Trader to the Stars Short Guide

Trader to the Stars by Poul Anderson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Nicholas Van Rijn is the protagonist of all three novellas in Trader to the Stars. Although obese, he is strong, with a powerful sexuality and an alert and clever mind. In the first noveella "Hiding Place," he solves the mystery of the missing crew of a zoolike spaceship and wins the affection of a young woman who at the novella's end is sitting in Van Rijn's lap while wearing a "slit and topless blue gown which fitted like a coat of lacquer." The rugged Captain Bahadur Torrance of Van Rijn's own ship ends up with bruises after a brief battle with Van Rijn over the affections of the young woman.

Van Rijn is typical of Anderson's entrepreneurial heroes. Their dedication to commerce and to opening up new markets is accompanied by sturdy bodies and tremendous sex appeal. The women in their lives usually have to be content to share them, because the fertility of their minds is paralleled by their sexual drives. In contrast, government functionaries almost always have poor sex lives; their unimaginative minds are paralleled by impotence.

However, Van Rijn and his kind are not exploitive brutes. Their sensitivity to the needs of others makes them successful merchants; this same sensitivity makes them thoughtful lovers.

Some critics object to Anderson's entrepreneurial characters because they seem too self-absorbed, with underdeveloped personalities. On the other hand, general readers seem to find their use of wits to overcome enemies and other obstacles to be admirable as well as entertaining; and Van Rijn's low-key humor adds to his appeal.

Social Concerns

Trader to the Stars exemplifies Anderson's romantic view of human progress. In it, a cunning entrepreneur solves mysteries and figures out ways to establish mutually beneficial economic ties between his company and alien creatures in outer space. Where governments and ambassadors are ineffectual, the robust and dynamic merchant Nicholas Van Rijn succeeds because he pursues enlightened self-interest. For him and his kind, peace and friendly relations are necessary for successful economic enterprise. Therefore, Van Rijn resolves conflicts, makes friends, and turns a handsome profit.

The notion that free enterprise brings the greatest prosperity to the greatest number of people is a theme common to much of Anderson's fiction.

Techniques

The novellas of Trader to the Stars are united by the character Nicholas Van Rijn and by the theme of opening up frontiers. Otherwise, they are notably different from one another. "Hiding Place" is a mystery; "Territory" is a tale of frontier adventure, with the tomahawk-wielding t'Kelans taking the place of American Indians; and "The Master Key" is told in the first person by an acquaintance of Van Rijn, whereas the others are third-person narratives. This last novella has Van Rijn making sense out of a report by employees of a disastrous trading mission.

Although "Hiding Place" follows the pattern of a mystery story, Anderson takes full advantage of its science-fiction setting. Van Rijn is confronted with the problem of a spaceship without a crew. The craft carries several encaged alien species in its hold, none of which is familiar to him. Van Rijn concludes that the crew must be trying to pass itself off as one of the menagerie, but his problem is then compounded: The only creature capable of working the ship's controls is unintelligent and incapable of understanding how to run the craft. Van Rijn's logical solution to the mystery establishes his ability to solve complicated problems and reveals him to be a character of depth and not simply a stereotypical adventurer. The story maintains suspense because Van Rijn and his crew need the alien ship because their own was damaged, and they must try to deal with a possibly hostile species that they cannot identify.

Like "Hiding Place," both "Territory" and "The Master Key" focus on problems that Van Rijn must solve with his wits. In "Territory," tension is maintained by the relationship between the pragmatic Van Rijn and the idealistic Joyce Davisson, who resists Van Rijn's sexual advances. Suspense is maintained by the uncertainties of their situation; the t'Kelans have become inexplicably hostile, and Van Rijn and Davisson must try to survive in an environment that is never warmer than forty degrees Celsius below zero, while they try to make peace with the natives. As the relationship between Van Rijn and Davisson slowly warms, the theme of trade as a way of securing peace is developed. Van Rijn eventually shows that all the good intentions of Davisson cannot substitute for mutually profitable trade. The t'Kelans are much more willing to believe that human beings want to profit from buying and selling t'Kelan products than they are that human beings have altruistic motives.

"The Master Key" is also a celebration of mind over brawn. Like Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe sifting through clues in his office, Van Rijn listens to the tale of a failed trading mission on a wild and mysterious planet. "The Master Key" features a complicated narrative technique. It is told in the first person by a guest at a gathering in Van Rijn's penthouse apartment near Chicago, but the narrator is not the focus of the story. Instead, he relates what two other guests, Per Stenvik and Manuel Felipe Gomez y Palomares, tell of their adventure among the Yildivans. Although Stenvik and Gomez are the focus of the story, Van Rijn's presence is always felt; he asks probing questions and urges Stenvik and Gomez to tell all. The complicated mix of storytellers enables Anderson to present diverse views of the events on the planet Cain, allowing for more than one plausible explanation for the violence that erupted between Yildivans and humans. In

addition, each speaker reveals something of himself, which helps to advance one of Anderson's most disturbing themes — that his guests are like Yildivans, who are like wild animals, but most people are not wild and lovers of freedom; they are, instead, more akin to the Lugals, the intelligent domesticated animals of the Yildivans.

Themes

Trader to the Stars opens with remarks by "Le Matelot" (The Sailor), who declares in part: "Because today we are sailing out among the stars, we are more akin to Europeans overrunning America or Greeks colonizing the Mediterranean littoral than to our ancestors of only a few generations ago. We, too, are discoverers, pioneers, traders, missionaries, composers of epic and saga."

This represents the principal theme of the book: that those who will travel in outer space will be frontiersmen. Some of these adventurers will be bandits, but others will be like Nicholas Van Rijn — daring people who use their wits to open up the universe to humanity and commerce.

Key Questions

Trader to the Stars is a good book to discuss in a writers' workshop. Beginning writers especially would benefit from studying the techniques used to create mystery and suspense in the book's three tales. Each story features some kind of mystery, each following to a degree the American tradition of mystery writing exemplified by the works of Dashiell Hammett and Rex Stout. In them, the main characters must survive in hostile environments, while coping with social ills (mostly brought with them), even as they try to make sense out of a mystery that features exotic characters (as in The Maltese Falcon, 1930) and complicated twists of plot in which friends and enemies are hard to tell apart. Because each story features similar background material, the differing techniques of each are easy to spot and identify.

Workshop members should note how the situation of the first story is such that the solution to the mystery is essential to the main characters' survival, thus creating tension, while the solution itself may reveal enemies not friends, thus creating suspense. In the second story, Anderson pairs off two appealing characters, one an idealistic heroine, the other a lovable rogue; his purpose is to present a case for pragmatism over idealism by showing how the idealist often takes little interest in finding out what the proposed beneficiaries of his or her charity really want or need. This could be dull stuff, but Anderson makes his theme an essential part of the mystery; one problem cannot be solved without the other being resolved. This makes the theme easy to digest. In the third story, Anderson uses multiple points of view, a technique often labeled "experimental" by literary critics. Yet, Anderson's uses of multiple points of view is not strained and its tone is not avant garde. Instead, the story is an absorbing tale of adventure and mystery. The multiple views allow for a more complete relating of the clues to the mystery than a single point of view would allow; thus they allow Anderson to let his reader in on all the essential evidence without resorting to authorial intrusion. Anderson has made the supposedly experimental technique an integral part of the mystery, thus putting it into the background where it does not intrude upon the plot. Master any one of these techniques, and one could well create a successful mystery; master the science fiction elements as well and — well, one could have a career like Anderson's.

For book clubs that are not workshops, Trader to the Stars has much fodder for discussions. For instance, the issue of Anderson's mixing of popular forms of fiction with topics customarily reserved for mainstream or even academic fiction could prove a controversial one. Does his mixing of his idiosyncratic social views with his efforts to entertain put off readers? Is he playing fair with readers who might at first think they have a casual read in store for them? He has a decidedly sanguine view of free enterprise; is this view accurate? Does actual history support his imaginary adventures of free marketeers in outer space?

Anderson's career itself is interesting to discuss. Not only does it span decades in which the popular audience for science exploded to capture a large portion of the general readership in America, but it shows definite steps of development. At first seemingly

content to write mostly light reading, Anderson became more ambitious. The novel The High Crusade (1960) marked an advance in narrative complexity, as well as an adroit mixing of popular literary forms. Trader to the Stars not only mixes literary forms, it presents characters that represent social concepts. In it, Anderson adds thematic depth that caught the attention of literary critics; this depth may account for the book's enduring popularity. It represents Anderson's effort to simultaneously entertain and inspire contemplation. Trader to the Stars could generate an interesting discussion of what Anderson has done to expand his literary horizons as well as his audience: What elements in the book are repeated in Anderson's later work?

Which of these elements could account for his currently high esteem among his fellow writers, even some of those who reject his social views?

1. You are isolated deep in unexplored space, perhaps doomed because your spaceship seems damaged beyond repair. You board an alien craft. What is the first thing you would do? Is it what Nicholas Van Rijn does? What are your first thoughts when confronted by the "Hiding Place"? Do you do what Van Rijn does? Would you take another approach to solving your problems?

2. Approach the mystery from another direction. You are a human being (pick your gender) transporting alien life forms, mostly animals, on a spaceship to a cosmic zoo or laboratory.

Your craft is unarmed and is approached and about to be boarded by some unknown, bizarre, possibly dangerous creature — someone or something that you did not invite aboard.

How do you hide yourself? How do you determine the intentions of your utterly alien visitors?

3. How valid is the point about pragmatism versus idealism in "Territory"?

4. In "Territory," is Joyce Davisson a well-developed character, or is she merely a mouthpiece for a point of view Anderson wishes to discredit?

5. Is "Territory" entertaining in spite of or because of its social theme? How well does the central problem of the story engage the mind and imagination? Does the social theme slip on by while the adventure has center stage?

6. Who in the discussion group figured out why the t'Kelans have become inexplicably hostile in "Territory" before it was revealed in the story?

7. A question that pops up now and again in science fiction is whether sentient alien beings would have souls.

"The Master Key" presents a case of beings without religion — at least as human beings would conceive of it.

Van Rijn says they have no souls. If there were sentient beings on other worlds, could they have souls? Would some, as "The Master Key" seems to suggest, have souls and others not?

Does sentience require a soul?

8. In "The Master Key," the expedition members forego a chance to shoot up Yildivans who had treated them treacherously. Are their reasons for abstaining credible? Is it in keeping with Van Rijn's views on how to behave toward other cultures?

9. What are the prospects for another expedition among the Yildivans? Will humans and Yildivans constantly misunderstand one another, or can they build a mutually beneficial economic relationship? Is there any reason to believe that the Yildivans might have other cultures that believe in God? Is there reason to doubt that the Yildivans have any cultures that would include religious beliefs?

10. If the Yildivans have no souls, would it be a waste of time for missionaries to try to convert them? Why does Van Rijn seem unconcerned by this problem?

11. What makes Van Rijn an appealing character? Why would Anderson give him traditionally unheroic characteristics such as obesity and comical ways of speaking? Might the obesity be symbolic?

Literary Precedents

The fat and clever Nicholas Van Rijn belongs to a long line of cunning fat men, beginning with Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White (1859) and including Rex Stout's detective Nero Wolfe, the protagonist of mystery novels such as Gambit (1962).

Such characters, often at once repellent and fascinating, have long appealed to popular audiences. In addition, the adventures surrounding Van Rijn are meant to advance Anderson's ideas about freedom and the common good.

Authors have often followed the adventures of a single character to present their ideas about society. For instance, Jonathan Swift does so in Gulliver's Travels (1726), which features several different imaginary societies that represent Swift's social views. In tone and content, Trader to the Stars is distinctly literary, intending to engage the mind in thought as well as to entertain it, thus placing the book in the tradition of such fiction as Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889) and Samuel Butler's Erewhon (1872).

Related Titles

Trader to the Stars is part of an imaginary future universe that is often dubbed the "Technic History" by critics, although Anderson avoids such labels.

Technic civilization is covered in two series of stories and novels. The first series focuses on the Polesotechnic League, a vast galactic trading organization, and it follows the adventures of Van Rijn and his protege, David Falkayn. The second and larger series focuses on the Terran Empire, which evolves a couple of centuries after the end of the Polesotechnic League. These complex series are notable for their sophisticated storytelling techniques and for their imaginative depth that reveals societies far more fully realized than in most science fiction.

Trader to the Stars comprises three novellas, part of a continuing series of short stories and novels about the Polesotechnic League. Other books in the series: War of the Wing Men, 1958, novel (reprinted as "The Man Who Counts" in The Earth Book of Stormgate); The Trouble Twisters, 1966, three novellas; Satan's World, 1969, novel; Mirkheim, 1977, novel; and The Earth Book of Stormgate, 1978, short stories.

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