

Seventh Son Short Guide

Seventh Son by Orson Scott Card

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Overview

Seventh Son is a work of fantasy concerned with the mystery of the human soul, particularly how people find and deal with evil within themselves. Though this serious theme is often found in adult fiction, Orson Scott Card presents it in a wonderfully exciting series of adventures set in a uniquely interesting fictional world. These adventures concern the birth and growth of Alvin Miller, Jr., a child capable of wielding great power in an alternative frontier America.

While the setting is a fantasy world in which people practice magic, it is realistically presented. For example, the first chapter begins with a little girl's pleasure in gathering eggs on her frontier farm, a pleasure spoiled by Bloody Mary, the hen that always pecks the girl.

The novel then recounts Alvin's birth and the major episodes of his childhood.

Throughout these adventures, Card exhibits a sure grasp of a child's perception of reality. The reader also shares the suffering of Alvin's parents as they deal with and try to protect a gifted child whom the very elements of nature seem to wish to destroy.

The serious moral and spiritual issues of the novel arise from Alvin's attempts to grow up with his special gifts and from the attempts of those around him to help or hinder.

About the Author

Orson Scott Card was born on August 24, 1951, in Richland, Washington. He graduated from Brigham Young University in 1975 with a degree in theatre. In 1981 he earned a master's degree in English from the University of Utah, Salt Lake City. As an undergraduate, Card began writing, directing, and producing plays, often on themes derived from the teachings of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormon Church). He interrupted his college studies to spend two years as a Mormon missionary in Brazil. In 1977 he married Kristine Allen. Continuing to write and direct plays, he worked for Brigham Young University Press, edited Ensign magazine, and wrote for Compute Books, where he authored Compute's Guide to IBMPCjr Sound and Graphics.

During this period, Card was publishing short stories in science fiction magazines, especially Analog, where he was encouraged by editor, Ben Bova. His first books were published in 1978: *Hot Sleep*, *Capitol* and *Listen, Mom and Dad*.

Though he was reasonably well-known among science fiction fans, he only succeeded in reaching a large audience with *Ender's Game*, which won both of the most prestigious science fiction and fantasy awards, the Nebula of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and the Hugo of the World Science Fiction Convention.

He followed this success with a sequel, *Speaker for the Dead*, a deeply moving novel that also won both Nebula and Hugo awards. With the publication of *Seventh Son* and *Red Prophet*, Card indicated that he was beginning a series that could extend to six novels: *The Tales of Alvin Maker*.

Setting

The story is set in about 1800 in what is now Indiana on the Wobbish River.

That the Wobbish is the Wabash, reveals one way in which the author alters fact to create a fantastic setting. In most of the details of the frontier, Card presents American life as it was in the early nineteenth century, but this is not the frontier students learn about in school.

In Card's history, the Puritan Revolution in seventeenth-century England has been successful. The Puritan domination of England during the colonial period has forced all people with magical knacks to leave England for the New World. The Puritans believe that magical powers come only from Satan. One result of this change in history is that there was no American Revolution; America remains a group of varyingly independent territories. In this America, Benjamin Franklin is the most important hero, and William Blake, the English mystic poet, is drawn to the colonies and to Franklin. Blake takes on the name "Taleswapper" and wanders the colonies until he meets young Alvin.

The Millers have left the East to found a settlement in the Midwest. They are followed by others, and eventually by the Reverend Philadelphia Thrower, a Puritan minister with a mission to bring rational, Calvinist Christianity to the superstitious and benighted heathens who have fled England. As a result, the story takes place in the context of the establishment of a new settlement in a frontier wilderness.

Social Sensitivity

While all of his fiction is morally serious, some of Card's work, notably Hart's Hope and the award winning Ender's Game, is very violent. This is not the case, however, with Seventh Son.

Still, his handling of sexual and religious themes may bother some younger readers.

Though he approaches the subjects from a child's point of view, Card is frank about several aspects of adult sexual life. The novel contains a fairly vivid and detailed portrayal of childbirth, and gives information about, but no description of, the sexual relations between Alvin's parents. Because such material is presented from a child's point of view in every case, it remains at a level accessible without anxiety to most readers over ten years of age, and perhaps even to younger readers. The main advantage of such frankness is that it aids a sensitive portrayal of family relations among people who generally value sexual equality. Although issues such as sexism and racism (in relation to Native Americans) are not emphasized, enlightened and liberal attitudes prevail.

Card has said that Mormon beliefs influence much of his writing. However, while his approach to this story is clearly religious and moral, it is not recognizably Mormon, or even Christian. In fact, Christian fundamentalists may be offended by the portrayal of Reverend Thrower, and even by the whole world of the novel. Although the force of destruction suggests the Fall from Grace and Original Sin, Card seems closer to Taoism in seeing a creative opposition between good and evil. In this story, there can be no final victory of order over disorder, for if either principle is victorious, history will end, and such an apocalypse is not envisioned.



Literary Qualities

Seventh Son combines suspenseful narrative and rich realistic description with moral seriousness. Almost every chapter contains an exciting event: the Miller family wagon trapped in the middle of a raging flash flood, the heavy ridge beam of a church under construction falling toward the workers beneath it, Reverend Thrower coming to the Millers' under "divine" instruction to kill Alvin—these are only a few examples.

Not all such events threaten Alvin with death. After he sends the cockroaches to his sisters' bedroom, he communes with "the shining man," a supernatural visitor who teaches him the meaning of his act. The events leading up to this one form a hilarious depiction of childhood family fights.

Despite his tinkering with history and description of magical powers, Card has presented an authentic portrait of frontier culture. In fact, even his portrayal of magic is based on studies of folk practices.

The moral seriousness of the story is reflected not only in the themes discussed above, but in the treatment of characters. Card takes the reader inside the consciousness of many of the characters. He lets the reader feel what it is like to be Alvin, his father, and even Reverend Thrower. Internal viewpoints of other characters give richness and depth to the novel's characterizations and provide multiple points of view from which to understand and sympathize, even with the less likeable characters.

The result is a compassionate novel that can extend sympathy even to a deluded minister who wants to do what is right, if he can only discover what it is.

Card makes his fantasy world believable by vividly imagining a possible historical setting and giving deep internal portraits of many characters. Ultimately, the main purpose of the fantasy world seems to be to set up the larger conflict between order and disorder within which the characters try to live their lives. Into this realistically presented imaginary world, Card introduces a young hero and follows his development.



Themes and Characters

Alvin Miller, Jr., is the seventh son of a seventh son, born when his six brothers were still living. This makes him especially powerful in the magic economy of his world and culture, where there exist two roughly equal creative and destructive forces. Folk magic attempts to tap into and harmonize with the force of creation while holding off the force of destruction. These forces are clearly related to those William Blake describes in, among other works, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Blake calls his forces "the prolific" and "the devourer." These forces are also similar to the powers of light and darkness in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea trilogy.

While both forces are essential to life and motion in the universe, humanity must choose life over death, order over disorder, creation over destruction.

Because Alvin promises to be an especially powerful "maker," or representative of the force of creation, he is also a target for the forces of destruction. The novel describes the many subtle plots undertaken by the powers of unmaking to destroy Alvin. Card does not present these forces as intelligently directed; there is no focus of evil. The power of unmaking in the universe seems intuitive; it gathers itself in many ways wherever it feels thwarted.

To Alvin's family, the center of destructive force is the element of water. They believe that water is the element among the four—earth, air, fire, water—that works for disorder. The sudden flooding of the Hatrack River when the Millers are crossing nearly kills Alvin before he is born. Repeatedly, water seems involved in the numerous disasters, great and small, that threaten Alvin.

While destructive force resides in water, it is not wholly external to the human soul. Both Alvin and his father, Alvin, Sr., find it in themselves. When Alvin is five, he discovers that in anger, he can use his power to communicate with animals to send a plague of roaches on his persecuting older sisters. Humorous as this incident is, Alvin suffers anguish and guilt when he is made to see what he has done from the roaches' point of view. In a supernatural vision brought on by a "shining man," he sees he has lied to them and caused their suffering and death merely to suit his own pleasure. From this moment, Alvin vows to use his gift for the benefit of others. He will eventually learn the more complex lesson of when to use his power to help himself so that he can help others.

As Alvin grows, his father discovers in himself an irrational impulse to kill his own son. He knows the impulse is completely against all that he really wants, yet it is there, and it repeatedly overcomes him. His suffering increases as he finds he must watch himself ever more closely to avoid the slightest action that might so easily destroy his beloved son as they daily work side by side. Finally, Alvin, Sr. sees that to protect his son he must take the painful step of sending him away.



If Alvin himself and his loving father can become unwilling agents of the force of destruction, how much more likely that other less interested people might also work for disorder. The main character in opposition to Alvin is Reverend Thrower.

Thrower does not believe in magic at all, even as a Satanic expression. He is a scientific Puritan, called to the American frontier by an angelic voice. His mission is to rescue these people from darkness and superstition and bring them into the fold of true, rational Christianity. He believes the "angel" who visits him regularly and assigns him specific tasks is truly miraculous while the magic and insights of the people he came to save are mere superstition. His absolute certainty about his own vision leads him to take part in plots against Alvin's life.

Peggy Guester, who appears only briefly at the beginning and the end of the novel, opposes Thrower and the plots against Alvin. Fate chooses her as Alvin's supernatural protector. She is given the power to know when he is in danger and to save him. The final chapters suggest what it means to her to have this duty thrust upon her while yet a child.

In *Seventh Son* the struggle between creation and destruction does not end.

What humans value in life must be continuously remade from moment to moment. One important way of making it is storytelling. William Blake, as Taleswapper, is an itinerant collector of those stories that reveal the essential creative power of each original teller. His collection and retelling of such stories as well as his understanding of the main opposing forces of the universe make him the most perceptive character in the novel.



Key Questions

Alvin Miller is clearly a Christ-figure. As such, he is persecuted by his own people as well as pursued by a supernatural being, the "Unmaker."

Religious leaders encourage this persecution, much as the Pharisees in the Bible encouraged the persecution of Christ and his followers. There is also a suggestion that religious fundamentalists often miss the connection between Nature and Religion, a failure of perception that led to the witch hunts of centuries not so long past.

1. What parallels can you draw between Jesus Christ and Alvin?
2. What parallels can you draw between the "Unmaker" and the devil as he appears in the Bible?
3. What parallels between today's social discrimination can you see in the persecution of the Millers and other strong magical talents?
4. The Reverend Thrower wants to be a good man, but he fails because of misperceptions. Explain his misperceptions and discuss what led to them.
5. Do you see any parallels between Reverend Thrower and the historical persecutors of witches in Salem, Massachusetts?
6. Envy of property or prosperity often triggered historical witchhunts. Do you think this is a factor in Seventh Son?
7. The Mullers' "talents" are looked on suspiciously by the less talented. Do you see any parallels between the Mullers' talents and modern science, both often at odds with organized religion?



Topics for Discussion

1. Alvin Miller, Jr. learns several lessons that lead toward his realizing his potential as a "maker." What does he learn from "the shining man?" What does he learn from Taleswapper? What important things does he learn from others?
2. How would you explain Alvin's father's impulse to kill his beloved seventh son?
3. Does the author finally want the reader to feel sorry for Reverend Thrower, or is the minister just a villain?
4. What does Taleswapper really mean when he talks about "the unmaker?" He says, for example, that "the great enemy remains invisible, so that no one guesses that they unwittingly serve him." How can one unwittingly serve unmaking?
5. Alvin's mother, for much of the story, seems torn between her attraction to the Christianity represented by Reverend Thrower and the "superstitious" way of life practiced by her family. How would you explain this conflict? Which is the better way of life?
6. Peggy Guester's knack is reading heartfires. What meanings does she read in the heartfires of her father and Alvin?
7. Protecting him from a distance, Peggy splits the millstone to save Alvin. Why does he heal it again and allow his leg to be crushed? Which of them is serving the Unmaker at that moment?
8. Benjamin Franklin, when asked the most important thing he has invented, does not mention spectacles or the Franklin stove, but says Americans are most important. In what way has he made Americans? What does his answer mean?
9. How is America in this book different from the America described in history? What do you find interesting about these differences?
10. In chapter 9, Taleswapper remembers a discussion he had with Ben Franklin about the difference between usefulness and truth. What issues are involved in this discussion? How are these issues important to Taleswapper and in this book?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Review Benjamin Franklin's American Compact in chapter 10. Describe the nature of this compact and explain how it is different from the America that has actually come into existence.
2. Write a summary of Reverend Thrower's relations with his "visitor." Compare this relationship with Alvin's vision of the shining man. What important similarities and differences do you see?
3. Peggy Guester is an important character at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Compare the way she appears and acts when she is a child and when she is grown up. How has she changed? How is she the same?
4. If you had an opportunity to write in Taleswapper's book, what would you write? Why?
5. Think about the marriage between Armor-of-God Weaver and Eleanor Miller. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this marriage? How will they live together after their fight in chapter 14?
6. Compare marriages in the novel: the Guesters, the Millers, and the Weavers. Which seems to you the best marriage? Why?
7. Compare how the Millers and the Guesters raise their children. What can you learn about the problems of being a good parent from these families?
8. In chapter 10, Taleswapper tries to explain to Alvin the meaning of his dream of the Unmaker. Imagine you had to explain Taleswapper's ideas to a friend. Explain those ideas in your own words. Do you believe these ideas describe the way things really are in human life? Why or why not?
9. Card presents several historical events and characters. Important examples are: The Puritan Revolution that began in about 1642 in England; William Blake (1757-1827), British poet and engraver; and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), American statesman and inventor. Look up one of these in the encyclopedia. Discuss any interesting relationships you find between the historical accounts and the account in the novel.

For Further Reference

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Related Titles

So far, only three volumes of a projected six of the Tales of Alvin Maker have appeared. The second, *Red Prophet* narrates from Card's fantasy perspective the historical events surrounding the war between Native American armies, united by Tecumseh, and white settlers led by William Henry Harrison.

At its center is the battle of Tippecanoe, where the Shawnee Prophet was a central figure. Card alters historical events to emphasize the general conflicts between Native American and colonial cultures and point out the particular strengths and weaknesses of each. Alvin strives to help each culture understand both itself and its opponent.

Prentice Alvin, the third volume, centers on slavery and on Alvin's education in the use of his powers of making.

There, he and Peggy Guester meet again.

Card has indicated that the fourth volume, *Alvin Journeyman*, would have male and female roles as a theme, while the fifth, tentatively titled *Master Alvin*, will be especially concerned with American politics. The final volume, *The Crystal City*, will be the story of Alvin's death. In this series Card is trying to tell the truth about America by looking at history from the point of view of fantasy.



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