Sphere Short Guide

Sphere by Michael Crichton

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Characters

A typical Crichton novel, Sphere is filled with a number of minor characters who are portrayed with a few deft touches that make them identifiable.

However, these characters appear only briefly and remain undeveloped. Others, such as Hal Barnes, Alice Fletcher, Tina Chan, Jane Edmunds, and Rose Levy, become personalities, although they primarily function as character types.

Five characters are represented with enough depth to take on the semblance of real people: Ted Fielding, Harry Adams, Beth Halpern, Norman Johnson, and Jerry. Fielding, a forty-yearold astrophysicist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory is inquisitive and vulnerable. In spite of his profession he functions on an openly emotional level and serves as a contrast to the seemingly more intellectual characters. Adams, a Princeton mathematician, is a black man whose exposure to racial bias has traumatized him so deeply that a reverse prejudice colors his perceptions and is the underlying motivation of all that he does. Thirty-six-year-old zoologist Halpern is Adams's female counterpart; her status as a victim of sexual discrimination has affected her similarly. In a sense society has created these damaged characters, and it seems almost apropos that they are the source of the destruction of their society, whether it is the temporary collection of people on the mission or, as suggested by Beth's actions at the close of the novel, the culture of the entire planet Earth.

The protagonist in Sphere — Johnson, the fifty-three-year-old professor of psychology from the University of California at San Diego — is also a father figure. Because he has insight but is limited in his knowledge, the reader attains understanding at the same rate that he does. A humanist, his insufficiencies partially blind him to reality and prevent him from saving humanity. The final character is an amalgam. "Jerry" existentially becomes the essence of whomever enters the sphere; its identity is a power — and the possessor of the power has the capacity to control reality and consequently the world.

Social Concerns

Two levels of social concerns are depicted in Sphere. At the core of the novel's plot is the question of how to approach an artifact of unknown origin that may have come from another planet. Crichton develops the various conflicts — military versus scientific interests, and cultural versus humanitarian ideals — that surround this issue. The struggle to protect individual rights comes up against the desire of special interest groups to psychologically manipulate individuals for their own ends. At stake is the future of the human race. During the debate over these matters, other, more basic social concerns surface, leading to questions about race relations and sexual discrimination. These conflicts are acted out in the backgrounds, attitudes, and actions of Harry Adams and Beth Halpern as they respond to the other members of the investigative team and to developing events.

Techniques

As in his other novels, in Sphere Crichton relies heavily on visual images, myriads of specific details, and scientific facts to provide a backdrop for constant action. To generate suspense he places a personable, intelligent, and competent main character in a deadly situation. Technical details (for example, the elaborate description and explanation of the habitat design) are juxtaposed with the excitement of personal, physical danger and the unknown. However, at times the reader is overburdened with unnatural sounding dialogue that provides too much information, such as naming all of the islands in sight or supplying both the common and the scientific names of shrimp and squid. As in his other works, although, Crichton is generally successful in his application of the formula developed in The Andromeda Strain (1969). One major technical innovation in Sphere is Crichton's plot twist, whereby appearance becomes reality and his characters' worst nightmares are realized.

Themes

The novel's many themes are psychologically interrelated. Besides examining the power of the mind to create reality (which has a literary correspondence as well), Crichton explores the possible application of Jungian psychology to group dynamics, especially as represented in the release of man's dark inner side. Crichton explores the theme that humankind is its own worst enemy, carrying the seeds of its destruction. The divisions within society (professional, racial, sexual) that block humankind's ability to function efficiently and effectively for its own good, the identification of the distinguishing characteristic in defining a human being as the imagination, the failure of the discipline of psychology to produce accurate guidelines for analyzing individuals, and the existentialist emphasis on human choice — all revolve around and reinforce one another throughout the course of Sphere.

Ultimately, it is implied by Beth's contrivance at the end of the book that all of these systems, procedures, philosophies, and cultural components can be undermined by one willful individual who places self-interest above everything else. Whereas in The Andromeda Strain Crichton celebrated the ideal of scientific teamwork, here he implies that when a group of individuals is incapable of operating as a team, all is lost.

Literary Precedents

The most obvious literary precursor for Sphere is Jules Verne's 1870 novel Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, not only in the setting but also in the battle with a giant squid. Peter Benchley's Jaws (1974) and The Deep (1976), along with innumerable science fiction tales of encounters with aliens and explorations of strange worlds, such as Arthur C. Clarke's tale of underwater life in the future, The Deep Range (1957), as well as those concerning time travel, the transformation of something imagined into something real, and mind over matter, might be cited too.

There is an echo of George Orwell's 1984 (1949) in the concept that terror is peculiar to each individual and derives its full power from the individual's mind.

The close reader can also find parallels with Alfred Bester's The Demolished Man (1953) and The Stars My Destinations (1957) or with Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), particularly in relation to the creative power of the human mind and the release of man's dark inner side in a physical manifestation.

Crichton's personal experience often figures prominently in his storytelling.

In Travels (1988) he relates some of his adventures during his travels around the world. The influence of several of the images conjured up by these experiences is evident in Sphere. Crichton is a scuba diver, for example, a fact that is evident in his descriptions of the underwater excursions and the unseen yet menacing presence of sharks in the travel volume. In the novel he comments on the difference between a fearful reaction to imaginary beasts and a blissful lack of awareness of their actual presence. In Travels he tells, too, of an encounter with an elephant in the African bush; the description of the elephant's eye peering through the window of his hut is remarkably similar to the depiction in the novel of the giant squid's eye as seen through the habitat's porthole.

Related Titles

Sphere is clearly related to Crichton's previous novels in style, plot structure, and handling of character. Stylistically, his works tend to be fairly straightforward and relatively simple, although cinematic in nature, that is, visual and full of action. The plot structure is similar throughout his fiction, and there are explicit parallels between Sphere and The Andromeda Strain. In both a scientific team is brought together by the military to deal with a life-threatening problem that may have originated in outer space. Furthermore, the patterns of bringing the characters together, the presentation of the problem, the approach to solving the problem, and the interactions of the characters within the context of the plot, are essentially the same. Style and plot come together in the semidocumentary devices of identifying locales, time settings, and major events through typographical techniques or division of the book into sections, titled chapters, and so forth. Lastly, while the numerous other characters are identifiably drawn, only the protagonist's character is fully developed.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994