

The Secret of the Ninth Planet Short Guide

The Secret of the Ninth Planet by Donald A. Wollheim

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Overview

The Secret of the Ninth Planet is an exciting read. Although it touches on the topics of nuclear weapons and the value of space exploration, the novel emphasizes adventure and action. The book's breakneck pace, suspenseful situations, and mysterious settings are bound to please those who enjoy science-fiction adventure stories.

About the Author

Donald Allen Wollheim was born in New York City on October 1, 1914, to Jacob Lewis Wollheim, a doctor, and Rose Grinnell Wollheim. Scientific fantasies caught hold of Wollheim's imagination as a young man, and he helped found the Futurians, a club of New York science-fiction fans that included such important writers-to-be as Damon Knight and Frederik Pohl. Wollheim's energetic passion for science fiction made him an important force in the club. Later, he would also become an important force in the publication and development of science fiction.

His first short story, "The Man from Ariel," was published in 1934 in *Wonder Stories*. In 1935 Wollheim graduated from New York University, and in 1941 he founded two magazines, *Cosmic Stories* and *Stirring Science Stories*, neither of which was successful. From 1942 to 1947, he edited magazines for Ace Publishing. During the 1940s, Wollheim edited two pioneering collections of science-fiction stories, *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* (1943) and *Portable Novels of Science* (1945). These collections helped change science fiction from a small, youth-oriented literary genre to one that appealed to a wider and older audience.

On June 25, 1943, Wollheim married Elsie Baiter, and the couple had one daughter, Elizabeth. In later years his wife became his assistant in his publishing venture, DAW Books. Eventually, she became DAW's principal reader of unsolicited manuscripts.

But in 1947, when Wollheim joined Avon Books and began editing the Avon science-fiction series, DAW Books was still many years away. Unhappy with Avon's low-quality publications, he rejoined Ace Books in 1952 as editorial vice president. Ace aimed at a broad general audience, and Wollheim sought out appropriate books. He wanted fastpaced, exciting stories that would hold most readers from the first page to the last. As a general rule he published what he himself enjoyed reading, believing that most people shared his taste. Even while aiming at a large general audience, Wollheim published works by many science-fiction trend-setters such as Philip K. Dick and Samuel R. Delany, and his tenure at Ace helped shape the direction that science fiction took during the 1950s and 1960s.

During the 1950s, Wollheim began writing his own science-fiction books for young adults. Exciting and full of adventure, such books as *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* caught the imaginations of young adults and remain popular today.

From 1961 to 1964, he published the Mike Mars series for younger children.

Each of these books takes the reader through a particular aspect of the space program—a topic that had enormous appeal in the days of the "space race" to the moon. Under the pen name David Grinnell, he wrote science-fiction novels for adults. Most of the books reflect his own editorial standards: straightforward plots, clear writing, and gripping action.



In 1971 Wollheim left Ace Books to begin his own publishing venture, DAW Books. He made an arrangement with New American Library in which they provided office space, distribution services, and similar support, while he exercised complete editorial control.

Wollheim remains outspoken about what he values in science fiction and clear about the types of books he publishes—science-fiction and fantasy books with exciting action and broad popular appeal.

Setting

The novel begins with an archeological expedition in the high Andes of South America, moves to a spaceport in California, and then takes off to visit each of the planets in the solar system.

The main character, Burl Denning, accompanies his father on an expedition to uncover Incan artifacts in a dry, rocky region of the Andes. The expedition learns it is near an alien installation that is draining away the sun's energy. The Dennings locate the installation and shut it down; in the process Burl is exposed to a mysterious electronic charge that allows him to operate the alien controls.

The novel pauses at the California spaceport only long enough to introduce the others who will go on the expedition into the solar system. The space voyage itself is fraught with danger and the problems created by the crew's unfamiliarity with their spaceship's new method of propulsion—antigravity engines.

Some of Wollheim's information about the planets is outdated. According to Wollheim, Mercury does not rotate and is thus permanently hot on one side and cold on the other, but modern scientists have found that the planet does in fact rotate. Wollheim portrays Venus as covered by a vast shallow sea, inhabited by primitive plants and animals, while scientific probes of the 1970s indicate that the surface of Venus is actually dry and extremely hot. Wollheim portrays the canals of Mars as products of antlike but technologically sophisticated beings, instead of the optical illusions scientists now know them to be. His speculations about Jupiter, Uranus, and Neptune, however, are still remarkably consistent with modern scientific thought. He characterizes Pluto as Earthlike in size and composition—very cold but otherwise a planet that was almost identical to Earth in the distant past. Present-day observations of Pluto indicate that it is actually a twin planet and that the two planets are much smaller than Earth. Despite its dated astronomy, *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* presents the science of physics and space navigation accurately and in plain language. The differences between the book's descriptions of the planets and modern observations are unlikely to spoil the fun of the story for young readers.



Social Sensitivity

The violence of *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* is the likeliest aspect of the novel to cause concern for readers. When Burl and his companions use an atomic bomb to blow up a sun-tapping station located in a Martian city, they kill many of the Martian inhabitants. The Martians are like insects and purely instinctual, which means that their complicity in the plot to make the sun into a nova would be entirely without their consent—they cannot reason and therefore have not been conscious coconspirators. For some readers, the killing of Martians would probably be no more meaningful than stepping on an anthill, and the situation is so desperate that their deaths would probably seem inevitable and justifiable. Still, for some readers who are sensitive to the rights of other living things, the killing of the fascinating Martians may be unsettling.

A social concern found in other of Wollheim's novels is touched on briefly in *The Secret of the Ninth Planet*. Nuclear weapons were an issue of interest to young adults at the time *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* was written, and they remain so. When the crew destroys the alien installation on Iapetus, a moon of Saturn, it uses a bulky hydrogen bomb: "After the dust cleared away, they saw only a gaping crater where the plateau had been—a volcanic hole, miles wide and glowing red, from which spread vast, deep cracks throughout the entire visible hemisphere of the moon."

Wollheim notes, "The men on the Magellan were awed and silent. The thought occurred to each of them, beyond his capacity to deny it: what if this had occurred on Earth?" Most of the novel's thoughtful moments are reserved for explanations of the science involved in space exploration, but here Wollheim shows sensitivity to an issue of concern to modern young adults.

Literary Qualities

The Secret of the Ninth Planet features easily identifiable characters; a suspenseful, dangerous situation; and a plot that is almost nonstop action. Such an action-oriented novel requires a strong premise. The characters need a good reason for their desperate acts of courage against great odds. The threat in this novel is to planet Earth itself.

Alien beings are stealing the sun's energy, making Earth and Mars dangerously frigid and threatening crop failures on Earth. Furthermore, astronomers discover that the sun-tapping installations will cause the sun to become a nova; in a matter of weeks the sun will suddenly expand into a red giant and destroy the inner planets of the solar system.

Ordinary chemical-propelled spaceships would take weeks just to reach the nearest planets, but the Magellan can travel much faster than ordinary spacecraft. By making the Magellan the only craft capable of traveling fast enough to save the Earth, Wollheim keeps the novel tightly focused. All the action moves toward the fateful meeting with the aliens themselves.



Themes and Characters

Underlying *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* is the belief that space exploration is important to the well-being of humanity. In Wollheim's vision of the future, humanity establishes a presence in space stations and on the moon before discovering the alien threat. Implicit in the story is the belief that the peoples of Earth need to be prepared to face a possible threat from outer space, whether it be alien invaders or asteroids on a collision course with Earth.

The novel has a strong bias in favor of advanced technology and scientific research, and Wollheim provides brief and somewhat dry explanations for each of the wonders he introduces, including the antigravity drive. He points out that his conception of an antigravity drive is different from that found in H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), which defies known laws of physics. Wollheim says that his conception of antigravity is based on discoveries in subatomic physics, in which some particles are repelled from one another by gravity rather than being mutually attracted.

In Wollheim's novel, a beautiful, teardrop-shaped spaceship uses gravity as a propulsive force. The antigravity engines do not need the enormous fuel tanks typical of present-day rockets, enabling the spaceship to carry a large crew and a wide array of equipment.

Wollheim's description of the problems of maneuvering the spaceship as it journeys from one planet to another adds to the story's believability.

Another significant theme of *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* is the importance of human ingenuity. The successful defense of Earth relies on the human ability to use intelligence in dealing with new situations and a willingness to take quick, decisive action. On Mercury, the astronauts rig a plastic shield as protection from the sun's killing rays. On Venus, Burl saves his companion from giant amoebalike creatures by using an oxygen tank as a blow torch. Each alien installation poses new challenges and dangers. Learning from mistakes as well as successes, the expedition slowly pieces together clues about the aliens.

For instance, the flimsy construction of some of the sun-tapping devices suggests that the aliens are few in number, in a hurry, and unconcerned about humans destroying the devices.

The characters in the novel are not developed in detail. Burl, the main character, is the young adult reader's representative in the novel and is involved in all the important action. His quick mind and determination to succeed make him an ideal crewman on a journey into the unknown. Burl is courageous, levelheaded, intelligent, and filled with the 1933 excitement of his journey. As the son of an archeologist, he is accustomed to traveling to strange and remote places; as an expert marksman, he is familiar with weapons; having hiked deep in the Andes, he is fit enough to participate in the rigors of

the space expedition; deeply interested in his father's work, he is comfortable with the complexities of science.

The other figures in *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* are less well-developed.

Burl's father appears only briefly, leading the investigation of the sun-tapping station in the Andes. Lockhart, the leader of the *Magellan*, is strong-minded and given to ruthless and decisive action. The president of the United States has told him to regard himself and his crew as a military team and to treat the aliens as enemies. Whenever the aliens pose a threat, he acts quickly and decisively, without discussion. Russell Clyde, Burl's cabinmate and an astronomer, is somewhat more fully developed.

He is fascinated by the *Magellan's* discoveries and, along with other scientists on board, is eager to explore each new planet. Clyde is a good friend to Burl and proves to be a valuable member of the assault team on Pluto.



Topics for Discussion

1. What does the "zoo" tell us about the aliens from Pluto? About their religious practices? About how they view other living beings?
2. Why are the explorers from Earth excited about finding so many alien beings in the zoo?
3. Some of the astronomy in *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* is out of date. Did this affect your enjoyment of the novel? Is the success of the story dependent on the accuracy of the science, or is it enjoyable anyway? Are there other science-fiction novels that are old but enjoyable even if some their science is dated?
4. What are the qualities that make Burl such a good companion on the journey to save the solar system?
5. Why are there no women involved in the action?
6. Wollheim says that his antigravity propulsion system is different from those of other writers because his is based on known physics. Does that matter to you?
7. What do you think will happen in the world of the novel, now that Earthlings know about life on other planets and satellites in the solar system?
8. Which were your favorite alien creatures in the novel? Why?
9. Many people think that a work of literature should communicate a deep inner meaning or have a moral, but *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* chiefly entertains. Does this diminish its value as a novel? Why or why not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of the Martian "canals." Who first saw them? Why did people come to believe in the canals?

Why would Wollheim include them in his novel?

2. Many authors have written novels about Martians. Research the history of Martians in literature. How do Wollheim's Martians compare with other writers' conceptions? Are his Martians a logical development of the Martians imagined by such authors as Ray Bradbury and Edgar Rice Burroughs? Or are Wollheim's Martians distinctive?

3. Wollheim imagines creatures living on the cold outer planets and their moons as frigi-plasmic rather than protoplasmic. What does Wollheim mean by this? What qualities do his frigi-plasmic creatures have in common? Have any scientists speculated on how life on cold planets might be different from life on earth? Do any scientists have views similar to Wollheim's?

4. Why are space wars popular with young people? There are numerous examples, from novels such as Ben Bova's *The Star Conquerors* (1959) to motion pictures such as *Star Wars* (1977) to television shows such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969). Is the violence something people should be concerned about? How does Wollheim's conception of space warfare compare with other authors' views?

5. *The Secret of the Ninth Planet* takes its readers on a planet-by-planet exploration of the solar system. How have scientific views about the solar system changed since the novel was written?

Which of Wollheim's conjectures seem to have been correct?

6. Research the science behind the antigravity drive of *The Secret of the Ninth Planet*. Physicists have talked seriously about the possibility for decades. How realistic is this view about the potential for an antigravity drive?

What do scientists think of the possibility?

7. There are different kinds of novas, stars that undergo catastrophic changes.

What kind of nova is described in *The Secret of the Ninth Planet*? How does it occur? Is it likely to happen to the sun?

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Gunn, James. *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*.

New York: A&W Visual Library, 1975.

Notes Wollheim's role in the development of science fiction.

Platt, Charles. "Donald A. Wollheim." In *Dream Makers Volume II: The Uncommon Men & Women Who Write Science Fiction*. New York: Berkley Books, 1983. This is a superb interview in which Wollheim reveals a great deal about his editorial principles.

Pohl, Frederik. *The Way the Future Was: A Memoir*. New York: Ballantine, 1978.

Includes a lengthy discussion of the Futurians club, of which Wollheim was a principal member.

Related Titles

All four of Wollheim's most important writings for young adults focus on mysteries in outer space. Of these, *The Secret of Saturn's Rings* has the most in common with *The Secret of the Ninth Planet*. In the novel, people race to be the first to Saturn, and the explorers discover that the rings were once a large, inhabited moon of Saturn that may have been blown apart in an atomic cataclysm.



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