

The Satanic Illusion Short Guide

The Satanic Illusion by L. Sprague de Camp

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Characters

The three chief characters of "The Satanic Illusion" are Rivers, Zahn, and Hubert. Rivers has the advantage over the other two because his character is developed through several stories, whereas Zahn and Hubert barely have time to fulfill their functions as antagonists. Rivers is from Australia and for most of his life he has led hunting safaris, the objective of which is to secure trophies for the customers. The modern world is fast running out of trophy animals, with most being either extinct or endangered and on protected wildlife reserves. Faced with unemployment, Rivers learns that a time machine has been invented, and he and his partner Chandra Aiyar, as well as a host of other professional hunters, rush to the machine's inventor Prochaska and arrange to use it to ferry customers and supplies back to eras in which exotic animals such as dinosaurs and mastodons existed. Rivers's adventures usually involve difficult people who do not listen to him as they should, and he is frequently in danger while trying to keep his customers out of danger.

He is a hardheaded professional modeled on the stereotypical British professional hunter that romantic adventures often have leading safaris in Africa. He is both a hard-nosed businessman and a matter-of-fact realist, believing the evidence of his own eyes. This last trait brings him into conflict with more spiritually inclined people such as Zahn and Hubert. Zahn is "St. Louis' leading hellfire-and-damnation Fundamentalist preacher," and he is determined to prove evolutionism wrong. A big, fat man, he is too soft for Rivers's taste, and he lacks Rivers's hardened view of life. "'We have no intention of hunting or shooting anything,' said Zahn. 'From what I hear about wildlife, if you leave them alone they will mostly do you the same courtesy. No guns . . .'" Ignorant about wildlife, unwilling to carry weapons, and somewhat closed-minded, Zahn is the antithesis of Rivers, and Rivers wants nothing to do with him, but Rivers did tell an audience at the West Side YMCA that he wished he could show a creationist what he has seen of ancient wildlife.

Even so, Zahn's ignorance of wildlife makes him a poor candidate for observing the signs in ancient life that would point to evolution, creation, or some other mechanism.

Although Rivers and Zahn are the chief representatives of their points of view, Hubert's role is crucial in the playing out of the themes of "The Satanic Illusion." He begins the story as an obnoxious zealot: "We hope you won't mind if this survey ruins your business," says Hubert to Rivers. Why? "Because it will expose the falsity of the whole evolutionary heresy. It will demonstrate that all these prehistoric beasts, whereof your clients bring home heads, hides, and photographs, did not live in succession, but all at the same time." Not a wellrounded character, Hubert is more like a puppet, doomed to play out his role in the conflict between two ideologies. As he journeys from era to era, taking photographs of what he sees, he begins a slow process of revising his views. He is overheard arguing with Zahn in their tent. "But Paul," Zahn says, "do you not see? Once you start admitting that certain verses in the Bible may be interpreted as figures of speech, you open the door to all the biblical historians and analysts, who want to reduce God's word to a lot of legends and folk tales." There is little doubt which side of the



issue de Camp favors, and he has his characters speak with loaded words. Note how Zahn says "admitting," which suggests that evolution may be true but that he wants to suppress it; words such as saying or declaring could be substituted for admitting and have a neutral connotation. Hubert protests, "On some points the scholars have us by the short hairs." At first seeming to be a closed-minded zealot, Hubert performs his role as the absolute believer changing his mind: That is, the evidence favors evolution and even an antievolution extremist, if he is honest, will be converted to the view that evolution over millions of years accounts for the development of species. Of creationism, Hubert declares, "If something's plainly untrue, you can't expect me to defend it to the laity."

A fourth character, newspaperman Spencer McMurtrie plays the important role of witness. For the story to work, it requires an observer who can attest to Rivers's account of events. The story is told in the first person by Rivers, and his account could be discounted if McMurtrie had not recorded Hubert's death on film. "Neither of these preachers intends to carry a gun, and that makes us too lightly armed for comfort," says Rivers, hoping McMurtrie can use a firearm. It turns out that McMurtrie can use a gun, and while his turn as witness awaits, his presence in the story is felt as both photographer and hunter.

All the events of "The Satanic Illusion" are weighted against Zahn. From the start, he appears self-indulgent, ignorant, and manipulative. He is unwilling to honestly assess what he learns and proves to be an outright hypocrite. On the other hand, Hubert is allowed some growth.

His love for wildlife makes him appealing; he refuses to kill a snake even after Zahn demands that he do so because biblical scripture says that snakes are "cursed" and that God had "ordained that man should bruise its head!" Zahn is very good at quoting scripture and poor at interpreting it; Hubert insists on photographing the snake but not harming it.

Unfortunate, Hubert, lost in his passion for photography, then dies when a diatryma, a large predatory bird, attacks him; McMurtrie has photographic proof that Zahn could have saved Hubert's life but plainly chose not to do so. Thus, Zahn is a murderer who chooses to allow a colleague to die rather than allow his closedminded views to be challenged. He is an utter hypocrite who quotes the Bible to support his views, but who ignores the spirit of the Bible when it suits him.

This gathering of characters and presentation of events heavily weighs "The Satanic Illusion" in favor of evolutionism, perhaps unfairly. A conflict between two views that could be worked out through evidence from the natural world is instead worked out in the characterizations of the principal characters. This is a trait common to de Camp's work—the scientific background is impeccable, but the interaction of people is more important. This is an admirable quality that has elevated most of de Camp's work above most science fiction, and it probably plays a significant role in his enduring popularity, but in "The Satanic Illusion," it is worrisome. That the primary advocate of creationism is

a closed-minded, hypocritical demagogue does not actually invalidate creationism, even though it provides the story with an otherwise neat and satisfying ending.

Social Concerns

In "The Satanic Illusion," L. Sprague de Camp focuses on the conflict between believers in creationism and believers in evolution. Reginald Rivers, his partner Chandra Aiyar, and many other hunters using a time machine to travel to prehistoric eras have been bringing to the present a great deal of evidence supporting evolution as the explanation why animals and plants have achieved their present forms. This has disturbed supporters of creationism, some of whom have picketed the offices of Rivers and Aiyar: "The signs they carried denounced the Raja— that is, my partner Chandra Aiyar—and me as murderers and emissaries of Satan.

I was never quite clear as to whether one of us was supposed to be Old Nick himself, and the other an assistant imp."

Rivers made the mistake of saying in a speech to the West Side YMCA that he, as the Reverend Gilmore Zahn puts it, "wished you could take some of those foolish Fundamentalists back on one of your safaris, so they could see how the world really was in prehistoric times."

Zahn, a charismatic preacher, and his associate Reverend Paul Hubert, take up Rivers's challenge. The narrative takes them and Rivers to several geological eras to witness different animals, most of which have become extinct by the present day. The conflict of the story is one of explanations. Zahn maintains that the time travel machine is not hopping back millions of years but only thousands and that the animals may be explained as creations created in a brief time, as he interprets Genesis to say. Rivers maintains that only evolution, probably by means of natural selection, can account for the variety of different species found in each era. Central to the playing out of the conflict between creationist and evolutionist is Hubert, at first hostile to Rivers, but a keen observer who begins to doubt creationism as his mind wrestles with ambiguous evidence.



Techniques

De Camp has been writing adventure stories for seventy years, and his is a sure hand at constructing a tale that will capture one's interest and that will entertain.

Typically, his stories do not take themselves seriously; they are leavened with humor. In "The Satanic Illusion," Rivers's witty asides, made in his Australian dialect, usually focus on observations of human nature and remind one that the story is meant more to be fun than a serious social commentary.

The structure of the story is that of the quest. A goal is stated early in the story, and then like Odysseus, the characters travel from place to place—in this case time to time—and have adventures related to the exotic locales they discover.

This is a comfortable format, familiar to most readers, in which the important aspect of "The Satanic Illusion," the interplay among characters may be emphasized without the plot being a distraction.



Themes

The issue of the conflict between evolutionism and creationism is the primary theme of "The Satanic Illusion" and motivates all of the action. A supporting theme is time travel, long a fixture in popular fiction. Without the ability to travel in time, the central characters would be unable to make their observations of different ecosystems in succeeding eras. De Camp deals with one of the conundrums of time travel—Won't killing ancient animals change history?—by saying that changes made far enough back in time will be absorbed by great evolutionary trends, and the effects will disappear long before human beings appear. This underlying idea about the effects of time travel makes evolution inevitably the winner over creationism, which does not offer a similar explanation for how ancient animals may be killed without affecting modern times.

Rivers's time traveling machine cannot move geographically, remaining in the central region of North America. This confines the succession of ecosystems the characters visit to one geographical area, with each successive ecosystem probably deriving from the ecosystem previously visited. This idea that each ecosystem evolved out of the ones previous to it implies that there would be earlier ecosystems than the earliest one the characters choose to visit, extending back in time to the moment when life first arrived in North America.

Another significant theme is a conflict between inquiry to learn and inquiry to prove. Hubert and McMurtrie are openminded, seeking to learn from what they observe. This quality allows Hubert to develop a roundedness denied to Zahn, and it gives McMurtrie credibility when he shows how Zahn doomed Hubert to death. Hubert and McMurtrie are learners; they develop their conclusions from their observations. On the other hand, Zahn is not interested in learning; he intends to make all evidence fit his already made up conclusion. His attempts at making what he sees fit creationism become increasingly ridiculous as he and his companions travel through time. Such closed-mindedness is not unique to clergymen; scientists have often suffered from it, too, with scientific advances coming in spite of scientific theory, not because of it. In "The Satanic Illusion," forcing evidence to fit predrawn conclusions is antithetical to good science; honest people like Hubert would be prepared to adjust their ideas according to rationally derived evidence, in this case from direct observation, whereas dishonest people would defy the evidence and lie about it. This is not to say that Hubert actually converts his views to evolutionism. Instead, he is shown to be willing to allow for the possibility of evolution based on what he has seen; he allows his mind to be open to new possibilities as he learns. On the other hand, Zahn maintains that the evidence for evolution is a Satanic illusion.

Key Questions

One quality all of de Camp's Reginald Rivers stories have in common is fun.

Unless lacking a sense of humor, most discussion group members will be glad to have read the stories simply because they offered adventures in well-drawn exotic locales involving some of the more popular animals of prehistoric eras. The social concern about evolutionism versus creationism is a hot topic and is likely to remain so for many years, perhaps generations, to come. A discussion leader might best begin by reminding group members that "The Satanic Illusion" is in part about being open-minded and that a discussion that is open-minded about the central social issue of the story would be in keeping with the spirit of the story.

After that, one tack to take would be to invite comment on how open-minded de Camp seems to be in creating his narrative. How fair is it? What, if anything, is missing in order to create a balanced view? Aside from the social issues, other avenues for generating good discussions are: The different ecosystems; the animals; the interaction of human beings with wildlife that has never experienced human beings.

1. De Camp mentions several different kinds of animals in "The Satanic Illusion." How well has de Camp described the animals? How much of his description of their behavior is from his imagination and how much from what science has found? Are his animals plausible?

2. If discussion group members are feeling particularly industrious they might research ahead of time the different geological eras the story's characters visit.

What kinds of life existed in North America in the eras mentioned? What were their ecosystems like? Does de Camp make these ecosystems come to life?

3. How representative is Zahn of Christian fundamentalism? How representative of it is Hubert?

4. Should Rivers take a more active role in advocating his view in favor of evolution? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. Is what happens to Zahn satisfying?

Should he suffer? Is what happens to him in keeping with human nature, even if it does not satisfy one's hopes for justice?

6. What is Rivers's responsibility in Hubert's death? Did he do what he should?

What is Hubert's own measure of responsibility for his fate?



7. Should Rivers be willing to take more people on expeditions to study the development of life? Is he correct in his view that such safaris would be "to settle theological arguments"?
8. "The Satanic Illusion" has a quest structure. Is the goal of the quest reached? Does it matter?
9. What aspect of the story seems most important to de Camp, the characters, the social issues, or the adventures? How does he develop his focus?
10. Rivers is very concerned about being able to shoot animals. Is his concern justified? How much of the concern comes from his own attitudes toward wildlife and how much is based on the behavior of the animals?



Literary Precedents

Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Lost World* (1912; see separate entry) set the standard for adventures like "The Satanic Illusion." In *The Lost World*, Professor George Edward Challenger, narrator Edward Dunn Malone, and a gathering of misfits seek out a great plateau in South America where ancient life, particularly dinosaurs, may persist long after its extinction elsewhere. On the plateau, evolution is seen playing itself out, and every observation is based on the belief that evolutionary theory is true. Conan Doyle had in mind more than high adventure when he wrote *The Lost World*; the novel is a parody of a popular form of fiction called "boys' books." These were fantastic adventures that were supposed to show boys the important traits of manliness. Conan Doyle's novel is humorous and has fun with all sorts of supposedly manly activities, and the men in the narrative seem more like overgrown boys than truly mature adults. De Camp's Reginald Rivers stories in general share with Conan Doyle's dinosaur adventure a satirical attitude toward high adventure, with people usually proving to be contrary figures whose foolishness is more often funny than serious.

Other adventures among dinosaurs tend to share in common with "The Satanic Illusion" an interest in evolution.

In *The Lost World*, events are portrayed as not only supporting evolution but a violent brand of natural selection as the mechanism for evolution. More advanced animal species destroy less advanced ones. In another influential book, *The Land That Time Forgot* (1924; c. 1918; see separate entry), a gathering of three novellas, Edgar Rice Burroughs creates a world of ancient life that is perpetually living out evolution, with life forms constantly evolving into higher life forms, with modern human beings at the end of the evolutionary chain. Burroughs has serious purposes in mind beyond illustrating how evolution might work in an entertaining series of adventures; he is an advocate for the benefits of natural selection over human beings manipulating their own evolution—making his book contemporary in its concerns. The Galus are the human beings who have resulted from their land's constant evolutionary production; opposed to them are the Wieroos, who practice eugenics. They have wings and can fly, a seeming advantage over human beings, but they are hideous and morally debased and unable to procreate with one another. In Burroughs's world, Rivers would find much of interest, and he would probably find the characters just as foolish and contrary as he does in his own adventures.



Related Titles

The first Reginald Rivers short story "A Gun for Dinosaur" was published in 1956, in response, de Camp says, to gross scientific inaccuracies he had seen in fiction about adventures among dinosaurs. He wanted to write a story that was scientifically plausible, in which the era into which his characters ventured was rendered as accurately as scientific knowledge would permit. "A Gun for Dinosaur" became one of the most popular of science fiction short stories, anthologized often. When asked by Robert Silverberg to contribute a dinosaur story to an anthology Silverberg was editing, de Camp revived Reginald Rivers and in the 1990s wrote several new stories of his adventures. These stories have in common adventures in carefully depicted ancient eras in North America, wayward clients who seem more trouble than they are worth, and Rivers's engaging sense of humor. Evolution as a topic does not dominate most of them; de Camp is more concerned about the interplay among characters in an exotic and dangerous environment. Each has in common Rivers's encyclopedic knowledge of prehistoric wildlife, and entrancing depictions of long-extinct animals and their behavior.



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