

Thendara House Short Guide

Thendara House by Marion Zimmer Bradley

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Characters

Although strong female central characters are perhaps even more unusual in science fiction as they are in mainstream fiction, both Jaelle (Jaelle n'ha Mellora) and Magda (Magdalena Lome, in Darkovan "Margali") are spunky, self-sufficient, warm, engaging, resourceful, and active. They share the dual Darkoveran/Terran nature of many Bradley heroines—part Terran and part Darkovan, as well as the same job in Terran Intelligence helping build understanding between the two societies. Both are in a sense displaced—Magda to Darkover, and Jaelle, kidnaped as a child to the Dry Towns and rescued by the Guild House, from her Alton heritage. After their initial meeting, when Magda invokes the Renunciate oath which later sends her to the Guild House, both women seek a way of accommodating their emerging identities to the circumscribed worlds in which they find themselves, working for the Terrans and even marrying, each in her turn, the Terran Peter. Both, however, find these attempts ultimately unfulfilling, and return to the Guild House before embarking on a life together at the end.

The residents of Thendara House illustrate the various ways one can express both a woman-centered identity and a unique personality. They include an emmasca soldier, Camilla, who has undergone a neutering operation to make herself invulnerable to men, and Rafaella, the mountain guide with a quick eye for a handsome man and children from three different fathers. These two women are midwives and healers who practice the traditional arts of natural medicine and earth magic.

Wise motherly figures act as guides to a psychic territory formerly hidden in shadow. They are engaged in an experiment to rebuild female selves damaged by the outside worlds. Many in the Guild House, like Keitha and even Jaelle herself, have come to escape abusive relationships or bondage in the Dry Towns, where women such as Jaelle's mother are literally held with chains.

The men of Thendara House, apart from the liberated inhabitants of the Forbidden Tower such as Lord Damon (the Terran Andrew Carr) who intervene at key places in the narrative, are patriarchal figures in the feudal houses, benighted commoners, or conflicted sensitive males, such as Peter, who cannot escape their internalized need for a dominant gender role, no matter how modern their outlook might appear in other ways. Terran men, although outwardly egalitarian, are frequently either sexist (the women's boss) or clueless, like Alessandro Li, whose illadvised foray into the Kilghard Hills initiates the rescue journey at the end.



Social Concerns

The explicitly feminist focus of Thendara House, one of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover Series, allows her to explore the effects of patriarchy on both individuals and society. In the Amazon Guild Houses communal groups of women are bonded under the Renunciate Oath, in which they exchange self-determination for the traditional protections granted women in conservative patriarchal society—marriage and respectability. The Guild houses also function like the domestic abuse centers which have sprung up across the country as places of refuge. In many ways the Guild House reflects the situation of the feminist movement in the 1970s, with its collective experiment, its focus on sisterhood in all its forms, including lesbianism, and issues of survival, separatism, ownership, and cooperation.

Terran and Darkovan society illustrate two ways patriarchal society may treat women. The Terrans are a highly technological liberal democracy with nominally egalitarian status for women, who are still regarded as sex objects, while Darkover is an exceedingly conservative society with rigidly subservient roles. Jaelle and Magda, traveling between Terran Headquarters and Thendara House, debate the issues of sexual politics—not only the oppression of women under patriarchal institutions, but the differences between men and women, the uses of separatism in developing independence and selfsufficiency, the status of separatist movements within a larger culture, and especially technology—contraception, eugenics, birthing, and medical ethics.



Techniques

Bradley's themes of dual identity and dual loyalties are mirrored in the setting of the novel, the travel between the two worlds of Terra and Darkover, and within them the creation of a third way of living, the Guild House. The dichotomies and interrelationships between these, and later with the dynasty of the Forbidden Tower, create the texture of the novel and provide opportunity for many colorful occurrences. Even the narrative is parallel, with events framed by daring mountain rescues at the beginning and end that mark key events in the lives of the main characters. The corporate board rooms of Terra and the feudal halls of Darkover, which contrast yet correlate with each other, are both set alongside the busy commune of the Amazons.

Point of view shifts between Magdalene Lome (Margali), a Darkover-raised Terran, and her Darkovan partner, Jaelle n'ha Mellora. The reflective, intellectual voice of Magda, interwoven with the more practical, passionate, and outspoken voice of Jaelle provide a nuanced perspective in this most philosophical and idea-oriented of the Darkover series.

Extensive use of interior monologue and elaborate discussions of belief and practice illustrate the Bradleian theme of outer and inner chains—outer and visible in the feudal world of Darkover, but just as confining in some ways in the Terran atmosphere of internalized expectations and gendered consciousness. With Iaran, the psychic ability to share the thoughts and sometimes the experiences of others, along with the imaginative capacity for flashbacks into the past possessed by those who are thoughtful and sensitive, multiple viewpoints are gathered for every question, and an air-borne hallucinogenic released by plants in the thin air of the Kilghard Hills provides even more intense insight.

Themes

Human relationships appear in endless variety. Jaelle, although a Renunciate, lives as a Freemate to and is pregnant by her husband Peter. Magda explores woman-to-woman relationships, both platonic friendship and lesbianism, in her affair with Camilla and her deepening friendship with Jaelle. The friendship between these women explore issues central to all females: how to maintain one's self-determination in relationships; how to balance dependence and independence of thought, feeling, and action in light of myriad contexts; how to be open about sexual doubts, fears, and ecstasies; and how to respond to the procreative imperative, the complex experiences of deciding to bear children, pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. But for all of this, Bradley's vision of human interaction is not primarily sexual. Of deeper importance is the enduringness of friendship that emotional intimacy built on shared experiences between members of the same and the opposite sex; a friendship that frequently leads naturally to sexual expression. Love and lust are not separate for Bradley, as they frequently are in traditional works. More central is the need for independent selfhood and fulfilling relationships within supportive, effective communities. The unifying theme of Thendara House is that of resolving contradictory demands. The Renunciate oath is in conflict with conventional desires, heterosexual relationships and same-sex friendship, and the need for independence and for connectedness, especially when deciding to bear children.



Key Questions

Because of its women-centered focus and feminist themes, *Thendara House* is a good choice for women's reading groups and for readers interested in alternative societies and futuristic ideas. The Renunciate Oath taken at the Amazon Guild House is a good starting point for a discussion of competing value systems and alternative views of gender roles.

Many science fiction courses now include units on gender, and *Thendara House*, like other Bradley works, reflects our society's evolving perceptions of gender. Her balanced viewpoint is one which would probably not offend readers of differing views.

1. What are the key elements of the Renunciate Oath, and what do they suggest about our own social and behavioral norms?
2. In what ways does the Amazon Guild House provide an alternative to both Darkoveran and Terran social structures? How does it balance these competing world views and provide new options?
3. What are the parallels between these societies and our own?
4. How do the major characters— Jaelle, Magda, and Camilla—illustrate different qualities of the female hero?

How do the characters complement and balance one another? How does the concept of androgyny, or balance between traditional male and traditionally female personal qualities, play a role here?

5. What is the ideal for human relationships, especially between friends and coworkers? What is the vision of community created in *Thendara House*? How are both individual and communal values fostered?

Literary Precedents

Amazon literatures are an ancient form of popular romance in the West, beginning with the Greek epics and romances.

Greek drama, too, depicted strong female characters such as Antigone and Medea, often in opposition to patriarchal values.

In Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (411 BC) women from different city states, as Bradley's women are from all the domains, unite under a witty, wise, and warm leader.

The depiction of female societies is not usual in science fiction. Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonsea* novels feature female societies, and the androgynous inhabitants of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969; see separate entry) share some features of Amazon literatures. Recently, feminist science fiction writers such as Joanna Russ, Sally Gearhart, and Susie Charnas have created totally female worlds.



Related Titles

Bradley created a Free Amazon in one of the first Darkover stories, but her full development of the Amazon theme did not occur until *The Shattered Chain* (1978); *The Ruins of Isis* (1978) provides archaeological underpinnings for a matriarchal society. *The City of Sorcery* (1984; see separate entry) extends this theme as Magdalene Lome undertakes a female version of the traditional Quest. The Amazon theme is also prominent in Bradley's historical fiction, such as *The Firebrand* (1987; see separate entry), where the Trojan Princess Cassandra is trained as an Amazon warrior.

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