neurosis increase our understanding of the Talented?
7. Has McCaffrey created a wellrounded character? Are there any aspects of the Rowan that are flat, stereotypical, or superficially developed?
8. What is Jeff's attitude to the FT&T, and how does this change as he becomes drawn into the corporation?

9. How does the depiction of the Hivers seem stereotypical or unique?

What do you make of the women's sensitivity to the alien's second attack?

10. How has McCaffrey limited the settings in this novel?
11. How does the Rowan's trip with Turian illuminate Talented and nonTalented relationships?
12. In what ways does the novel reflect its short-story origins?

## Literary Precedents

In many ways, *The Rowan* originates from typical science fiction scenarios: the colonization of worlds through accessible interstellar travel, the various alien lifeforms — both benevolent and malicious, the extrapolation of current impossibilities into future routines.

McCaffrey also draws on typical romantic conventions in *The Rowan*: lonely woman looking for love, unconsummated love because of obstacles, the overcoming of them to fly to the beloved's side at a time of crisis, playing nurse to his near-mortal injuries, intimate knowledge of the other's needs and fears and past, all without having to say anything — a knowledge more accurate and specific than hazy intuition.

What is unique, then, is McCaffrey's combination of these genres. Science fiction's readers are still predominantly adolescent males, although McCaffrey's fans are increasingly diverse. Thus, she effectively combines genres, as well as adding a few contemporary innovations of her own. The lonely woman is not lonely because she is ugly, weak or mean-spirited; on the contrary: She is beautiful, powerful, and loving, as well as intimidating and peerless. She does not look for someone to rescue her (in fact, she often does the rescuing). She desires a companion, a relationship of equals.

While McCaffrey's variation on the typical themes are modern, she also has classic foundations for her plot.

*Rowan* is a foundling that rises to greatness — a trope as old as Moses, Dickens, and Alger. This is also the hero's journey of legend and folklore: the young woman (typically a man) who wanders in the wilderness, is exposed to dangers, is taught by others, and returns to the community an adult and a new person. McCaffrey also draws on the innate powers of witches, fortunetellers, wizards, and sages of fantasy and lore, and adds a scientific basis for their powers of telekinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, prescience, and telempathy — the powers to act or know by thought or intent.

## Related Titles

McCaffrey's first forays into the realm of the Talented begins in some of her earlier novels and short stories, including *To Ride Pegasus* (1973) and *Pegasus in Flight* (1990). *Rowan* is the transition from the near-future of the Pegasus stories to the far-future of common space flight and interplanetary colonization.

The specific origins of *Rowan and Damia* (1992) are rooted in short stories, two of McCaffrey's first: "The Lady in the Tower" and "A Meeting of Minds."

Reprinted in *Get Off the Unicorn* (1977) from the various science fiction pulps in which they were first published, they form a central part of their respective novels. In both novels, much of the opening details the early lives and budding romances of both mother and daughter, while the closing chapters bring the characters back to the essential conflict that runs through the remainder of the series: seeking out and destroying the Hivers.

However, *Damia* introduces the arrival of possible allies in their search for the Hiver's home world. The Mrdini, however cuddly they appear to humans, are depicted as a separate and distinct culture. Their views on many issues are markedly different from humans; these differences often erupt in conflicts and mistrust. This uneasy alliance sounds an honest tone for careful readers.

In *Damia's Children* (1993), the Talented offspring of *Damia* and *Afra* are encouraged to have Mrdini playmates to foster relations, to further crosscultural understanding, and later, to coordinate military efforts of both species' space fleets. Their military efforts and cross-cultural encounters (both positive and negative) culminate in *The Lyons Pride* (1994).



# Copyright Information

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