

The Universe Against Her Short Guide

The Universe Against Her by James H. Schmitz

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Contents

The Universe Against Her Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

Telzey first uncovers her telepathic (or "psionic") powers through a relationship with her pet, Tick-Tock, a kittenlike creature she had found as a stray and taken in. As the years pass she has discovered that she can pick up mental images and feelings from her pet, now grown much larger and mentally more mature — less a pet and more a companion. It is the question of Tick-Tock's fate as a possibly intelligent creature and a friend in trouble that motivates Telzey to push onward through strange, new and even frightening experiences to expand what had simply been a telepathic form of child's play into the means to save her catlike friend.

As the novel progresses, so does Telzey's scope. She ventures far beyond the resolution of Tick-Tock's problem and into the arena of government agencies such as the Psychology Service and private investigative firms such as the Kyth Interstellar Agency who are trying to defend a young friend of Telzey's who is caught up in a private war. Telzey must struggle to avoid becoming an easily dispatched pawn in a chess game with many other pieces: some sympathetic, others distantly manipulative, and the last group coldly, criminally ruthless. It becomes obvious in the course of the "game" what the basic character of each group is, and what Telzey must do, despite fear or distaste, to win for decency's sake.



Social Concerns

In *The Universe Against Her*, the adventures of a brilliant young telepath are set in a future civilization clustered about the galactic core, called the Federation of the Hub. Telzey Amberdon's discovery, exploration, and, finally, application of her telepathic gifts make for entertaining reading but also a well-thought-out presentation of how an intelligent young person makes use of a highly unusual and potentially dangerous new ability. In this modern age of rapidly advancing and sometimes frighteningly powerful technology, many readers, particularly adolescents with a creative bent, can identify with both Telzey's ambition and caution. She learns that her high intelligence and will to use it have earned her the jealousy of others not so gifted; her emerging extrasensory talents threaten to get her looked upon as a freak even by those in her life who accept her intellect.

She is reluctant to take the path of least resistance: to squelch her talents in order to fit in, and to avoid the responsibilities that come with power.

Neither is she eager to put herself in the harness of any public agency, which would decide for her where, when, and how much of her talent she would use and develop. A strong-willed girl, Telzey trusts herself to explore wisely, to apply her powers humanely, to oppose evil with no less power than is necessary to defeat it.

Techniques

Schmitz establishes and maintains interest in his stories with two devices: intricate, cloak-and-dagger plots and an emphasis on the humanity of the telepathic protagonist. Schmitz's plots are elaborate puzzles where the use of telepathy is essential to investigate the criminal activities of people who have covered their tracks too well for conventional methods of detection to find them in time. But since telepathy is a mechanism used on sentient beings who have to be convicted on the basis of physical evidence, it is a device that needs an expert touch. Therefore, Schmitz has created a character, Telzey, who is both a law student and a powerful telepath, to bring such criminals to justice. In her, he has also created a human being whom the reader can find interesting because of the moral and practical decisions she must make on the job. These decisions include ones about if and when to intervene, and if so, what methods to use. These decisions promote her growth of character and nurture her telepathic talents, and make her a strong figure with whom the reader will want to identify.

Themes

The Universe Against Her and its sequels explore the theme of the individual being at her best when thrown back on her own resources. It emphasizes not only the potential strength of rugged individualism but also its sureness — that the best guide to the development of talent, provided that one has a solid foundation of good character to lay it on, is the intelligent person's own sensibility. Many times in the novel, this independence flies in the face of a large, complex society's tendency to overcontrol its members, even those who are already quite conscientious. It can hobble its most productive members and blunt its own natural defense systems against criminals by its own distrust of the very individuals that make up its body.

Telzey not only learns about these tendencies of civilization in order to overcome them; she also learns to make some of them work for her. She discovers that it can be to her advantage to outwardly appear, to everyone but her compatriots, to be a bright, pretty but otherwise quite ordinary teenage girl, especially to her criminal prey. Schmitz has an awareness of what might be called the psychological ecology of human society — the emergence of mental defenses similar to those physical ones seen in animal species in nature, such as camouflage, armoring, aggressiveness, or swift automatic responses.

Literary Precedents

While Schmitz is not an obvious imitator of other writers, his tendency to write "series" stories, later novelized into *The Universe Against Her* and its sequels, follows a pattern set by another prominent science fiction writer, Robert Heinlein. Much of Heinlein's work, which like Schmitz's includes short stories, novelettes, juvenile fiction, and short adventure novels, can be organized into what has been called a "future history." That is to say, his stories all take place in different historical eras in the same future galaxy of Heinlein's invention and are historically consistent with each other. Much of Schmitz's work deals with the Federation of the Hub, a vast alliance of largely human-inhabited worlds whose political and defense affairs are coordinated but not strictly controlled by an "Overgovernment," a power which Hub citizens almost forget is there because it does its job quietly and with a light touch. The Telzey Amberdon novels are only part of Schmitz's works that can be classified under "history of the Hub," although Telzey can easily be said to be the most popular continuing character that Schmitz ever created.

The major difference between Schmitz, Heinlein and many other writers of the post-World War II era is that Schmitz's work was not primarily Earth-centered, or even set in the Earth's solar system. In the Hub civilization, as with most of his other fiction, Earth is but a distant memory, even more remote than ancient Greece is today. This difference has made for a bigger physical scale, more depth of history, more complex political maneuvering. Other galactic-scale series, such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and Frank Herbert's *Dune* books, are based on past Earth empires; in Asimov's case the Roman Empire and in Herbert's, the Arabian Empire of Mohammed's followers (the Nation of Islam). Schmitz's Federation of the Hub has a much more modern feel to it, as if it were based on the present-day system of cold-war alliances, although aggression must be deterred more subtly than in previous eras. In Schmitz's universe, powers of the mind, such as intelligence, telepathy and creativity are preferred to prevent physical warfare from breaking out.



Related Titles

With the success of the first Telzey Amberdon stories, Schmitz wrote more novelettes, first published in Analog magazine, then gathered into novel form under the title *The Telzey Toy* (1973). This book draws Telzey deeper into investigative and intelligence work. The *Telzey Toy* is an android made in physical and mental imitation of Telzey as a part of an egotistical inventor's plan to perfect his product line of androids, with her unwilling cooperation. The *Telzey Toy* plays with the question of what constitutes a human identity; whether it consists of a body, a set of memories, or a unique location in physical space.

The Lion Game (1973), a sequel to *The Telzey Toy*, which was first published in serial form, again in Analog, is a densely-plotted novel about a mysterious race of telepathic giants pursuing a ruthless game of power politics and assassination within the Federation of the Hub. Telzey nearly becomes a victim of their deadly tactics. When she survives an assassination attempt she knows that she must track down her attackers or succumb to inevitable future attempts on her life. In this book Schmitz explores the theme of the weakness inherent in selfishness. The villains are very strong; they are giants, physically and telepathically.

They have conquered races to do their inventive work for them while they concentrate on competing with each other for power. But they have become lazy in their success; they use the same brutal strategy over and over again until they have forgotten how to adapt to new circumstances. Thus Telzey, who has cultivated a sense of responsibility and compassion along with her strong talents has retained the ability to adapt, invent, and cooperate, can fight back successfully and defeat them.



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