# There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine Short Guide

## There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine by Larry Niven

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# Overview

Hanville Svetz is a wanderer through time, usually very lost without knowing it.

His job is to ride a time machine, an "extension cage," back to the pre-Atomic era and retrieve extinct animals for display. Eleven hundred years after the Atomic era, little is known about animals. Humanity has so polluted the world that only humans and dogs, both of whom have adapted their lungs and digestions to the pollution, survive. When sent back for a horse, he retrieves a unicorn, but with no one having seen a horse in thousands of years, the unicorn is accepted as a horse. What we readers quickly realize, but Svetz and the engineers of the time machine do not realize, is that Svetz is retrieving animals that never existed; they are products of myth, legend, and fiction. (Moby Dick makes a cameo appearance in another story about Svetz, "Leviathan!")

# About the Author

Laurence Van Cott Niven (Larry Niven) was born in Los Angeles on April 30, 1938, to a lawyer, Waldemar Van Cott Niven and Lucy Estelle (nee Doheny) Niven. He was educated near Beverly Hills and went to California Institute of Technology, from 1956 to 1958. He says that after he discovered a bookstore full of used science fiction magazines, he flunked out of college. He later finished his degree in mathematics at Washburn University in Topeka in 1962.

After attending graduate school from 1962 to 1963 at UCLA, he lived off of a trust fund set up by his great-grandfather while he worked at becoming a professional writer, selling his first story "The Coldest Place" to Worlds of If, then one of the leading science fiction magazines. He later redid a science fiction story into his first novel, World of Ptavvs, published in 1966.

Niven married Marilyn Joyce Wisowaty on September 6, 1969. By this time, his work was already the subject of much discussion.

In an era in which soft science fiction (speculations of social changes or outright fantasies imitating The Lord of the Rings but set on alien planets) seemed to be subsuming hard science fiction (speculations emphasizing technological developments and their effects on people), Niven was writing popular, much admired works in which technology was a powerful, beneficial force for humanity. He is sometimes credited with keeping hard science fiction respectable during the 1970s and with laying the foundations for new writers about technology, such as Tom Clancy and Greg Bear who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Niven is aware of the appeal much of his work has for young people. In N-Space, he suggests that in stories such as "All the Myriad Ways" (please see separate entry), and in works by such writers as Keith Laumer, Poul Anderson, and Fritz Leiber, it is "the dance of ideas that hooks us before our teens." As with many other writers of science fiction, the phrase "What if?" sparks his imagination, and the ideas stirred up form the basis of tales that appeal mightily to young adults and captivate grownups, as well.

# Setting

The earth of Svetz's time seems like a horrible place. It has no plants or animals; everything is artificial. People eat a liquid microbial gook to survive. During the Atomic era the earth was severely polluted. The result was the extermination of nearly all life. Human beings managed to adapt to the poisoned land and air. In fact, they adapted so much that unpolluted air is poisonous for Svetz. There is popular interest in extinct animal forms, although people tend to be afraid of anything living besides themselves. Even the dogs displayed at Svetz's museum must be kept behind glass, though they can breathe the poisoned air, because people fear contact with them.

In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," Svetz ends up on an earth that will be familiar to fans of gothic horror tales.

Werewolves, the monsters of many a frightening tale, are the dominant species in America, one in which pollution is rare because of the sensitive noses of the wolves, who cannot abide anything as smelly as an internal combustion engine. Wrocky tells Svetz that Detroit once had hundreds of automobiles, but "then one night the citizenry rose in a pack and tore all the cars to pieces. The owners too." In this version of earth, humans evolved only into Homo habilis and no further. And it is this arrested development that holds more menace than the wolves or even the mention of Count Dracula coming for a visit.

# Social Sensitivity

In Niven's fiction, advances in technology usually have benefits for humanity, making it notable that in Svetz's society such technology as internal combustion engines has poisoned the earth and destroyed all life except for microbes, human beings, and dogs. Indeed, the planet has been devoid of life so long that people are afraid of living things. Svetz describes himself as xenophobic, meaning that he cannot tolerate living with anything other than his own kind, and xenophobia seems to be a common trait among his fellow humans. Even "the dogs were behind glass because people were afraid of them. Too many species had died.

The people of 1100 Post Atomic were not used to animals."

The society Svetz encounters when he prematurely stops his time machine contrasts markedly with his own. The wolves have formed an America that coincides with our own twentieth-century America, but they live without pollution and amid abundant life. A lawn alarms Svetz, and the wildlife is a mystery. For instance, a bird is "a tiny thing that fluttered and warbled"; Svetz does not know what it is. This does not mean that the wolves are primitives; the story alludes to their having nuclear technology and being as scientifically advanced as the twentieth-century America of Svetz's own timeline. The difference is in the choices the wolves have made in favor of clean air and water. This contrast offers a pessimistic view of modern technological excesses; people are making the wrong choices, and a poisoned world is a possible future.

The way out of a poisoned future is to be found in the word possible. Given that whether they know it or not, the time travelers are swinging their extension cages across many different timelines, it is possible that their timeline is not our own, and that their polluted future does not actually belong to us.

# Literary Qualities

"There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" is inspired by a theory in physics that there are a multiplicity of timelines, perhaps an infinite number, that branch off from one another every time anyone makes a decision. It is a complex theory, but in essence it maintains that every time you or anyone else makes a decision, you (or that other person) make all possible alternative decisions in new, diverging timelines. Niven sees this as more fantasy than science, and as in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," he tends to use the idea to spin off fantasies without, he says, the usual trappings of fantasy.

One of the notable traits of Niven's fiction is his sharp imagery of amazing people, places, and machines. For instance, in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," he describes what the extension cage looks like from the outside when it is in operation: The extension cage rested a few yards away, the door a black circle on one curved side. The other side seemed to fade away into nothing. It was still attached to the rest of the time machine, in 1103 PA, along a direction eyes could not follow. This is stuff to excite the imagination.

Niven is also notable for his nomenclature, that is, the words he uses to make his settings seem realistic. His words help to give depth to his imaginary cultures and tend to reflect the technology and attitudes of his characters. In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," the crucial word is troll.

When Wrona asks Svetz, "Did the trolls bother you?" the word evokes associations with mythical creatures of Scandinavian folklore, semihumans who prey on human beings. In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," the term troll applies to the humanlike creatures that inhabit Wrona's yard, and it hints at how the wolf people regard humans—Homo habilis. It also hints at how Svetz himself will be regarded. If a civilized wolf would surprise real-life humans, then a seemingly civilized troll, a cruel and uncivilized being, would surprise and perhaps worry the wolf people of "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine."

"There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" is loaded with foreshadowing, with Niven hinting at what is to come while avoiding saying outright what is happening. For instance, the first reference to the horse with a horn foreshadows the seeming breakdown of the time machine and the mistaken perception of where he is that Svetz will have in the wolf world. He is wrong about the unicorn being a horse, and he will prove to be wrong about why the air in his extension cage becomes poisonous to him. Another significant foreshadowing arises out of the physical changes the captured wolf undergoes. The description of its change into something manlike suggests werewolves; yet this is misdirection because the wolf is not a werewolf, just a wolf becoming like wolves in the world through which the extension cage extends. This episode indicates what happens to Svetz, who also changes to match the humans of the wolf world. It also hints at the ending, in which Wrona undergoes her own change when, like a loving dog, she insists on staying with Svetz. These complex foreshadowings, each honest about what is to

come yet playing on audience expectations by defying them, help make "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" a satisfying read.

# Themes and Characters

Hanville Svetz, the main character, is a time traveler. His job is to go back in time before the Atomic era and retrieve extinct animals for display in his own time. Like most people of his time, Svetz is xenophobic, which makes his job especially tough: "Svetz shuddered. Of all the things he hated about his profession, this was the worst; the ride home, staring up at a strange and dangerous extinct animal." In this case, he has captured a wolf. He is not an imposing figure, only a "pale, slender young man topped with thin blond hair." He seems like an ordinary man working at an extraordinary job, and he tends to deal with the problems that arise in his work much as most people would.

Much of the humor of "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" depends on Svetz's not knowing what is happening. As he travels back to his own time with his prize, it seems to change: "The beast's snout was shorter, wasn't it? Its forelegs lengthened peculiarly, its paws seemed to grow and spread."

This is a fine bit of misdirection by Niven; the wolf seems to be a werewolf, changing from its wolf state into a man. After stopping the time machine to confirm that he has picked up a werewolf, Swetz "saw the intruder towering over him, the coarse thick hair, the yellow eyes glaring, the taloned hands spread wide to kill."

Niven, being a clever writer, has allowed Svetz's impressions to be misleading. Svetz himself does not fully realize what he is doing, but the story's humor depends on irony—having the audience know more than the character does. Niven has already established earlier in the story that Svetz brought home a unicorn, thinking it was a horse; therefore he seems to be making the same mistake about another mythical creature.

Even so, Niven leaves clues about what is really happening. A big clue is his description of Wrona, who answers the door of the big house to which Svetz flees: Her skin was sheet white, and her rich white hair would better have fit a centenarian. Her nose, very broad and flat, would have disfigured an ordinary girl.

Somehow it fit Wrona well enough, but her face was most odd, and her ears were too large, almost pointed, and black.

Flakee Wrocky, Flakee Worrel, and Brenda share similar looks. Although they speak "in ancient American," they are plainly not the sort of human beings typical of our own America. Another clue is "She [Wrona] reached up to scratch him [Svetz] behind the ear. A thrill of pleasure ran through him." This sounds much like a mistress and her dog. Further, the glimpse of family structure suggests a wolflike culture. Among wolves there are what scientists often call "alpha" males, adult male wolves that dominate all the other male wolves. In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," "Wrocky was emphatically the boss," the alpha male. He is a bright man, quickly recognizing what he has in Svetz: "And Wrocky didn't want Svetz to leave."

Niven has fun with his characters, and this may be the story's primary appeal. The wolf people are wolflike in their behavior and views. Having an excellent sense of smell, they naturally dislike air pollution and have therefore created a society without the internal combustion engine and other polluting technology. Organized instinctively like a wolf pack, the people Svetz encounters defer to their alpha male. Svetz finds himself changing to suit his new environment: His forehead is gradually flattening and sloping backward; his memory is becoming clouded; he is powerfully attracted to Wrona, as a pet would be. This fun sets up the twist at the story's end and suggests how matters might be if a species other than human had become the intellectually dominant one. Niven gently invites thought about what humanity is doing right and wrong for itself and for its fellow inhabitants of earth.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Did you foresee what would be Svetz's real problem in the timeline of the wolves, or were you surprised? Why would Niven not take the usual horror story route?

2. Why do the characters in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine" and the other Svetz stories not realize that Svetz is capturing imaginary beasts?

3. Why does Niven mention the horse with a horn early in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"? Is he telling us something?

4. What does Svetz mean when he says, "Can't you tell the difference between a wolf and a dog?"

5. What are examples of foreshadowing in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"?

6. How well described are the wolf people? 7. Why is there no air pollution in the America of the wolves? What other differences between their America and modern America would there be because of their wolf ancestry?

8. Why does Wrona want to stay with Svetz?

9. What social criticism is there in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"?

10. Would Svetz have been of any use to Wrocky?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What aspect of physics deals with alternate dimensions? What, in plain English, is the theory behind alternate timelines? Is it popular among physicists?

2. Read the other Svetz stories (they may be found in The Flight of the Horse). Do they all share themes in common? Are they all good reading?

3. Niven has written time travel stories that do not involve Svetz or Svetz's world. You may find a few of them in N-Space and Playgrounds of the Mind.

How are they similar to "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"? Are the worlds of the time travelers like that of Svetz? What seems to be Niven's overall attitude toward the concept of time travel?

4. How are communities of wolves typically organized? What aspects of real wolf societies has Niven used in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"?

5. What were the Homo habilis? How intelligent were they? How do scientists determine what they were like?

6. After having read all the Svetz stories, write one of your own. What would his boss want him to retrieve? What would he actually find? What adventure would he have?

7. What are the ironic passages in "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"? How does Niven present his irony? What effect does the irony have on the events in the story?

# For Further Reference

Bernardo, Anthony. "Larry Niven." Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography Series. Volume 2. Ed. Kirk H. Beetz. Osprey, FL: Beacham Publishing, 1996, pp. 1355-58. Bernardo presents an account of Niven's life and career, as well as primary and secondary bibliographies.

Clute, John. "Niven, Larry." The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls, et al. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1993, pp. 873-75. Discusses Niven as an important exponent of hard science fiction.

Hartmann, William K. "A What-If World Comes to Life in Los Angeles."Smithsonian 12 (March 1982): 86-94. Niven, artists, and scientists jointly create an imaginary but scientifically possible world.

Of interest for its insights into Niven's creative methods.

Jonas, Gerald. New York Times Book Review (October 26, 1975): 49. After suggesting that "hard" science science fiction is stupid, Jonas places Niven's Tales of Known Space in the middle of it.

Niven, Larry. "The Words in Science Fiction." The Craft of Science Fiction. Ed.

Reginald Bretnor. New York: Harper and Row, 1976, pp. 178-94. Niven often invents slang for his futuristic characters to use; here he explains how he uses invented words. His invented terminology (for example, stasis field) has had a broad influence on literature, making this article especially interesting.

Platt, Charles. "Larry Niven." Dream Makers: Volume II. New York: Berkley Books, 1983, pp. 15-24. Platt provides some biographical background on Niven and in an interview with Niven discusses his development as a writer and his view of the status of science fiction as literature.

Stein, Kevin. The Guide to Larry Niven's Ringworld. Riverdale, NY: Baen (Paramount), 1994. A dictionary of the elements, such as characters and places, of Niven's Ringworld fiction.

# Related Titles

Niven's own view of multiple timelines seems to be that they are absurd. He believes alternate-history fiction to be fantasies without the trappings of fantasy—that is, there is little science in them—so they are not the hard science fiction he prefers. Even so, he recognizes in the concept of alternate histories the opportunity to play with ideas, to ask "What if?" In the case of "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," one "what if" is "What would America be like if wolves (or dogs) were the dominant species?" Another is "What would a civilized wolf (or dog) society be like?" Yet another is "What would America be like without the internal combustion engine?" This third is a question typical of not only Niven's alternate timeline stories, but of those of many other writers. In "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine," the answer seems to be that the world would be better without automobiles with polluting engines.

The other Svetz tales are not as didactic as "There Is a Wolf in My Time Machine"; they do not as bluntly compare a pollutionfree America with the toxic environment of Svetz's day. On the other hand, they all share a humorous tone and Svetz's wild encounters with beasts of our myths rather than real-life creatures. For instance, in "Leviathan!" Svetz encounters a huge sea serpent with enormous pointed teeth. It bites into his extension cage and hangs on, giving Svetz some frightful moments. Once free of the leviathan, Svetz manages to catch what he was supposed to catch, a sperm whale. But this sperm whale is all white, with a harpoon in its back; Svetz does not realize what we readers recognize, that he has captured a fictional creature, Herman Melville's Moby Dick. To cap off the humor, Svetz's compatriots think that it is too bad that the whale is white. Other creatures include a Chinese dragon that breathes fire that is mistaken for a gila monster and a fabulous "horse" with a horn on its head.

Although Niven thinks alternate timelines to be a spurious concept, he admits being drawn more often than he means to be to the "what if" opportunities the concept offers to fiction. In "All the Myriad Ways," he tries to put an end to the foolishness with a tale of how people would react if infinite timelines were proven to be true: mass suicides and murders. If every possible choice is made in at least one timeline or another, what does life matter? Decisions would not count for anything. Thus, a person could commit suicide knowing that in another timeline he chooses not to. "All the Myriad Ways" does a good job of exposing the absurdity of the concept of alternative timelines. Even so, Niven seems unwilling to allow his own verdict to put an end to his own playing with alternate histories. For example, in "The Return of William Proxmire," he has a former United States senator persuade Congress to fund the research and development of a time machine, just so that he can go back to the 1920s and give Robert Heinlein an injection that will cure his tuberculosis. He blames Heinlein's science fiction for inspiring people to become scientists who then push for what Proxmire believes is a wasteful program of space exploration. By curing the young naval officer Heinlein, he hopes Heinlein will remain in the navy and not leave to become a writer. The effects of his actions are not what he expects. In the new timeline that he creates, there are several space stations, two colonies on the moon, and the Apollo program has reached beyond twenty expeditions. The Soviet Union is not much of a threat because Admiral Heinlein

will not let them have spacecraft, although he is allowing six of their scientists to accompany Americans on a exploratory trip to Mars.

In "The Return of William Proxmire," Niven takes the opportunity to express his debt to Heinlein and others, and to indicate what their influence has been on science and literature.

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