

The Stones of Nomuru Short Guide

The Stones of Nomuru by L. Sprague de Camp

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Characters

Dr. Keith Adams Salazar, an archeologist, is not the stock hero of science fiction adventure. Although courageous, he is basically self-centered and worthless.

He abandoned his first wife Kara for a younger woman, which triggered their son's suicide. He and his second wife bickered constantly, so he has left her, too. Now when Kara appears at the archeological dig at the ancient city of Nomuru, he tries to get her to take him back and spends much of the novel urging her to have sex, even though she has excellent reasons to loathe him.

The novel does not gloss over his shortcomings. He vows never to kill a Kook, but then kills them frequently. He thinks of himself as a scientist committed to truth but believes that being painfully blunt about his reasons for leaving Kara means that he is a truthful man. And when his work at Nomuru is in jeopardy, he manages to lie to everyone about almost everything. Among other whoppers, he tells a sexually aggressive student that he has no penis. Despite all his faults and falsehoods, he responds to the crisis of the war with courage and cunning and becomes a hero of sorts. How he plans to live with himself after the novel ends and all his lies are unmasked is left a mystery.

Kara's motives are also ambivalent, but she is in general a more sympathetic character. She is intelligent and courageous, but lonely; she still loves Keith, even though she blames him for their son's suicide. She writes for a newspaper in the city of Henderson and foolishly agrees to report on her ex-husband's dig.

Her interest in gathering fresh material for her stories ensnares her in Keith's increasingly complicated intrigues to save his dig. She proclaims herself willing to be friends and continues to resist his sexual advances; yet by novel's end she is ready to take him back, even though her assessment of him as incorrigible seems accurate. She and Keith come off as a worldly couple, ready to accept each other's imperfections.

The villain Bergen is a commonplace portrayal of a rapacious land developer. A man of great appetites and temper, he is physically huge and forever bullies those around him. He is perfectly willing to kill to get what he wants, sees the earning of money as life's highest virtue, and is contemptuous of the past. He envisions a large resort located at Nomuru that will employ many and bring wealth to the local Kook community. To him, this justifies the destruction of Salazar's dig.

Dying as he lived, Bergen lets his bad temper get the best of him, and he charges into a mass of hostile Chensoos who cut him down.

One unsettling aspect of *The Stones of Nomuru* is the ethnic stereotyping: the Chinese man is self-effacing and bows to people; the Russian is a big bear of a man who speaks with a funny accent; the Japanese man is efficient and orderly, wanting everything in its proper place; the Frenchman is a womanizer who speaks caressingly in dreamy tones to the women on the archeological crew. This sort of stereotyping is a shortcut to



creating minor characters without having to flesh them out. It is supposed to encourage the reader to fill in the gaps with his own knowledge of what the stereotype is like. Yet, the use of ethnic stereotypes seems old fashioned for a 1988 book.

As the novel progresses, the ethnic stereotyping is softened somewhat by the description of life on Kukulcan; the novel reveals that the Chinese and Russians have built their own cities, thus explaining their accents, and thus hinting that the Chinese are more than just servile lackeys.

Social Concerns

The Stones of Nomuru borrows from the experience of European colonization of the Americas to develop a conflict between settlers and the indigenous people of the planet Kukulkan. The "Kooks"—the intelligent, reptilian creatures of Kukulkan—are a sophisticated species with a partly industrialized society.

The better educated among them are aware of the history of European colonialism and are therefore suspicious of the motives of the people from Earth, who have built cities on Kukulkan. This creates complications for the novel's main character, the archeologist Keith Salazar, who tries to save an important archeological dig from the depredations of human developers and invading nomadic Kooks.

The Kooks are roughly what might have evolved on Earth if the dinosaurs had escaped extinction and continued to evolve. They are bipedal, without tails, and about the same height as humans.

They have scales, inexpressive faces, and turtlelike beaks. One can judge their emotional state by watching the movement of bristles on their necks. Because the Kooks cannot control this movement, they are usually an honest people; their necks show when they are lying.

Religion becomes an issue in The Stones of Nomuru when a cleric tries to teach Kampai, leader of the warlike nomadic Chensoo, about Christianity. Kampai has read the Bible, memorized it, and declared himself a prophet of Christ. He uses Old Testament stories of warfare to justify his desire to conquer and rule all of Kukulkan. Salazar notes that like some Earth people, Kampai has little interest in the cleric's teachings about peace and brotherhood; instead, he uses quotations from the Bible to support whatever he wants to do. Teaching a religion from Earth to alien beings is harmful, Salazar believes, because the religions are likely to confuse and harm the aliens rather than convert them.

Perhaps the most interesting social aspect of the Kooks is their attitude toward the soft-fleshed people from another world. In general, the Kooks regard the colonists as incapable of higher thought processes; they refer to themselves as "human beings," believing that they are true humans, while the people from Earth are uncivilized, alien animals.

The Kooks have several good reasons for believing this. Their memories are far superior; a Kook never forgets anything it learns, and it need only hear a foreign word once to know it, although it must work hard to reproduce the colonists' speech with its snakelike tongue. Although capable of intrigue and intricate political treachery, the average Kook will not commit a crime or break his word.

Because of their powerful memories, the Kooks have developed an elaborate system of castes, laws, and rules of social conduct, and they regard the colonists as slow witted



because they do not grasp the intricacies of their behavior. On the other hand, these intricate rules have prevented their society from developing. Although their civilization is much older than that of Earth, their technology has lagged far behind because change almost invariably breaks one or more social rules, making innovation rare and even disliked.

The literal-minded honesty of the Kooks, while admirable, also has its weaknesses. When they contract to do something, they fulfill the contract and nothing more. The repairing of a bridge can take years as the Kooks constantly create and revise their contracts with one another.

This also hinders their social progress; even when they make up their minds to get something done, it can take ages to settle all contractual requirements before work can begin.

Techniques

The technique of creating the adventure story is a straightforward one: set forth a problem that the main character must solve, and then throw as many lifethreatening complications between the main character and the solution as possible. De Camp is a master of this technique, but the adventure story in *The Stones of Notnuru* seems almost routine with the kidnaping, the war, and even the naked-woman-in-a-pit-full-of-vipers episode, pulled from the stock of routine fiction.

A disappointment in *The Stones of Nomuru* is the failure to use the archeological dig as anything more than a pretext for the adventure. Salazar hopes to find a great library left behind by the ancient city's last king. The prospect of finding this library, as well as of exploring the ruins of an ancient city, could fire the imagination with the anticipation of bizarre discoveries. But the ancient ruins are not the subject of the novel; instead Salazar has adventures among the Kooks, while trying to save his dig from invasion and the depredations of the land developer.

Themes

In addition to several strands of social commentary, blighted love is a theme of the novel. Keith Salazar and his ex-wife Kara spend most of the book doing a kind of love dance, with Keith continually making advances and Kara avoiding them. This theme is deepened by Keith's history of cruel and selfish behavior. His earnest efforts to woo Kara generate ambivalence; it is hard to root for his success because she is probably better off without him. Yet one cannot shake the feeling that he is trying to make up somehow for his past behavior, even though he continues to repeat the same selfish pattern. The love dance is therefore filled with unresolved tension and conflicting emotions.



Key Questions

The Stones of Nomuru could be just a routine adventure, but its richness of themes gives it more than the usual depth and makes it a good topic for discussion.

The issue of what happens when a culture mixes with a less advanced one is one worthy of examination, as is the issue of what happens when foreign religions mix with local ones. The latter issue is a potentially explosive one, so discussion leaders might find it a good idea to approach it gently.

1. How does The Stones of Nomuru borrow from the experience of European colonization of the Americas? How does the foreknowledge the Kukulkans have from their study of human history shape their behavior toward the colonists? By being forewarned, will they be able to avoid the tragedies that befell Native Americans?
2. How industrialized are the Kukulkans? Does this industrialization help them to understand the culture of the human beings?
3. Why does the novel not reveal more about Keith Salazar's archeological dig?
4. Kampai, leader of the warlike nomadic Chensoo, has read the Bible, memorized it, and declared himself a prophet of Christ. He uses Old Testament stories of warfare to justify his desire to conquer and rule all of Kukulkan. Is this a censure of Christianity? How does this portrayal of Christianity compare with the one in de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941; see separate entry)?
5. Teaching a religion from earth to alien beings is harmful, Salazar believes, because the religions are likely to confuse and harm the aliens rather than convert them. Is this view accurate? Are there examples from history to support this view? What are the moral implications of not teaching one's religious beliefs to others?
6. Why does the Kooks' technology lag behind that of the humans?
7. In some ways, Keith Salazar has been a contemptible egoist. Why would de Camp give his protagonist repellant traits?
8. Will Keith Salazar's lies be uncovered? How will he cope with their discovery?
9. Why does Kara allow Keith back into her life?
10. How old-fashioned are the ethnic stereotypes in *The Stones of Nomuru*? Are they unpleasant? How do they affect the development of the narrative?

Literary Precedents

There are numerous precedents for the themes of *The Stones of Nomuru*. The idea of using the real-life experiences of Europeans colonizing the New World as resources for science fiction tales dates back at least to H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898; see separate entry), in which Martians attempt to colonize the earth much as the Americas were colonized.

Ray Bradbury's collection of short stories, *The Martian Chronicles* (1951; see separate entry), shows a Martian culture being destroyed much the way the Native American culture was by European colonists. Mysterious ruins found on alien planets have also been frequent topics for science fiction tales. For instance, Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Star" (1955) focuses on the relics of a civilization that was destroyed by a nova. In a particularly moving short story, "The Time Tombs" (1963), J. G. Ballard tells of tombs that contain lifelike recordings of the dead.



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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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