

Unwise Child Short Guide

Unwise Child by Randall Garrett

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Characters

The main characters in *Unwise Child* are unabashed stereotypes — the handsome hero, the beautiful damsel, and so on — but with some exotic variations. The hero, a towering blond Adonis with an inventive intellect that da Vinci might have envied, is Michael Raphael Gabriel. Named after three archangels, Mike "the Angel" is a street-smart engineer thriving in the wilderness of the Manhattan of the future, not unlike a latter-day Tarzan.

In order for the plot to get going, even the hero must have an appealing weakness or two. Michael Gabriel's are a "wise-guy" curiosity and being a most eligible bachelor.

The heroine is Leda Crannon, a luscious lady scientist who partakes of divine beauty. Her red hair and curvaceous figure suggest a passionate nature just waiting to be released within the proper bounds of matrimony for the lucky male who gets there first. She is just childlike enough to be innocent of her power to attract — an unspoiled beauty, bright and spunky, yet very much in need of an experienced man to comfort her as she matures through learning a hard lesson. Although at first seeming one of a new and possibly ferocious breed of female, Leda is actually a sweet girl.

Ensign Vaneski is a juvenile menace who, lacking a sense of humor, ends by making a joke of himself like many who take themselves and their vendettas too seriously. A junior officer of the William Branchell, Vaneski has a bright future in the Space Service. But because he cannot bring himself to do the sensible thing and write off his younger brother and sister and the rest of his criminal past, he dooms himself in a contest with his intended victim Mike "the Angel."

Snookums, the absurdly-named robot brain, is the second "villain" of the book, not in the sense that he is capable of malevolence, but in that he makes a pain of his little self. Although he mimics a wise human genius in certain ways, solving purely technical problems with astonishing speed, Snookums has only a primitive understanding of abstract values. He does not understand, for example, that human beings are not to be the subject of experiments without their consent until he nearly kills Mike in one, and is scolded carefully by Leda. He does not know enough about humans to distrust any, so that when Vaneski tells him that Mike is known as "the Angel" the robot-mind is in a quandary over whether Leda or the ensign is right about Mike's species. Humans are protected from harm or neglect under the first law of robotics, but whether that extends to angels is beyond Snookums. Having no common sense he can neither solve conundrums nor set them aside, so he goes irrevocably insane.

Minor characters are well-described and individualized. For example, Dr.

Morris Fitzhugh, head of the cybernetics project, is a determined man, yet considerate of the feelings of others.

Likewise, the captain of the Branchell, Henry "Black Bart" Quill, is a cantankerous man whose sarcasm to his officers is a respected institution. These details do give life and texture to the book, but in this early novel there are many spots where witty dialogues designed to explicate character are labored and overdone.



Social Concerns

One of numerous early science fiction novels that extrapolated from current problems in the field of artificial intelligence, *Unwise Child* is about a cybernetics project that has developed a potentially troubling new invention, and must be moved off the Earth of the twenty-first century before that invention can fall into the wrong hands. Artificial intelligence has retained its importance both as a topic for fiction and for general interest, now that computer technology is a flagship industry of the world economy. Garrett has made some guesses about the perils and rewards of working with a robot intellect, and compares it to the system it is designed to augment — the human mind.

A detective as well as a science fiction novel, *Unwise Child* also deals with the universal problem of crime. A string of crimes begins in New York City and extends to the fancifully named planet of Eisberg, a frozen planet circling a distant star. As a novel for the juvenile market it focuses on juvenile delinquency and gang vengeance without glorifying the criminals. Its hero is pointedly an adult, although in a way that a teenager would find glamorous, and a real adult would find too good to be true: a cultured Philip Marlowe-like character with the engineering genius of a Hyman Rickover and a Nicola Tesla combined. While the criminal may also be ingenious and talented, he is unflatteringly portrayed as a "nerdy-teenager" type, someone who will never make adequate use of those advantages for sheer lack of common sense.



Techniques

While fun and educational to read as a whole, *Unwise Child* has technical problems that dilute its strength as a novel. It is an uneasy marriage of too many mutually-exclusive elements; it attempts to simultaneously be a hardbitten detective story, a philosophical piece about man versus machine, a science fiction adventure for juveniles, and a romantic story of true love. Any two of these elements taken together would make a challenging basis for such a short novel. Four major changes of locale, from New York City to the Antarctic, then to shipboard for a long interstellar journey, to land on an exotic planet, is again too much. Add to this an invented future history and futuristic hardware and there is enough subject matter for three novels of *Unwise Child*'s length.

The punchy writing style and simple vocabulary are appropriate for the juvenile level, but the philosophical questions raised are more readily appreciated by adults. *Unwise Child* was written when science fiction as a genre was becoming more adult fare, requiring more ideas and psychological insight into character. One senses that Garrett is trying to incorporate adult insights into essentially juvenile characters when the characters act in ways that belie their chronological ages.

Still, Garrett has grasped the basics of convoluted mystery plots, salting his narrative with casual clues, interesting suspects and hidden motives. The very beginning and the very end of the novel are nicely tied together, as it is revealed that the unknown mastermind behind the crimes in New York and the ones on the Branchell is Vaneski, and that Snookums has been used as both a diversion and a secret weapon, one that fortunately goes awry.



Themes

In *Unwise Child* the human mind is contrasted in an action-adventure setting with two alternative kinds of mentalities — the robot mind and the criminal mind. Although both alternatives have their short-term superiorities, by the end of the novel they are demonstrated to be childish in competition with the reasoning power of the mature human mind. The novel's major theme is wisdom; its minor themes are love and justice. The novel's hero, Michael Gabriel, is wise, and therefore able to love appropriately. Its heroine, Dr. Leda Crannon, is able to do likewise but only at the end of the novel.

Its two villains, the robot "Snookums" and the criminal Ensign Vaneski, are incapable of wisdom or real love.

The robot mind is logical and experimental, but cannot comprehend emotionally loaded issues as the wise mind can. The robot brain, governed by Asimov's famous "three laws" of robotics (a sort of simple statement of ethical behavior for machine-minds), is in constant danger of freezing up if it is pushed too far into realms beyond straightforward research. When "Snookums" is maliciously fed a particularly potent book on theology he descends first into hysteria, then into permanent catatonia.

The criminal mind can be both clever and emotional; but, unlike the wise mind, it lacks true empathy. Vaneski is incapable of reconciling his feelings and the logic of which human minds are capable because he sees no need to do so. Being so selfish, his immediate desires suffer little inhibition from the understanding of consequences. In short, he is not only unjust, but stupidly impulsive as well. As the criminal of the novel he starts out in a powerful position, with technical knowledge, ingenuity, and his identity as a criminal concealed. But his character flaws of impatience, immaturity, and lack of humor rapidly trip him up until he loses far more than he could have hoped to gain.

The minor theme of true love is displayed in the interaction of the hero and heroine. True love has wisdom as its ally. Michael Gabriel falls in love with a beautiful young woman who is intelligent and well-educated but lacks experience beyond the narrow boundaries of her schooling and her job.

Although her physical beauty is quite frankly what attracts him initially, her other fine qualities and her potential are important enough to him that he finds, with some surprise, many more noble sentiments than desire coming to the fore. Wisdom guides him not only in the choice of a love interest, but in securing her and his own happiness afterwards.

In contrast, misplaced sentiment is shown to be at best a waste and at worst a danger. The ensign and the robot are both the objects of innocently misplaced affection. The ensign uses the kindness directed toward him for criminal ends, resulting in vandalism, murder, and attempted murder. The robot has been anthropomorphized by Leda Crannon into a child-substitute. A child psychologist, she has put off getting to know real

children by putting eight years of her life into a project that never had the potential to advance her in her field.

Literary Precedents

Antecedents for *Unwise Child* range from science fiction to detective fiction.

The "wise child" tradition of science fiction is used along with the "wise guy" tradition of detective fiction. The "wise child" is an old archetype, an innocent but preternaturally clever figure, often a savior. The "wise guy" is a clever fellow who gets himself into trouble and the plot into motion by being clever once too often.

The "wise child" motif is often seen in science fiction stories featuring robots. Often in such stories the robot is more potent than its creator, which is not too difficult if its creator is more ingenious than he is sensible, like young Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the progenitor of many science fiction horror stories. The title *Unwise Child* indicates that Garrett is working a deliberate reversal of the child-as-savior theme, for while Snookums does save the ship, later on he has not the wit to save himself — hardly wise.

Garrett openly borrows from the legacy of Isaac Asimov, the foremost writer in the field of robot stories, and a man regarded by many critics as the most revered writer in science fiction.

Asimov's stories about the mechanical men manufactured by U.S. Robots are the definitive works on the subject.

Garrett's characters refer to and quote Asimov's three laws of robotics by name, while they themselves and their dilemmas harken back to some of his more famous creations. Dr. Leda Crannon is a prettier Susan Calvin. Asimov's Dr. Susan Calvin is a somber figure. She is the lone woman in what is depicted as a man's world; a brilliant but plain roboticist who never finds the man to appreciate her potential for romantic love, so that the only love of her life is her work. One senses not so much that Dr. Calvin is a failure in love as that the world fails her because she is so far ahead of her time. Leda Crannon, though similarly out of place, is a more conventional figure, a lovely girl who finds her man before she is forced, as Susan Calvin has been, to choose between her heart and her mind. Leda Crannon also shares the heartache of Claire Belmont in Asimov's "Satisfaction Guaranteed," who falls in love with a too-handsome android after her husband fails to appreciate her. Despite his loving behavior, the lonely Mrs. Belmont knows that an android cannot return her feelings and replace the absent love of a human husband. Leda Crannon mistakenly comes to love Snookums as if he were a real child, and to watch him go insane brings her great pain, while others knew better than to form such an attachment.

Mike "the Angel" (a title reminiscent of Damon Runyon) gets onto the *Branchell* and into harm's way by being a "wise guy." He was commissioned to design the U.S.S. *Branchell* without being told its secret cargo, but once he guesses it he has to say something to his client, who promptly drafts him for the mission. It takes a "wise guy" to deliberately live in an area of New York where an apartment needs blastproof doors, but Michael

Gabriel is a hard-bitten type in the tradition of detective Sam Spade. In his gentlemanly treatment of Leda he also resembles that modern "knight-errant" character Philip Marlowe.



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