Tarzan Alive Short Guide

Tarzan Alive by Philip José Farmer

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Contents

Characters

In order to write the "true" story of Tarzan, Farmer had to condense Edgar Rice Burroughs's twenty-four Tarzan novels into one volume of manageable length. This need to condense and eliminate may explain why Tarzan is the only well-developed character in Tarzan Alive, and why not even Jane among the secondary characters seems either complex or interesting. However, by focusing on just one character, Farmer did allow himself the opportunity to create a multifaceted personality for his hero. To Farmer, Tarzan represents an ideal. His ancestors were exposed to radiation which improved their genetic structure, making him a superior mutation of normal human beings. In training, he is an animal, cunning in survival lore and free of the decadent inhibitions of civilization.

Once Tarzan leaves the real jungle of Africa, he is equally masterful in the jungle of international law and finance, managing to take control of his family fortune without revealing his true identity. Moreover, like the gods, he is immortal, having taken an elixir given to him by a witch doctor.

The narrator also reminds us, more often than necessary, that Tarzan is an archetypal Trickster, that mythic figure who resents the strictures and vexations of civilization and who enjoys a good joke at civilization's expense. As a Trickster, Tarzan is also a potential savior, and as his life progresses, providential appearances become his main activity. When he is not saving others, usually arriving at the last moment and back from being thought dead, he often behaves like a jealous god, as when he slaughters the cannibals who murdered his foster-mother. Also like a jealous god, and like Farmer, Tarzan is hard on "false" religions, defrocking or killing witch-doctors and exposing them to their enslaved multitudes. In the aftermaths, Tarzan is usually given the chance to become a high priest or even a god, but like Odysseus returning to his wife, Penelope, Tarzan always returns to Jane.

Along with Tarzan's symbolism as the incarnation of Natural Man, his undying love for Jane may be his most important quality for Farmer, as it probably was for Burroughs. Burroughs's ambivalent fascination with eroticism was always a strong element of his appeal. Sexual situations abound in his writing; nothing is ever explicit, but white women are frequently carried off by villains and are always being saved by Tarzan, who is, of course, above such behavior, although his superhuman strength implies an equally superhuman sexuality. To Burroughs, it appears to have been obvious that Natural Man came equipped with Victorian morals, almost as if they were built into his genes. In contrast, Farmer has always acted out in his writing a romantic rebellion against such morality, so it is intriguing that his own version of Tarzan (at least, in Tarzan Alive), also keeps his sexuality decently in check until appropriate moments. Perhaps Burroughs's description of Tarzan's relationship with Jane represents an ideal so potent to Farmer that he does not wish to alter it: Tarzan discovers that he is not the beast of the apes or the god of the cannibals, but the man of Jane Porter.

More than anything else, his loving relationship with Jane signals irrefutable proof of his essential humanity.

Social Concerns

In grade five, Farmer first began reading Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan novels, a discovery which so impressed him that his school friends were soon calling him "Tarzan" because of his fondness for climbing trees and swinging from branch to branch. As well, Farmer also has a large collection of pulp fiction dating back to the 1920s, including original editions of Burroughs's novels. Clearly, then, Tarzan Alive was written as the result of a lifelong fascination with a figure Farmer describes as "Nature's last creation of a Golden Age man," and not as a direct response to specific social conditions.

Nevertheless, the fact that Farmer found a receptive audience for the nine Tarzan-related titles he published from 1969-1976 is no coincidence. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of social history during which many people, particularly young people, were intensely distrustful of the "establishment," as represented by the government, the military, and industry. If people felt neither powerful nor free, so the argument went, the culprit could only be "civilization." Tarzan, in contrast, is popular culture's most famous embodiment of the idea that people in their natural state are powerful and free creatures. Burroughs's novels imply that if we would simply return to our natural element, we would regain the power and freedom that are our natural birthright. Tarzan, therefore, represents a universal fantasy of the Natural Man: savage at times, but innocent of civilization's decadence and corruption. He is Burroughs's dream of ourselves, a dream that exerted a powerful appeal in society at just the same time that Farmer was writing his own series of Tarzan novels.

Techniques

After the spectacular success of the first Tarzan novel in 1914, Burroughs wrote and published steadily for the next thirty years. He could produce a novel a month, working five or six hours a day, dictating to a secretary.

He seldom revised his first draft, did not mind interruptions, and could work anywhere, even among his children. In view of his writing methods and the fact that he never actually went to Africa, the Tarzan novels are unavoidably full of gross improbabilities and striking inconsistencies, including talking apes, lost civilizations, and a race of men eighteen inches tall.

Farmer's most significant strategy in reworking Burroughs's fantastic material into a "true" biography was the use of a naive persona as his researcher/biographer/narrator. This narrator believes that Burroughs knowingly created inconsistencies and impossibilities because he was under the orders from "Lord Greystoke" (Tarzan) to conceal the true identify of his subject; that is, Burroughs was only pretending to be writing fiction and deliberately violated credibility. Farmer's narrator often goes to extraordinary lengths to excuse Burroughs's absurdities before providing his own "factual" version of events. For example, he admits that Tarzan's journey to "Pellucidar" at the center of the Earth could not have happened in reality, but argues that Burroughs accurately recorded Tarzan's dream vision of visiting such a place. Noting that Burroughs has Tarzan's son being born in 1912 and fighting in World War I in 1918, the narrator claims that Tarzan actually had two sons and that Burroughs concealed the existence of one in order to protect Tarzan's identity. The narrator also supplements his discoveries and revisions with all the trappings of serious academic scholarship. Tarzan Alive has an elaborate genealogy of Tarzan's ancestors, "Acknowledgments," a "Forword," no less than five "addendums" totaling eighty-six pages, and a detailed bibliography and index. All this scholarly paraphernalia creates a strong sense of imaginative play for its own sake while simultaneously raising serious questions about the relation between fiction and reality. In fact, Farmer succeeded so well in creating the illusion of a "real" biography that some public libraries stock Tarzan Alive in their "B," or "Biography," section.

Themes

Burroughs (1875-1950) wrote serviceable prose at best, but what he lacked in style, he more than compensated for in sheer invention. He possessed a powerful and vivid imagination, and with it, he created the fantasy of a primitive being concealed inside ourselves: an absolutely good hero dominating a world of savagery and beauty.

Moreover, Burroughs also had a coherent vision of life. Like most mythic literature, his Tarzan books are about what a thing man is, how like an ape and how like an angel.

Burroughs's world view, as revealed in the Tarzan novels, coincides closely enough with Farmer's to account for two of the three major themes of Tarzan Alive. First, like Burroughs's Tarzan, Farmer's Tarzan must discover that he is more than an ape. He has a survival ethic unrestrained by sentimentality or a feeling of community and a capacity for violence uninhabited by conventional morality. He also has a libido to match his great strength, a sexuality free of the repression and hypocrisy of civilization. Burroughs "tames" this potentially uncontrollable Natural Man by creating Jane Porter to be his mate and save him from complete primitivism. Furthermore, in case we miss the point, Burroughs repeats this process in Tarzan's son, Korak, who, like his father, is redeemed by the love of a woman, a small girl he adopts, protects, and learns to love as she grows to womanhood. This double demonstration of, in effect, the transcendental power of the feminine principle must have appealed to Farmer, whose writing often elevates female characters to the status of divinities. His own version of Jane is not only "strikingly beautiful," but "tough and self-controlled." Inevitably, after Tarzan first meets her, he acts out the best qualities of his character by giving her his hunting knife before they spend their first night together in the jungle. Farmer's narrator compares this gesture to "that of the medieval knight who placed a sword between himself and his chaste lady love."

Tarzan is no mere knight, however, for acting like a god is for him, as for Odysseus, Hercules, or Beowulf, his other temptation — other, that is, than reverting to a beast. Both Burroughs's and Farmer's stories of Tarzan correspond exactly to the structure of all classical hero myths. Like Romulus and Remus, Tarzan is raised by animals, and like King Arthur, he is unpromising as a child. Like the sword bequeathed to Theseus by Aegeus, the books from which Tarzan learns to read are the magical gift left by a departed parent. Later, like Hercules and Perseus, Tarzan slays the beast and rescues the fair maiden, before discovering that like Oedipus and Moses, he is the lost heir to a "throne." In Burroughs's case, these parallels with classical myth indicate not sophistication, but rather, the instinctive level at which myths communicate and from which Burroughs's fantasies originated.

In Farmer's case, however, these parallels were consciously understood, developed in elaborate detail, and enriched and transformed. Farmer's creative reworking of the Tarzan myth becomes the basis for an assertion of faith in the heroic, an expression of disappointment in the modern world, and a challenge to the reader to maintain some sort of heroic ideal.

Farmer created his own version of Tarzan from a wide variety of fictional, historical, and anthropological sources, and in the process, blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality. In the biography, the narrator assumes that Burroughs based Tarzan on a real person and fictionalized Tarzan's life in order to protect the "real" Tarzan's privacy. The narrator, then, claims to be writing Tarzan's "true" biography by supplying crucial facts which Burroughs deliberately withheld, altered, or distorted. The final results demonstrate a mammoth task of research and also a parody of academic scholarship.

Farmer reconceptualizes and renarrates the Tarzan novels, luring us into a world of fiction only to confront us with the world of history, thus asking us to rethink the categories by which we would normally distinguish "fantasy" from "reality."

Key Questions

Tarzan Alive will be appreciated most by those readers already familiar with Burroughs's Tarzan novels, so reading at least one or two of them is advisable. Discussions can then consider what use Farmer has made of his primary source material in creating his own version of such a well-known figure. Readers should also focus on the ways that Tarzan serves as a vehicle for social criticism, particularly of environmental issues, and how as an Outsider, he is well suited to provide an objective commentary on the follies and cruelties of civilization. Finally, given Jane's importance in Tarzan's life and to the biography's themes, readers might want to question Farmer's apparent decision to leave her undeveloped as a character. How convincing is the supposedly larger-than-life love affair between Tarzan and Jane?

1. Popular culture's superheroes, such as Tarzan and Doc Savage, have generally been ignored by literary critics and scholars. What does Tarzan Alive illustrate or imply about how popular culture can be used by "serious" writers?

2. Compare the imaginative scope of Tarzan Alive to that of Burroughs's Tarzan novels. How does Farmer create a much larger mythic figure than Burroughs was able to imagine?

3. The task of a mythmaker is to consolidate and rationalize a number of loosely connected stories into a coherent pattern. With this in mind, consider the use Farmer has made of his many sources, as itemized in his bibliography. For example, what is the function or effect of all the references to natural history and anthropology?

4. How is Farmer's explanation of the true identity of the creatures who raised Tarzan central to Tarzan Alive's credibility? More generally, what function do language and linguistics have in the biography?

5. Consider the personality of Farmer's narrator. What can we reasonably conclude about him from what information he provides and how he provides it? In general, what is his attitude toward his source material?

6. Also prepare a personality profile of Tarzan. As the narrator presents him, what are the main reasons for his appeal? Is he effective as a "real" person, or does he remain on the level of a symbol of natural forces?

7. Paying particular attention to Chapter Twenty-Five, "The Rest Is Silence," consider Tarzan Alive as an elegy for nature and for natural and primitive values.

8. Is the biography's presentation of technology and the other tools of civilization entirely negative? For example, what enables the young Tarzan to transcend the primitive condition of the humanoids who raise him? In general, what is Farmer's attitude towards the relationship between technology and nature?

Literary Precedents

The precedents of Tarzan Alive fall into two categories: previous fictional biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, and postmodernist experiments in metafiction. First, Farmer has often acknowledged the influence of W. S. Baring-Gould's Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street (1962) on his own versions of fictional biography. As well, in his introduction to "An Exclusive Interview with Lord Greystoke," he refers to a series of "splendid examples" of this subgenre, including Cyril Northcote Parkinson's The Life and Times of Horatio Hornblower (1970) and George MacDonald Fraser's better known Flashman novels, supposedly the memoirs of a character in Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's School Days (1856). These and other fictional biographies have in common an attempt to remain faithful to the letter and spirit of the original while "correcting" discrepancies, filling in gaps, and generating new theories. Farmer describes this process as "a lot of fun and hard work," and he clearly enjoys playing the kind of very sophisticated literary games that a fictional biography requires.

Fictional biographies can be considered part of a larger, widespread movement in the arts called "postmodernism," which (Trickster-like) enjoys blurring conventional boundaries and confounding audience expectations. In literature, this impulse often results in "metafiction," or fiction that goes beyond the usual concerns of fiction to consider the nature of fiction itself. For postmodernist writers like John Fowles, John Barth, Robert Coover, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., the real subject of fiction is fiction: the double process by which a story or novel is written by an author and then "decoded" by a reader. Tarzan Alive is very much in this tradition. Farmer's narrator often takes the reader into his confidence, explaining the difficulties he had in discovering the "facts" and the criteria he used to evaluate them. By using a famous figure from a popular culture as his point of departure, Farmer avoids the dry, abstract quality of some metafiction and succeeds in maintaining the reader's interest in a well-known hero.

Related Titles

Farmer has published two other works dealing with the same version of Tarzan who appears in Tarzan Alive: "An Exclusive Interview with Lord Greystoke" and "Extracts from the Memoirs of 'Lord Greystoke.'" The "interview," first published in the April 1972 issue of Esquire and republished in The Book of Philip Jose Farmer (1973), brilliantly demonstrates Farmer's ability to make a fictional character seem real. Farmer prefaces the interview with an explanation of how he tracked down his subject to a hotel on the coast of West Africa and was granted a fifteen-minute conversation. During the interview, Tarzan, who is now eighty-five years old but looks thirtyfive because of his immortality treatment, speaks with quiet dignity of his life and main concerns. He explains some of the inconsistencies in Burroughs's novels, reveals something of his philosophy of life, and remarks that like Mark Twain, he has only one prejudice: "That is against the human race." As he speaks, the reader can almost share the interviewer's awe at being in the company of this legendary figure. Greystoke's memoirs complement the interview and appear in Mother Was a Lovely Beast (1974), an anthology Farmer edited about "feral humans," or humans raised by animals.

Tarzan seems a bit pedantic and dull in these memoirs, which devote a great deal of space to his rather dry account of the language and customs of the humanoid creatures (not apes) who raised him in the jungle. In retrospect, Tarzan was wise originally to allow the story of his life to be written by Burroughs.

Tarzan Alive is also directly related to the eight other Tarzan titles Farmer published: A Feast Unknown (1969), Lord Tyger (1970), Lord of the Trees and The Mad Goblin (1970), Hadon of Ancient Opar (1974), Mother Was a Lovely Beast (1974), and Flight to Opar (1976). Collectively, these works present at least three very distinct versions of Tarzan, ranging from A Feast Unknown's "phallic superman," who can achieve an orgasm only when killing an enemy, to Tarzan Alive's familiar gentleman of the jungle, who would rather die than offend Jane Porter. Lord Tyger, with its more socialized version of the phallic hero, is often singled out as one of Farmer's best novels.

Finally, Tarzan Alive is also part of what Farmer calls "the Wold Newton Family," a series of works based on the premise that in the eighteenth century, a meteorite landed near Wold Newton in Yorkshire, irradiating a number of pregnant women, who subsequently gave birth to supermen. From this event, all of the world's superheroes are descended, including Doc Savage, Sherlock Holmes, the Shadow, and, of course, Tarzan. Farmer has written several further adventures of these and other related characters. The most significant are his fictional biography Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life (1973) and his two novels The Other Log of Phileas Fogg (1973) and The Adventures of the Peerless Peer (1974). Probably not even Farmer could provide a complete explanation of the incredibly intricate and ingenious network of connections existing between Tarzan Alive and the rest of his many stories and novels.

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