

# **The Witches of Karres Short Guide**

## **The Witches of Karres by James H. Schmitz**

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# Characters

In *The Witches of Karres*, the plot focuses on Captain Pausert of Nikkeldepain, a young shiphandler who takes an old exploration ship out into the wide galaxy to redeem his dwindling fortunes and win the esteem of his fiancée's family so that he can return to that stuffy commercial planet, marry, and settle down to be the most ordinary of citizens. In the course of his journey he does a good deed, and because no good deed ever goes unpunished, the captain is forced into a new path of self-discovery.

By making his protagonist a galactic ship's captain, Schmitz is able to demonstrate the complexities of navigating among the stars, running a small commercial venture, getting to know one's allies from one's opponents, and surviving local politics long enough to make a profit. The young man must also decide over the course of the novel to which community he belongs: his dull native world of Nikkeldepain with its self-absorption, or Karres, a world peopled by galactic-minded odd birds with a gift for finding dangerous tasks and staying with them.

Karres is represented in the novel by Goth, a wily child who, like Pausert, is on a journey of self-discovery that draws on her extrasensory powers to stay just one step ahead of the situation — one that grows rapidly from the problems aboard one ship, to those of a world, to that of a galaxy on the brink of being overrun by a sinister force. Together, she and Pausert take on ever-larger challenges, hoping their growing capabilities will enable them to keep pace.

## Social Concerns/Themes

The Witches of Karres combines an unconventional young man's search for his niche in life with an elaborate narrative of political and commercial intrigue on a grand scale. In this book, set in the distant future, humanity has colonized much of the galaxy, and has diversified into a variety of types, some with very special powers. It is a chance encounter with three young citizens of the planet Karres, whose metaphysical powers have earned them and their community the title of witches, that propel the young man into strange adventures.

Among its most timely themes, common to Schmitz's work, is the idea that each individual needs to be capable of taking care of himself. Female and male characters, human or otherwise, are equally represented in every profession, from shipwright to secret agent.



# Techniques

The Witches of Karres is a fantasyscience fiction novel of intrigue and magic. In order for tension to be maintained throughout the novel to a satisfying conclusion, the magic must have limitations, to avoid making life too easy and success too predictable, and to enable its characters to experience the fascinating, frustrating process of growth, thus developing the admirable qualities of bravery and competence— this last important especially for the adolescent reader.

So it makes sense that the two principal characters be young people in the process of developing, in unpredictable order, their respective talents, as well as learning to get along with each other. It is also appropriate that they travel widely, encountering many types of people and new cultures, as well as strange and new dangers. Schmitz peoples his fantasy world with many kinds of eccentric but believable characters, from the stuffy high society of Nikkeldepain, to the friendly, far-traveling and mysterious inhabitants of Karres, to the cagey business people of the "reformed" pirate-planet of Uldune, to the wide assortment of strange folk who inhabit and occasionally menace the spaceways.

Finally, by setting his adventure on a galactic scale in the far future, Schmitz has plenty of room to let his imagination run fruitfully wild. Not many writers, even the best, can successfully write an imaginative adventure on such a grand scale as a galactic one, with a civilization steeped in its own ancient history, with a multitude of competing cultures either drawn out or implied. Schmitz manages to weave together all these elements: the protagonist's growth, an interesting cast of supporting characters, a vast and complex environment as a stage for those characters to move about, and a problem of the highest importance to solve — the very survival of civilization. His style of writing is not self-consciously literary; like that of a good journalist, his writing style is direct and uncomplicated. With a gift for good, straightforward description and pithy dialogue, Schmitz knows how to invent a good action tale and how to tell it well.

## Literary Precedents

Stories of picaresque adventure have been popular since the ancient days when the *Odyssey* (c.1050-850 B.C.) of Homer was sung. Recent favorites include Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, set in India in the days of the British Raj, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), set in the antebellum South. The modern-day versions of these tall-tale epic journeys are often found in the realm of science fiction. Like the Great Trunk Road of British India, or the Mississippi River, the imagined future traffic arteries and trade routes of a yet unborn civilization offer great opportunity to portray the people who make a living servicing, regulating, or robbing the traveler. Like *Kim* or *Huck Finn*, Pausert and Goth operate on the side of right rather than the side of bureaucracy, which gains them the enmity of certain authorities but guarantees them the sympathy of the reader.



# Copyright Information

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