

# Whipping Star Short Guide

## Whipping Star by Frank Herbert

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# Characters

To be fully successful, a conceptual novel's plot and characterization must be intimately linked to the main idea. In *Whipping Star*, the Caleban's problem is everybody's problem. This includes the protagonist Jorj X. McKie, a futuristic special agent working for the Bureau of Sabotage. Failure to save the Caleban will kill McKie, and the tension stems in large part from McKie having to confront the possibility of sudden death no matter what he does.

As he uncovers the enormity of the danger that confronts the Galaxy, so too is the main concept of the novel developed, with new details arising as the plot progresses. Thus McKie becomes the moving force of the plot and the themes as well.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Whipping Star is conceptual writing on a grand scale. In this novel, the principal concept is that stars are part of living beings. Much of the appeal of the novel is developing the implications of the main idea. In this sense, Herbert's *Dune* (1965) is an extraordinary achievement because it has more than one important concept worked out in convincingly thorough detail. By comparison, *Whipping Star* is a lean novel; its principal concept is developed at a rapid pace. Even so, instead of seeming slight or poorly developed, the theme is exhilarating because its details are elaborated thoroughly.

In some ways, Herbert's *Dune* is a cautionary tale about powerful leaders; *Whipping Star* also examines power through its characters. In *Dune*, Paul wields godlike powers through his ability to know and shape the future.

Ultimately, his humanity is his downfall because he subjugates his powers to his emotions. In *Whipping Star*, Herbert looks at godlike powers from another angle. The mysterious alien called a "Caleb" is not human and possesses extraordinary abilities. Its intellect and way of life are beyond the capacity of human beings to fully understand. Even so, the Caleb is trapped by its own responsibilities to those who rely on it. Its mortality, like that of human beings, makes it vulnerable. Though godlike, it nonetheless requires the common sense and cleverness of an ordinary man to help it because its powers make it too remote from ordinary people. Great power makes the lack of ability to understand lower beings; the help of a much less powerful being, Jorj X. McKie, is a necessity, making the near-god dependent on someone who in turn depends on it for survival. This favorite theme of Herbert's, power, is explored again in *The Heaven Makers* (1968; rev. 1977), in which the Chem are immortal and immensely powerful. Just as mortality is a weakness even for the star-creatures of *Whipping Star*, immortality is a weakness for the Chem. Nothing the Chem do has meaning for them. They abuse their powers by manipulating mortal creatures for their amusement; they start wars on Earth just for the diversion of watching the action. For all their power, they seem able to do little more than inflict misery on others without relieving their own interminable unhappiness. Whether wielded by the good Paul Atreides or the evil Chem, or even the austere Caleb, power is a trap for those who have it.



## Techniques

The interdependence of the major aspects of Whipping Star make it a tightly constructed novel. The premise is that stars are parts of a form of intelligent life that transcends the dimensions of time and space. The death of a star represents the death of one of these beings. Some of the beings manifest themselves to the people of the universe as Calebans, whose powers include the ability to transport people instantly from one place to another through "jumpdoors." The problem that creates the suspense of the novel is that the last Caleban is being tortured to death, and when it dies not only will its corresponding star die but everyone who has ever used a jumpdoor will die, too. Since nearly every intelligent creature in the Galaxy has used jumpdoors, the Caleban's death would mean the extinction of intelligent life.

## Key Questions

Whipping Star is primarily an adventure story and probably can be best approached in discussion from the direction of its adventure-story elements. For instance, note how well Herbert maintains suspense with the time-honored technique of having the main character's life in perpetual jeopardy. Does he do anything original with this? Does the high concept of stars being living beings enhance this traditional adventure story ploy? Note how Herbert also uses the time-honored technique of tying the main character's peril to a general threat to all sentient beings (in other stories, all life on earth might be in jeopardy). In Whipping Star the link between the main character's peril and that of the galaxy is less like a link and more like a smoothly woven seam, with one being inseparable from the other; this should stimulate a rooting interest in the reader for the survival of McKie.

Discussion group members who hope to write adventure tales would do well to study Herbert's flawless mechanics for building suspense in Whipping Star.

1. How well thought out is Herbert's idea for stars being alive?
2. Is Caleban a convincing representation of a star? What are Caleban's characteristics that set it apart from other beings?
3. Why is Caleban named Caleban? Is it a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*?
4. What does Whipping Star say about responsibility? How far does it suggest responsibility should go? What are McKie's most important responsibilities in the novel? What happens if he fails to fulfill his responsibilities? Does it matter whether he voluntarily took on the responsibilities or had them forced on him?
5. What is Caleban's system of values? Are they credible? Are they flawed in any way?
6. Why would anyone want to harm Caleban and thereby risk killing almost everyone? Are the villains credibly motivated?
7. Is power actually a trap for those who have it? Note how irresponsible some powerful people are in Whipping Star. Is a sense of responsibility a necessary element for wielding power successfully? Does that sense of responsibility make power a trap?



## Related Titles

The Dosadi Experiment (1977) is not so much a continuation of the story of Whipping Star as a different kind of narrative set in the same imaginary universe. Although the novels share the same central character, McKie, the problems he faces in each are very different. The Dosadi Experiment examines broad social issues, notably the consequences of overpopulation. The "experiment" is one in which froglike Gowachins isolate a planet with the help of a Caleban and crowd it with populations of Gowachins and human beings. In their deadly skills, the inhabitants of Dosadi resemble the Fremen of Dune as Herbert again explores the loss of freedom.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994