

Servant of the Bones Short Guide

Servant of the Bones by Anne Rice

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Characters

Azriel, while fascinating historically, is a fairly shallow character, an avenging angel made flesh once again. His faith and the testing of that faith comprise his sole motivation. At each step, he tries to determine what God would want him to do, what more God requires of him, and what steps he must take to reach heaven. As a metaphor, however, Azriel is an excellent illustration of the childlike ideal of faith. He accepts instruction from his masters, and when they betray him, he waits for signs from Yahweh himself. Through his faith he is transformed, freed of the need for a master and from dependence on the Bones. He is sustained by water and his faith in God alone.

Far more complex is the character of Gregory Belkin. A Hasidic prodigy, he turns against his faith and heritage, choosing instead to found a cult to redirect people's faith in God to himself. With cold calculation, he plots the "assassinations" of his stepdaughter, Rachel, and his twin brother Nathan, and through Nathan's death he mimics the resurrection of Christ, transforming himself into a god. Azriel represents Belkin's ultimate temptation: to become a godlike spirit, a creature beyond earthly concerns. It is this ravaging spirit that the witch Asenath would have wanted to become the Servant of the Bones, a creature turned away from God and controllable in its anger and vanity.

For an interviewer, Jonathan (literally, "beloved of God") takes a surprisingly active role in the narrative. To Azriel's story, he brings a sense of the traditions and sufferings of the Jewish people, including a tinge of the Holocaust, to the discussions of the Israelites' various exiles and captivities throughout history. His knowledge of Rachel also gives an unusually human, emotional grounding to an otherwise fantastic tale.



Social Concerns

Anne Rice dedicated *Servant of the Bones* to God. Her books deal increasingly with issues of religion and faith; this novel tackles directly the question of the existence of God, the existence of gods, and the possibility of life after death.

Set in much the same venue as *Interview with the Vampire* (1976; see separate entry), the work opens as Jonathan, a college professor with Jewish lineage, is saved by a supernatural being named Azriel, who afterwards tells him his story, which is recorded on tape for the benefit of the audience. Azriel was born a Hebrew in Babylon during the captivity of the Israelites under King Nabonidas. As a young man, Azriel worked as a scribe in the temple of Marduk.

The priests there observe that Azriel seems to have a special rapport with the god. As was fashionable in that time, Azriel has chosen Marduk as his personal god, and he talks, prays, and makes offerings to him.

Azriel's father, with whom he is very close, treats this lightly, but none of Azriel's family realizes that Marduk actually talks back to him. At nineteen, Azriel becomes strong enough to make the god visible, to even touch him and walk with him. This brings Azriel the unwanted notice of the prophet Enoch, the witch Asenath, and Remath and the priests of Marduk.

Cyrus the Persian has conquered Babylon, and he wants a peaceful transition of power. The priests of Marduk have a ceremony in which the statue of Marduk tours the city with the king to show his favor. The statue is made of a human body coated in gold, and the old statue has rotted through.

Azriel, who bears a striking resemblance to the god and is clearly favored by him, is asked to become the new statue. He is coated in a special, poisonous mixture of gold and tours the city, a living representative of the god, showing his people that Cyrus is to be their new king. In exchange for his life, Azriel buys the freedom of the Israelites. At the end of the ceremony, however, Azriel is tricked by Remath and Asenath. He is thrown into a pot of boiling gold, and only his bones remain; his spirit is then bound, genie-like, to the bones. Azriel calls for Marduk's help. The god turns away, however, and Azriel's spirit is driven into the bones.

As *The Servant of the Bones*, Azriel is called upon over the centuries by many a powerful wizard. The first, Zurvan, teaches him the nature of magic, and the idea that the Hebrew God is the same as all other major gods such as Zeus and Ahuramazda.

After being betrayed by one master, Azriel begins to kill all wizards who call him out of the bones, until finally he appears unbidden on the streets of modern New York in time to witness the murder of Rachel Belkin, daughter of Gregory Belkin, the leader of the cultish Temple of the Mind.

Throughout the novel, Rice speculates on the nature of God and Heaven. Azriel himself undergoes the realization that, while he was intended to be a spirit of great evil, he has instead the potential for great good.

He also explores the relationship between faith and fanatical madness. The Temple of the Mind, while bringing happiness and enlightenment to its millions of followers, is at its heart more corrupt and destructive than any cult.

Techniques

Anne Rice's trademark is her sensual writing style. Her rhythmic, lyrical style and the use of Hebrew ease the narrative along. The biblical and historical references are excellent and give a strong factual grounding to the story, unlike other novels by her. Rice also avoids the pitfall of making broad pronouncements about religious figures as she did in *Memnoch the Devil* (1995), incurring the wrath of critic and clergy alike.

Rice's description of the coalescing particles of Azriel's body also lends a factual air to the tale, especially in the explanation that the mechanism is not yet understood by science. In this, Rice joins together liturgical beliefs and scientific fact, paving the way for further such developments in novels to come.



Themes

Rice brings a number of strong religious themes to this novel as a result of her research into ancient Hebrew and Babylonian cultures as well as modern Hasidic society.

The most obvious theme is that of ritualistic sacrifice. The Servant of the Bones is created through a tremendous, if somewhat unwilling, act of self-sacrifice so that his people could be freed, and that spirit of service to God may have prevented Azriel from becoming the evil spirit his creators had intended. Rachel Belkin is touted as a sacrifice by the Temple of the Mind, but that assessment may not have been far from the truth, since her death seems to have triggered Azriel's reemergence from the Bones.

Finally, Gregory Belkin sacrifices his own brother for the furtherance of the Temple of the Mind, and Azriel sacrifices a chance to enter Heaven in order to stop Belkin.

Beneath the plot lies a deep probing into the question of faith. Azriel refers to Marduk as a god, and indeed Marduk calls himself a god, and yet this god is powerless to help Azriel. Azriel does not particularly believe in Marduk in the same way that he believes in Yahweh, the god of lesser gods, and yet Yahweh has never shown himself to Azriel.

"Why don't you go tell all this to Yahweh Himself if you are a god?" Azriel taunts Marduk. Marduk replies, "What? Talk to your god? No one can look at the face of your god and live. What do you want to happen to me?" Clearly, then, Marduk is a lesser god than Yahweh. He claims that he is not the last sacrificial victim of the statue, and yet there is the implication that Marduk is a made thing, a spirit such as Azriel himself becomes, and that in the creation of Azriel, Marduk is destroyed. This claim is reinforced by Zurvan's teaching of one God.

If there is one God, then Azriel exists by His will. Thus, the entirety of Azriel's existence is a test of faith.

The Temple of the Mind provides the reader with a look at the consequences of unfounded faith. Born out of the cults and televangelism that have become commonplace in American culture, the Temple of the Mind resembles the Church of Scientology with a sinister twist. Bent on converting ninety percent of the world's population to his "religion," Gregory Belkin lives for the faith of his people, for the power and self-fulfillment that it gives him, but he seeks that adoration because of a lack of faith in himself. Having abandoned his family and his Hasidic roots, Belkin seeks to redefine himself and redirect history to make certain that he is immortalized.

He sees in Azriel a divine confirmation of his destiny and clings to him as proof of the supernatural in order to bolster his own faith. He intends to use Azriel to do the same for his followers, thus swelling their faith in him even further.



Key Questions

Azriel often compares America and Babylon because of their wealth and their similar, casual attitudes towards the divine. The Hebrews, while captives in Babylon, were nonetheless respected citizens because of their wealth and the economic benefits their trading brought to the city. They developed a cosmopolitan laxness, which may have resulted in Azriel turning to the false god, Marduk, thus causing his death and transformation. In this sense, *Servant of the Bones* resembles a parable or fable, what we would today call a cautionary tale: What lessons can this story pass on to decadent American culture? Azriel deeply mourns the destruction of Babylon. Does this parallel constitute a warning that America may suffer the same fate?

1. How do the angels represented in this novel, such as Azriel and the Malak, compare to the modern conception of angels?
2. Compare the Temple of the Mind to recently founded churches, such as the Church of Scientology and to cults such as Heaven's Gate.
3. How do you think Azriel was called to witness Rachel Belkin's death? Was Belkin's grandfather involved? Was he called by God Himself?
4. Zurvan claims that all magic is based on the manipulation of spirits. How is this idea portrayed in other novels by Anne Rice?
5. Zurvan claims that there is only one God. What was Marduk? What were the other gods that Azriel saw in Babylon? Could they be manifestations of the one God?
6. What similarities can you find to biblical stories, aside from the crucifixion of Christ?

Literary Precedents

Despite the writing style, *Servant of the Bones* is not a typical gothic novel. It draws instead on ancient stories of the Fertile Crescent, such as the psalms and stories recorded in the Bible and the tales of Gilgamesh.

Like these stories, the novel mixes mystical, earth-shattering revelations with earthy details. Enkido, the wild man created to rival Gilgamesh, "is rendered tame by spending seven days with a temple harlot." Azriel is brought into the tale, attracted by the murder of Rachel Belkin. Gregory Belkin, a man who controls the fate of ninety percent of the world's population, is shaken and nearly thrown off course when Azriel helps his wife escape from him. Belkin's plot is destroyed by the simple love of his family.

Also, the novel's religious themes are consistent with the stories of Isaac and the tales of the Egyptian exile.



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