

Star of Gypsies Short Guide

Star of Gypsies by Robert Silverberg

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Characters

The novel's chief character is Yakoub the gypsy leader, who narrates the story of his conflict with Shandor, and in the process tells the story of his adventurous life. Yakoub is a man who combines the practical wisdom of a survivor with a certain degree of humane moral vision masked by Machiavellian pragmatism. As "King of the Gypsies" he has tried to exercise power judiciously, and he tries to abdicate from wielding his power because he finds the responsibility to be heavy.

He is, however, forced to use all his Machiavellian guile to outwit his son, Shandor, who seizes power in order to misuse it.

Shandor, Yakoub's foil, is a rebellious youth who wants power for the sake of power. Without having lived through Yakoub's experiences and learned from them, Shandor does not know how to use power wisely. Yakoub's knowledge of Shandor's deficiencies is the chief reason for his long duel of wits with Shandor.

Among the characters whom Silverberg portrays in detail, the gypsy potentate Loiza la Vakako is one of the more memorable and sympathetic. This grandee takes Yakoub in when he is a boy of little more than thirteen and provides Yakoub with a taste of life among the wealthy; not only is Loiza a mentor to Yakoub, but Loiza helps Yakoub realize that his possible destiny can be much greater than he imagined. Malini, Loiza's daughter, is also a memorable figure.

Although Yakoub loses her, she is the primary love of his life and becomes a symbol of the joy or goodness which human beings can only obtain fleetingly, if at all. Another character who wins Yakoub's affection is the boy Chorian, who is serving him at the beginning of the novel.

Chorian professes loyalty to the powerful Sunteil, a candidate for the emperor's throne; but Chorian feels a strong love and hero-worship for Yakoub, a fellow gypsy.

Syluise, Yakoub's perennial lover, proves to be a comforting presence (or memory) for him throughout many of the novel's events. A long-legged blonde beauty, somewhat untypical of the Rom people, Syluise enjoys playing the role of courtesan or goddess for men; but she is dominated by some deeper ambition, perhaps the desire to know what motivates humans. She has a special affection for Yakoub because his own detachment about life and relationships is similar to hers. In giving Syluise a deeper ambition, an intellectual curiosity comparable to Yakoub's, Silverberg attempts to create a feminine character who goes beyond the stereotype of a devoted mistress. Unfortunately, the narrative point of view does not allow readers to see her in action: her character is seen only through the filter of Yakoub's memories.

Polarca plays a recurring role as a friend and sidekick of Yakoub. They meet in the synapse pit of Mentiroso, when both are serving periods as indentured labor. Polarca is a crafty cynic; proud and self-reliant. Yakoub finds that Polarca, although tough and



intense, is being destroyed by the labor on Mentiroso, and devises a way to shoulder some of his burdens. Despite Polarca's initial reaction of anger at Yakoub's attempt to help, Polarca comes to accept his action and to admire him greatly. This episode of male bonding also shows Yakoub's compassion.

Damiano is a lord of the Rom, whose dedication to Romish principles helps Yakoub in his schemes to undo Shandor.

Although not necessarily an idealist, Damiano is a fairly predictable nobleman.

On the other hand, Julien de Gramont is a clever courtier who has served Yakoub in the past and who later serves the sixteenth emperor, Periandros. Julien prefers lavish expenditures on style and ceremony. Whereas Damiano is a figure of some independence and integrity, Julian de Gramont, who affects a grandiose style by speaking mannered French, represents the pure political pragmatist or courtier, who offers unstinting service to whatever emperor happens to be in power.

Periandros is a no-nonsense lord of the empire who unexpectedly becomes the sixteenth emperor. He prefers thrift to ceremony, but he proved to be a supporter of Yakoub during the troubled period when Shandor had played the role of usurper. As usual, Silverberg's secondary characters are only briefly, although vividly, sketched. Perhaps the supreme pragmatist, Periandros is chiefly characterized through his actions. It is revealed that he has become emperor through clever manipulations behind the scene, and that he prefers the wily Yakoub to the arrogant Shandor as ruler of the Rom. As a result, after taking power, he overthrows Shandor by a surprise attack and quickly acts to free Yakoub from imprisonment. Although Periandros does not seriously believe in abstract justice or principle, he recognizes that Shandor's ambitions are dangerous and that his seizure of the kingship of the Rom may well lead to trouble because a doubtful royal succession nearly always causes unrest. Moreover, Periandros prefers Yakoub to the unpredictable Shandor as an ally.

Social Concerns

At first glance, *Star of Gypsies* seems remote from the major social issues of recent science fiction; however, it provides a lesson in Machiavellian politics used for humanitarian and liberal purposes. The main conflict of the novel concerns a power struggle between Yakoub, the King of the Gypsies, and his son, Shandor, an ambitious and murderous egotist, who makes an ill-advised attempt to seize power over the gypsy realm.

Yakoub, the wily gypsy leader, is a master of devious political scheming, and his triumph in the novel comes from his ability to turn his captivity to his own purposes. In essence, the novel is a sophisticated hostage drama. Yakoub's knowledge of pragmatic politics also provides an intriguing contrast to the saintly idealism of Silverberg's liberal hero, Lord Valentine, especially as he is portrayed in *Valentine Pontifex* (1983; see entry on *Lord Valentine's Castle*).

Another interesting social implication of the novel is its description of the culture of the gypsy nation or people, who are called the Rom (because of their use of the Romany language). The gypsy nation is portrayed as a world of wily outsiders, who define themselves by their relationship with "the Gaje" or non-gypsies. In fact, the gypsy culture is the last group to maintain ethnic identity in the future posed by the novel, and Silverberg's identification with it may be traced to the dislike he has voiced in more than one story of a future where all cities and all cultures are blandly similar.

Techniques

Silverberg chose to tell *Star of Gypsies* as a first-person narrative, a technique used effectively in his historical novels. This point of view gives readers insight into Yakoub's mind allowing them to experience Yakoub's richly textured memories.

But the point of view also limits the author's depiction of other characters and prevents the reader from being present at some of the important moments of action, particularly during Yakoub's imprisonment. This restriction of narrative point of view allows Yakoub to explore his memories and reveal his sense of values.

Aside from the strengths and shortcomings of his choice of point of view, Silverberg's literary skills are displayed most clearly in his use of names and words with Romany origins. Because of the richness and amplitude of its language, the novel seems more like a romantic tale than a bare recital of its plot would suggest. Moreover, Yakoub's narrative is enriched by anecdotes and imagery derived from gypsy tradition—an accomplishment that heightens its credibility and testifies to a knowledge and narrative skill possessed by few other science fiction writers.

The future setting of *Star of Gypsies* is similar to the world of numerous science fiction epics in distant times, such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, the *Star Trek* adventures, and the world of Frank Herbert's *Dune* series. Precedents for political dramas also appear in mainstream novels, such as the works of Joseph Conrad, which are an acknowledged influence on Silverberg. The character of Yakoub offers a parallel, whether conscious or not, with the enigmatic duke in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604-1605), who takes a leave of absence from power to observe how a more severe ruler fares in curbing his country's vices.

Other works that feature gypsies as central figures, either in science fiction, films, or mainstream literature, are rare.

Gypsies appear in some German and Central European tales, and in Jewish folklore, although generally as secondary characters. In terms of fiction, only George Borrow, the nineteenth-century author of *Romany Rye* (1857), has focused prominently on gypsy culture.

Themes

A major theme is the importance of political pragmatism, as demonstrated not only by Yakoub's conflict with Shandor but by his skillful manipulation of relations with the empire. This theme is developed also in Yakoub's memories of his earlier life as a gypsy trickster. Yakoub's life has been a testimony to his survivor abilities and to his lusty enjoyment of the sensual pleasures of food and sexual gratification, as well as his delight in the trickery employed in his exercise of power.

As the dominating character of the novel and one of the supreme tricksters of science fiction and fantasy, Yakoub is cast in the tradition of the guileful heroes of Edgar Rice Burroughs and their descendants, as created by such masters of adventure science fiction as Philip Jose Farmer (Kickaha in the World of Tiers Series) and Poul Anderson (Nicolas van Rijn in various novels). Although credible as a gypsy monarch, Yakoub is a larger-than-life Falstaff, whose craftiness and humor provide much of the novel's drama.



Key Questions

Star of Gypsies draws heavily on the history and lore of the gypsies, the people called the "Rom" in the novel. To prepare for a discussion of the novel, readers should do a little background research on the history of the gypsies and their troubles down through the ages, including their suffering during World War II.

(Although it is not widely known, gypsies suffered as severely as Jews in the holocaust.) Moreover, some member of a discussion group might undertake the special task of researching the Romany language, which has been the tongue of the gypsies for centuries.

Readers might also benefit from efforts to describe the political structure of the future world Silverberg has imagined.

They might try to analyze the governmental structures, the system of justice, and the concern for individual rights in this period. If these are understood better an analysis of Yakoub's political astuteness may be easier.

1. Since Silverberg draws extensively on the history of gypsy culture, would it have been advantageous for him to write the story as an historical novel? What specific advantages are gained by presenting the drama of Yakoub's life through the genre of science fiction?
2. Compare and contrast the fates of the Rom and that of international Judaism, two cultures that have existed outside the boundaries of conventional nationalism. What parallels and contrasts present themselves? In what sense are the Rom still an outcast group even in the imagined future of Star of Gypsies?
3. What qualities of character does Yakoub show in the saga of his life that make him an exemplary representative of gypsy culture?
4. What values does Yakoub hold most dearly in the experiences of his life? What events illustrate Yakoub's sense of values?
5. In what ways does Yakoub demonstrate his mastery of trickery and guile? Are these put to humane and intelligent uses in his rule as king of the gypsies? Are they put to humane uses in his struggle with Shandor?
6. What is Yakoub's attitude toward the upstart Shandor? What qualities about Shandor arouse Yakoub's contempt?

Why did Yakoub and Shandor fail to develop a close relationship as father and son? Is Shandor's rebellion based on oedipal feelings?



7. What is meant by the process called "ghosting"? What is the nature of this experience?
8. Describe the methods Yakoub uses to win the political battle in the novel. In what ways is Yakoub a practitioner of Machiavellian politics?
9. What is the likelihood that the gypsies would continue to maintain their ethnic identity and traditions in the distant future setting of the novel? Is Silverberg's conception of a "Romany Star" credible? Give reasons supporting your answer.
10. According to Yakoub, he was seventy or eighty years old when Shandor was born. What reasons are given for the longevity of the characters in *Star of Gypsies*? Are these explanations credible?
11. What are Yakoub's feelings toward the "Gaje" or non-gypsies? What causes can be suggested for his ambivalent attitude?
12. Is "Romany Star" a major symbol in the novel? If it is, then what symbolic values does it come to represent?

Literary Precedents

At first glance, *Star of Gypsies* does not seem to have many precursors, at least among science fiction novels. However, many works in the "future-histories" of Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein have dealt with political struggles in a science fiction context. An even closer parallel can be found in the novels in Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, which deal extensively with political intrigue in a future history setting. Like *Star of Gypsies*, the *Dune* novels also draw on past human cultures (Renaissance Italy, Arabic culture) for precedents, just as Silverberg makes extensive use of gypsy tradition. Finally, science fiction has a tradition of novels with trickster heroes: Some precedents here are the works of L. Sprague de Camp, Jack Vance, and Poul Anderson's series about a shrewd intergalactic trader called Nicholas van Rijn (1964; see entry on *Trader to the Stars*).

Another literary influence on *Star of Gypsies* is the tradition of the picaresque novel, describing the life of a low-born hero who rises to great heights through audacity and cleverness. The picaresque tradition reaches back to Thomas Nashe (1567-1601?) and Daniel Defoe (1660?1731), and it has influenced many important writers, including Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885; see separate entry) and Saul Bellow (*The Adventures of Augie March*; \ 953; see separate entry). In American transformations and reworkings of the picaresque novel, the hero is frequently a moral commentator and judge on the actions of a confused and somewhat corrupt social world.

In this respect, Yakoub follows the American tradition, for he is not merely a voice of worldly wisdom but a moralist as well.

Related Titles

Silverberg's band of traveling entertainers in *Lard Valentine's Castle* (1980) suggests a gypsy troupe, and some of Valentine's adventures in the early parts of that novel are described in a tone anticipating Yakoub's reminiscences of his early life.

Silverberg's extensive use of history and archeology in his nonfiction books of the 1960s no doubt provided some information about gypsy lore, as well as some of his understanding of practical politics.



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