

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo Short Guide

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo by John Varley

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Overview

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo is a moving story of the struggle to save a stranded child. It deals with profound questions of right and wrong. The mere fact that a child is in danger moves some characters to want to save her.

When the child turns out actually to be over thirty years old, the decision about whether to save her becomes more complicated, as if a grownup's life were less valuable than that of a child. Still, the girl looks seven years old, and in many ways she is still mentally a small child. Her confusion about what is happening to her endears her to Corporal Anna-Louise Bach and Megan Galloway, who decide that regardless of her real age, the child deserves a chance to live. This theme of mortality is emphasized by the first reaction of the observers to the news that the little girl they see is actually thirty-seven years old: Could she hold the secret of immortality or freedom from death? Then the harsh facts of the girl's situation dash the observers' hopes, replacing them with the problem of whether the girl can be saved.

The theme of mortality is enriched by the question of whether anyone would be eager to save the child if she were a mature thirty-seven-year-old woman.

Varley offers no firm answers here. The question he poses remains unresolved and troubling.

About the Author

John Varley seems to be a very private man, and details of his life are hard to come by. He was born in Austin, Texas to John Edward Varley, an oil worker, and Joan Varley (nee Boehm). In 1966, he attended Michigan State University, then dropped out of college. He traveled around the United States for a few years. In 1970, he married Anet Mconel, a consumer advocate. Money was tight for the couple, especially as they began to have children. In 1973, according to Varley, he turned to writing science fiction in order to make a living. He wrote the sort of stories he wanted to read, and with persistence began selling his stories to major science fiction magazines within a year. His well-plotted short stories quickly became favorites of science fiction fans. His five novels for adults, too, have proven popular with readers, with the trilogy of Titan (1979), Wizard (1980), and Demon (1984) having found a wide audience, and Millennium (1983) having been made into a motion picture. Varley supports his family with his writing and now lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Varley's richly imaginative fiction has earned several awards. In 1978, he won the Jupiter Award of the Instructors of Science Fiction in higher Education for his novella In the Halls of the Martian Kings. He has received two World Science Fiction Convention Achievement Awards, the "Hugos," which are determined primarily by science fiction fans. One was in 1982 for the best short story, "The Pusher," and the other was in 1985 for the best novelette, "Press Enter" which also won the Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula Award.



Characters

Corporal Anna-Louise Bach is the point-of-view character for most of Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo. She is too acid-tongued for her own good and has been placed in a dead-end job because she failed to show respect to incompetent superiors. She supervises the crew of the New Dresden Police Department's monitoring room. When the presence of a living person on the space station Tango Charlie is suspected, this crew activates the station's few functioning cameras and observes the girl. Bach is a sad, lonely figure.

She is attracted to vacuous, muscular men and drifts from one unfulfilling love affair to another. She empathizes with the isolation of the girl and acts out of morality and emotion, rather than regard for public opinion.

The little girl calls herself Charlie.

Why she has remained a child for more than thirty years is a mystery, although the disease Neuro-X might be a factor.

She is Tango Charlie's only human survivor, kept company by the descendants of Shetland Sheepdogs that survived the Neuro-X plague, as well as by Tik-Tok, the space station's computer. Her time is spent maintaining the space station and raising Shetland Sheepdogs to exacting dog-show competition standards. Tik-Tok makes sure that Charlie follows a busy daily schedule of chores, sees to it that she eats nutritious meals, and encourages her to bathe and groom herself. She is lonely but does not know it. When first seen on camera, she presents a startling picture; with makeup smeared on her face like war paint, she seems surrounded by a sea of flowing dogs wherever she goes. Her courage in the face of isolation and her childlike innocence help make Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo one of Varley's most passionate and moving works.

The news reporter Megan Galloway is an unusual character. Once paralyzed from the neck down, she became famous as a mechanized being who moved with the aid of a golden exoskeleton. She became famous because of her ability to exploit the glamorous and erotic possibilities her extraordinarily beautiful exoskeleton offered.

Medical science eventually advanced enough to restore most of her natural mobility, although she walks with a cane. Now a glamorous reporter, she wears ornaments that resemble parts of her discarded exoskeleton. When she learns through informants of Charlie's plight, she takes an immediate interest in the child's welfare. Beneath her cynical shell, there is a responsible and caring person who tempers her desire for a good story with compassion. Like Charlie, she is something of a freak; she empathizes strongly with the little girl's loneliness and creates a plan to save the child. She is a bizarre, other worldly figure, yet with a core of humanity that makes her a believable, sympathetic character.

Setting

The action takes place on the moon and in a space station that has been nearly deserted for decades. A terrible disease killed everyone on the station—or so it was thought until a camera on the station reveals a little girl and a pack of dogs roaming the station.

The station's computer has been doing its best to care for the girl and keep her occupied. She does some maintenance and raises the dogs. How she and the dogs survived the disease that killed everyone else who came in even remote contact with it is a mystery. As *Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo* progresses, the reader learns that the station will soon crash into the moon.

The events on the moon take place in several locations, where characters observe the little girl as best they can through cameras, communicate with her, and discuss her fate. Humanity has long been on the moon, which has all the trappings of modern civilization, including areas for entertainment, government offices, and businesses.

The moon also features bureaucrats who try to rationalize the impending death of a small girl.



Social Concerns

In Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo civil servants and politicians cynically debate the fate of a child discovered living in a quarantined space station. They are driven more by fear of popular opinion than by any desire to do what is morally right. This common portrait of public servants can be found in numerous works of fiction. Of more topical interest is the disease Neuro-X, which resembles AIDS in the fear that it generates in people. One character, Doctor Blume, even suggests that "Neuro-X destroyed her immune system," a characteristic of AIDS. In the novel, Neuro-X is a virulent disease that is transmitted in mysterious ways.

No safeguard seems effective. Even physicians dressed in airtight suits catch the disease and die within days.

The disease is confined to a space station and a space ship, both of which have been quarantined, and the space station left to orbit the moon. Thirty years later observers learn that a living girl who appears to be about seven years old is on board. Her presence on the station opens a vigorous debate among people on Luna (the Moon) about whether the child's life or the safety of the public is more important.

Should the child be saved, even though she may be a carrier of the deadliest disease known to humanity? Should the station be destroyed and the girl killed in order to safeguard against the possibility of Neuro-X being transmitted to the general population?

These matters echo some of the debate about AIDS, particularly when there was doubt about how the disease was transmitted. Just how much risk should the general public be expected to accept? When does discrimination against those with the disease exceed justification and become cruel prejudice?



Techniques

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo resembles a tragic drama in which the plot leads inevitably to catastrophe (usually death) for the main character.

Although Bach does not die, her efforts end in disaster. Like a tragedy, Varley's novel is plotted in movements in which certain elements dominate.

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo is first a mystery story in which Bach and others try to learn the truth about who is on the space station; then a moral story in which characters are ethically tested by the plight of the girl; and finally a suspense story in which the protagonists struggle to save Charlie from certain death. Each movement reveals different aspects of the characters. For instance, in the mystery movement, Bach demonstrates her quick mind; in the moral movement, she reveals a depth of emotions that have not been expressed through her shallow love life; and in the suspense movement, she shows the courage of her convictions.

By shifting scenes back and forth from Bach to Charlie, Varley gives the reader a rounded view of the little girl.

At first, she greets the mystery of her discovery with irritation — she is a busy person with no time to waste talking with outsiders. As she warms to Bach, Charlie feels the loneliness of her isolation and expresses despair at losing her loved ones. First she cries for a dead puppy; later she faces up to the pain caused by her mother's death.

Her courage in these situations seems natural. Varley includes character touches, such as her literal-mindedness when asked questions, that make her believable. When she finally puts her trust in Bach, she reaches a level of maturity that exceeds that of the adults who are trying to help her. She confronts the universal human problem of mortality and overcomes her fear of death.

A tragedy touches on matters of universal human importance, and as the plot unfolds it humanizes and explores these themes. Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo does this, making it a remarkable literary work. If there is a false note, it is Bach's seeming failure to grow. Her grief yields to the passage of time and yet another brawny man.

On the other hand, this woman, who was resigned to her fate as the oldest recruit in the police force, has discovered in herself the capacity to do what is right in spite of powerful opposition and the courage to risk her future for someone who cannot defend herself.

Themes

Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo is a moving story of the struggle to save a stranded child. The mere fact that a child is in danger moves some characters to want to save her. When the "child" turns out actually to be over thirty years old, the decision to save her or not becomes more complicated, as if an adult's life were less valuable than that of a child. Still, the girl looks very young, and in many ways she is mentally a child. Her confusion about what is happening endears her to Corporal Anna-Louise Bach, and Megan Galloway, who decides to help her regardless of her real age. This theme of mortality is emphasized by the initial reaction to the discovery of the girl's real age: Could she hold the secret of immortality, freedom from death? Then the harsh reality of the girl's situation dashes the observers' hopes, and debate focuses on whether the girl can be saved. The theme of mortality is enriched by the question of whether anyone would be eager to save the child if she were a mature woman.

Varley offers no answers, and the question remains unresolved and troubling.



Topics for Discussion

1. Imagine that you are the person who must decide what to do about the space station and Charlie. How would you make your decision based on the level of technology Varley portrays in Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo?
2. Does Bach do what is right? 3. Varley leaves some questions unanswered, such as why Charlie has not aged. How does this affect your appreciation of the story?
4. Why is Bach, a seemingly intelligent woman, attracted to empty-headed men?
5. Why would it make a difference about whether she should live or die if Charlie is thirty-seven years old instead of seven?
6. How would a happy ending change Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo?

Say that Charlie lives: Would Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo be better or worse? What else would have to be changed to suit the new ending?

7. Most great literary works touch on universals in the human condition; that is, they explore issues that nearly all people have in common. To be great, a work of literature must offer profound insights into such issues. What universals of the human condition does Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo explore? How well does it explore them?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In what ways does Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo echo the early 1980s debate about AIDS? Does Varley offer any suggestions for how to treat people with the disease?

2. How accurate is Varley's depiction of how public officials behave when faced with a moral crisis?

3. Analyze the characterization of Charlie. Varley has set himself the task of making her both a believable seven-year-old child and a believable thirty-seven-year-old woman. What techniques does he use to accomplish this?

How well does he succeed?

4. In what ways is Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo a literary tragedy?

5. What are Shetland Sheepdogs?

Where do they originally come from?

What makes one of these animals a superior show dog?

Literary Precedents

Perhaps the most famous science fiction book to deal with an attempt to control a virulent disease is *The Andromeda Strain* by Michael Crichton (1969). Although that novel features people sealed in a research laboratory for somewhat the same reasons Charlie is sealed in her space station, its themes are very different. The motion picture *Silent Running* (1971) features a man isolated on a space station that contains some of the last examples of earth's natural world. He kills others and eventually kills himself to protect the wildlife on the station, leaving one lonely little robot to care for the living things. Like *Tango Charlie* and *Foxtrot Romeo*, the movie evokes strong emotions, although it lacks the thoughtfulness of Varley's novella. The conflict between incompetent civil servants and compassionate ones is an old idea, featured in many works of fiction.

Tango Charlie and *Foxtrot Romeo* is exceptional for its presentation of the problems of mortality through a character who is at once a little girl and a woman, as well as for its well-paced plot and genuine emotional content.

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Edited by Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: Dolphin Books, 1979: 628. Brief survey of Varley's early career.

"Varley, John." In *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 25.

Edited by Hal May and Deborah A. Straub, et al. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 458-460. Provides a summary of laudatory criticism.

"Varley, John." In *Reader's Guide to Twentieth-Century Science Fiction*. Edited by Marilyn P. Fletcher. Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.

Offers mostly plot summaries of Varley's fiction, with a brief discussion of his themes and style.

Related Titles

The imaginary future of Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo appears in at least one other of Varley's works, the novelette "Blue Champagne" (1981). In this story Megan Galloway is also a character. She is paralyzed from the neck down but moves with the aid of an elaborate golden exoskeleton. In Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo, recent medical advances have given her back much of her natural mobility, although she uses a cane to help her walk.



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