

Walk to the End of the World Short Guide

Walk to the End of the World by Suzy McKee Charnas

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Characters

Alldera, the protagonist of *Walk to the End of the World*, is one of the more memorable female characters in science fiction. Although intensely political, Charnas's book is very much a novel of character, and Alldera's development from downtrodden slave to increasingly self-confident woman, due, at least in part, to the pride she feels in her physical competence as a runner, is both believable and memorable. Alldera's growth parallels in an interesting fashion that of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

Social Concerns

Walk to the End of the World and its sequels Motherlines (1979) and The Furies (1994) are works of radical feminist science fiction. The first book in the series depicts the culture of the Holdfast, an isolated and failing post-holocaust community set somewhere on the east coast of what was once the United States. The all-white, intensely patriarchal society is both decadent and sadomasochistic, the men acting like something out of the fantasies of a leather fetishist. Women are seen as being soulless, quite literally subhuman, and are treated exclusively as slaves and breeding stock. Further, they have somehow been held at fault for the nuclear war, much as women were blamed for original sin in Judeo-Christian culture. The novel depicts the life of Aldera, a young woman born into slavery in the Holdfast "kit-pens," and her eventual flight from the society.

Techniques

In *Walk to the End of the World* Charnas is writing highly didactic political fiction, and her single most important literary technique is relentless exaggeration. The bleak anger of her satire approaches at times that of Jonathan Swift at his most dark. In *Motherlines*, the sequel, the all-male society of the Holdfast moves off stage and, lacking a focus for her anger, Charnas adopts a more philosophical stance toward her work. In the latter novel satire is, at least in part, replaced by travelogue and fictionalized anthropology.

Themes

Although set in another culture and in another age, *Walk to the End of the World*, like most serious science fiction, is really about today. Charnas's method is to take real male attitudes and exaggerate them to the point of absurdity.

In the hands of a less-skilled writer this could easily degenerate into bitter farce, but Charnas's inventiveness and the sheer ferocity of her vision keep the novel on track throughout. The author's point, of course, is that contemporary patriarchal society already does to women all of the horrible things which are mentioned here; it simply does them so subtly that men, especially, usually do not notice.



Key Questions

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of great ferment in the feminist community. Many women had learned the ins and outs of political activism from the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement and it was widely believed that change was not only possible, but inevitable. Feminists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer were widely read and their pronouncements widely praised or condemned. Unprecedented numbers of feminist novels were also seeing print from such diverse writers as Eric Jong, Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and a few years later, Marilyn French, and many of these novels were very angry indeed. *Walk to the End of the World* is also an angry book and it would be easy to put Charnas down as a manhater, but if the novel is to be truly understood, it must be seen within the context of its time period. Any discussion of Charnas's work must thus be firmly founded in the politics of the early 1970s.

1. To what extent is *Walk to the End of the World* actually about contemporary American society? Allowing for exaggeration, what is Charnas saying about our world?

2. Are there any similarities between the conditions depicted in *Walk to the End of the World* and the actual condition of women in the Middle East or other third world countries?

3. Consider the character of Alldera.

How does she change over the course of the first two novels in the series?

What is the significance of her name?

4. The culture of the Holdfast has a distinctly sado-masochistic feel to it.

What connection does Charnas see between this kind of sexual perversion and sexism?

5. At least two male characters play major roles in *Walk to the End of the World*. To what extent are these characters monsters? To what extent are they, like the female characters, mere victims of society?

6. *Motherlines* is virtually unique in science fiction, and in literature generally, because its large cast of characters contains no men whatsoever. Did you find this disconcerting? How does it change the feel of the book?

7. Compare the two all-female societies in *Motherlines*. What similarities do you see? What differences? To what extent do women take over traditional male roles in these societies? To what extent are those traditional male roles simply eliminated?

8. If you have any familiarity with contemporary lesbian culture, how do Charnas's two all-female cultures compare with it?



9. *Walk to the End of the World* was first published in 1974, *Motherlines* in 1979. To what extent have the books dated?

10. Compare these books to more recent feminist dystopias, particularly those of Atwood and Tepper. What differences do you see?

Literary Precedents

Charnas writes within the well-developed Utopian-dystopian tradition of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *1984* (1949). The tradition has its less well known, but just as strongly-rooted feminist side, dating as far back as the plays of the Duchess of Newcastle (c. 1650). A more immediate precedent would be Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). The 1970s saw the publication of a number of feminist utopian-dystopian novels, many of them influenced by Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), among them Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), *We Who Are About to*

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(1977), and *The Two of Them* (1978), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Important feminist dystopian novels that have appeared since *Walk to the End of the World* include Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Woman's Country* (1988).



Related Titles

Motherlines carries on Aldera's story.

Fleeing east through the desert, she discovers two new civilizations, both entirely female. The Riding Women, the result of a prewar genetic experiment, reproduce through parthenogenesis and have developed a sophisticated and intriguing nomad culture which revolves around their horses. In contrast, the Free Ferns, former slaves who have escaped from the Holdfast, live in a culture which mirrors the patriarchal society they fled.

Although Charnas's Riding Women's society is fascinating, the author carefully avoids the temptation to make it in any sense Utopian. Rather, Charnas studies both her women's cultures with an objective eye, carefully pointing out strengths and weaknesses. This makes for a thoughtful but at times somewhat slow-moving book. Motherlines is better written than is *Walk to the End of the World*, but lacks some of the earlier novel's power. The book has stirred up less controversy than did its predecessor (if only because fewer male readers were offended by it), but has been criticized for the odd, although scientifically and culturally defensible, conception methods of the Riding Women, who must mate with their horses to trigger their parthenogenetic reproductive systems into action.

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