

# **A World Between Short Guide**

## **A World Between by Norman Spinrad**

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# Characters

The two main characters in *A World Between* are Carlotta Madigan, the Chairman of Pacifica's Parliament, and Royce Lindblad, the Minister of Media and her longtime lover. These two offices are the most important posts in Pacifican government. Their partnership works well for both public and personal life, but they have never faced a challenge like the two alien ships bring. In the few months of dealing with this dual invasion, their relationship is tested and shaken. Both feel the pull of arguments from the extremists of their own sex. But with their sharp political instincts and media expertise, they realize what is happening. They fight it with reason, with humor, and with the obvious chemistry between them. Carlotta has to learn to trust Royce, even against her own outrage, when he approves a temporary Transcendental Science facility with only male students. At book's end, their bond is even stronger, and it has changed subtly to become truly equal.

Carlotta and Royce are likeable and competent people. The story focuses on their interpersonal changes rather than on one or the other's inner character development. In this, it resembles much "women's fiction," albeit with more insight and more balanced compromises than the standard romance usually provides.

Two other couples function as foils.

Dr. Roger Falkenberg and his wife Maria speak for the Transcendental Scientists on Pacifica. Roger, as a scientist and administrator, is all that a man in his position is expected to be. He can be gracious, sarcastic, deceptive, or straightforward, but his brilliance lacks something on the human plane. He understands human behavior in the abstract, but not as the acts of living, feeling individuals. When Maria says she feels they are jeopardizing something precious on Pacifica, he has no idea what she is talking about. And when she finally leaves him for the same reason, his shock and pain are so unanticipated that he cannot deal with them at all, but merely pushes them away to think about later. Maria changes more than any other character.

The "gender war" provoked by their ship's arrival makes her question everything her education and culture has taught her. Ultimately she defects, and offers her scientific expertise to the Pacificans.

Two women, Bara Dorothy and Cynda Elizabeth, form another couple.

Cynda is the spokesperson and ostensible leader of the Femocrat delegation.

Bara is the officer in charge of political correctness. She is completely rigid in her beliefs, and so bound up in them that she hardly recognizes disaster when it occurs. Cynda is much more personable. As she travels the planet to organize Femocrat cells, she falls into an affair with the boatman she has employed. This is strictly forbidden by Femocracy. The affair dissolves because of culture gaps. But she has learned that Pacifican men are not the hairy, aggressive monsters her ideology told her they surely



are. The idea that other women can actually enjoy men's company — and bodies — and still be sisters to one another causes Cynda to reconsider all her former beliefs. She does not stay on Pacifica.

But, keeping her secret to herself, she goes back to her home planet planning to work for change.

## Social Concerns

During the 1970s science fiction discovered gender issues. Under the influence of the women's movement, novels were published featuring androgynous races, matriarchal societies, all-female worlds, and many other arrangements. Most of these were serious attempts to examine aspects of sex roles that formerly had been viewed, even in science fiction, as at least "natural" if not inevitable. The imaginary society might be a dystopia, a Utopia, or something in between, depending on the writer's own beliefs.

*A World Between* is Spinrad's entry in this fray. Many male science fiction writers picked up on the trend only indirectly, by putting female characters into formerly male occupations. Spinrad is one of the few to tackle the "gender wars" directly in a novel; it makes fascinating reading for this reason alone. However, in *A World Between* he has also accomplished several other things. He has created a high-tech world which is also a pleasant place to live — no mean feat when compared to the dangerous worlds of the cyberpunk novels. He has played with some plausible ideas for an alternate mixed economy within a democracy. Finally, he has imagined a society and planet held together by a net of electronic communication and shown how it could work.

## Techniques

Unlike some other Spinrad works, *A World Between* is not venturesome in style. Its story is told directly, with cuts to scenes involving important characters or events. The one added feature is the frequent use of commercials from the media campaigns. These are described fully, including technical details like "The camera moves in for a closeup" or "Male voiceover." The commercials are given in present tense.

Those of the Femocrats and the Transcendental Scientists become increasingly hysterical and are often obscene (although the latter element is not new in Pacifican television).

In contrast, most of Carlotta Madigan's TV broadcasts show her simply talking to the electorate in a sober and candid manner. There is one commercial, though, where she and Royce use humor to good effect. They throw pies at each other, let their pet bumbler scold them, and parody the extremists' appeals. By these moves they capture the audience's attention. Thus they show that the loudest and most shocking voice is not necessarily the one that makes the most sense.

One other feature of Pacifican media may strike the reader. Although it carries a great deal of explicit sex and insulting talk, there is no on-screen violence. In fact there is no violence at all in the book. This de-linking of what our public discourse usually links is provocative. At minimum, the world's name Pacifica calls up its meaning of "peaceful" as well as its island-studded ocean vistas.

Readers of soft science fiction may wish *A World Between* had given a bit more space to Pacifican culture in place of so many TV clips. Spinrad has a gift for creating interesting cultures, but he tends to show only enough to pique the reader's curiosity.



# Themes

A blurb on the 1986 paperback edition describes the book: "The war between the sexes has just come to paradise." This expresses the novel's primary theme, that there is a way for the two sexes to live together happily.

Compared to the extremes represented by the invaders (and also in much feminist science fiction of the era), it is a moderate, sensible way.

However, Pacifica, the planetary society which exemplifies it, may not be quite what any segment of the "gender wars" had in mind. It is formally egalitarian, but women slightly predominate in public life, while men remain masters in the bedroom. Pacifica also has a frontier region where the inhabitants are all male and homosexual.

Some of this may have been set up for dramatic effect, in posing the "Pacifcan way" against the radical Femocrats and the male-dominant Transcendental Scientists. But it does work within the book, building a culture with which many readers can identify.

Even more timely, perhaps, is the novel's theme of electronic democracy.

Pacifica is a "wired" world somewhat like ours may be in the future. Parliamentary votes of confidence, if they fail, are referred to a planet-wide vote.

Even in their home on an isolated island, the two main characters have netshops, which enable them to keep in touch with their responsibilities as government leaders. Moreover, Pacifica's main export to other, faraway planets is information.

Free media access for all is one of Pacifica's sacred principles. This provides any person or group with the whole planet as a potential audience.

In one way this Pacifcan principle is a metaphor for our own First Amendment rights. From another view, in an electronic — or even a print — age, it is the only way to insure "equal access" for all, regardless of wealth.

There are commercial channels too, and they carry a range of programming, some of it quite explicit and some of it "hate talk." But despite the free-wheeling electronic environment, open access allows elections to be conducted largely on the issues rather than swayed by big money interests. This theme of electronic democracy and universal access is even more timely now than when the book was written.

A third theme, more submerged, is the promises and assumptions of science. The Femocrats who come to Pacifica are a crude version of radical feminists. Instead of setting up a group of macho "good old boys" to oppose them, Spinrad brings on the Transcendental Scientists. This cult is sexist only indirectly. Few women attain high positions among them or graduate from their institutes. But that is because of women's "essential nature," not because they are barred from trying. Or so the cult's leaders believe.



Transcendentalists are logical, sober, and unemotional. With this approach they have gained mastery over physical laws and limitations far beyond that of ordinary science. Theirs is a much more difficult lure to resist.

In contrasting them with the Pacificans, the author gives at least a nod to the feminist critique of science. As their name implies, this group aims to transcend nature, not to live as part of it. Their ships, the arkologies, are artificial habitats designed for function, with little thought for beauty or comfort. Their express goal is to take humanity beyond its evolutionary limits, controlling the universe in the process.

While Pacifica's people are far from primitive, they live in harmony with the natural beauty which surrounds them. Their information nets thrive on openness and chaos.

The basic theme behind this conflict is the question: how much to sacrifice for control of our environment? Can humanity be part of nature and at the same time transcend it? Simple answers to these questions cannot be given. The author and his Pacificans recognize this. Their solution is to build an institute for similar research, but without the Transcendental Scientists, their secrecy, or their hubris.





## Key Questions

A World Between is an understandable and fun read even for those who know little about science fiction. The very young, or very conservative, might be warned off because of its explicit scenes. Discussions will probably range over several topics of current interest: worldwide information nets, political and economic structure, the "gender wars," and relationship issues.

Discussion leaders might also note examples of subtle writing effects. For example, in the first chapter, the author hooks reader interest first with stunning vistas of the Island Continent, then with the mutual seduction when Royce and Carlotta meet. He has interwoven other, drier information (such as details of the planet's economic system) with high impact passages.

1. Discussions of TV and other media often speak of "sex and violence" as if they are naturally related. The Pacificans have extremely explicit sex on their net channels, but little violence in either media or life. Is this plausible? If so, is it the result of their gender arrangements, or of something else?

2. The Femocrats came to power on Earth after male-led wars devastated the planet. Where do you think the Transcendental Scientists came from?

3. Cynda Elizabeth's conversion from strict Femocrat principles comes across almost like the saying that feminists "just need to meet the right man." Is that all there is to it?

4. When Roger Falkenstein leaves Pacifica, he predicts that its natives can never attain the heights of technology without the secrets of Transcendental Science. Even with Maria's help, do you think they will do so?

5. The novel opens with Royce sailing alone through the Island Continent.

It ends with him and Carlotta sailing the same route home. What is this imagery saying, beyond the simple scenes of traveling home?

6. Do you think a society like Pacifica's is plausible?

7. In the book's universe, information can be sent almost instantly between far-flung planets, but travel by people in spacegoing vessels is slower and more difficult. In what ways does this parallel our own times? Is it likely that leagues of Femocrat and Transcendental Science planets will hold together under such circumstances?

8. If we were to guarantee free media access to everyone as Pacifica does, would our media environment be significantly different? Our politics? Are we likely to come close to this ideal in the future, with our computer networks? Why or why not?

9. Would Carlotta Madigan, a consummate politician, have been written differently by a female author?

10. As an examination of gender issues, *A World Between* seems a bit lightweight. What are some of the questions (if any) that it leaves out?

## Literary Precedents

*A World Between* is a light tale which half conceals some deeper issues. It lacks the driving outrage of most matriarchal society novels written by female authors. Even the more moderate ones like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Ruins of Isis* (1978) or Joy Chant's *When Voiha Wakes* (1983) have a sharp edge of awareness that this book lacks.

Brad Strickland's *To Stand Beneath the Sun* (1986), is a closer parallel that also examines gender issues through a matriarchal society.

For its story of a couple whose bond is tested and made stronger by their role in public events, there are even fewer precedents. This very fact emphasizes the book's value as a work of imagination. Couples like Royce and Carlotta are so rare in our world that no one writes mainstream novels about them. The sequel novels to the *Star Wars* movies show Leia Organa and Han Solo in slightly similar roles.

The back story, in which Royce got his start in politics as the bed partner of an ambitious woman on the way up, is arguably a reverse version of the Cinderella story.



# Copyright Information

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