

World of Ptavvs Short Guide

World of Ptavvs by Larry Niven

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

World of Ptavvs Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Literary Precedents.....	6
Related Titles.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8



Characters

Kzanol is important less as an individual than as the last representative of the thrints. Through his memory, the reader receives an intimate view of the Slaver Empire as it existed millions of years ago. He believes that his telepathy renders him superior to all other beings, but this is not seen as personal evil but simply as part of the psychology of the Slavers. As with many of his aliens, Niven shows that their ethics are frequently shaped by their environment and heredity. Rather than pass judgment on purely human terms, men must pragmatically accept their alienism.

Larry Greenberg, the novel's hero, is able through his limited telepathy to accept alien points of view. He enters Kzanol's mind and is nearly taken over by the thrint but also gains his memory. He defeats Kzanol by his new knowledge of thrint culture and by a practical joke he learned from Charlie, an intelligent dolphin with whom he has been in mental contact. Larry is a typical Niven hero in that he is a born explorer, able to understand alien mentalities, is more likely to think rather than fight his way out of difficulties, and has limited telepathic powers.

Niven believes that humans may have telepathy but that such powers cannot be too great or natural selection would have made them manifest before now.

Thus Niven's heroes, like Greenberg, triumph through the intelligent application of special abilities, revealing his faith that men can solve the problems posed by a dangerous universe, a faith shared by the readers and writers of traditional hard science fiction.



Social Concerns/Themes

World of Ptavvs deals with the contact between men of several centuries hence and Kzanol, an alien thrint who had buried himself in a stasis field millions of years ago and is only now excavated. The thrints possessed telepathic powers that enabled them to control other minds and with the aid of amplification helmets they established an interstellar Slaver Empire. Kzanol plans to do the same thing on Earth, which he regards as a world of ptavvs, the thrint word for slaves. Niven's chief social concern is how man survives and flourishes in a hostile universe. By the time of this novel, Earth is exploring other worlds both inside and outside of the solar system. Kzanol is but one of the many dangers that they will find and have to handle.

Niven, like many science fiction writers and readers, believes that men will journey out into an unknown and therefore dangerous universe. The story demonstrates his faith that men can overcome such dangers and continue to expand.

Related to this is another persistent theme in Niven's fiction, the need for the freedom to expand, grow, and experiment. The principal threat to freedom in World of Ptavvs is Kzanol who can take away free will, but there is also the world government of Earth which suppresses technological discoveries for fear that a too-rapid change in technical levels will cause social unrest. Although the government agents are presented sympathetically, Niven suggests that their policy could lead to stagnation. Thus the exploration of other worlds becomes a way of escaping confining social pressures, as do the Belters, the freewheeling colonizers of the asteroid belt, who aid in the defeat of Kzanol. Niven is one of science fiction's strongest proponents for the development of space travel as a means of both personal and humanistic development.



Techniques

World of Ptavvs is a well-told adventure story with gripping chase and lastminute rescues, but interspersed with recollections of the vanished Slaver Empire taken from Kzanol's memory, which exists in both Kzanol's own mind and Larry Greenberg's. Thus the story has a double perspective, with the reader seeing events through alien and human eyes. At one point, there is even a hybrid character Kzanol-Greenberg formed when Larry's personality is taken over by the thrint. Thus the story's theme that men must understand the alien outlook is dramatized when the hero has the alien outlook thrust upon him. Such a radical shift in point of view is designed to shock the reader and to give him a sense of the alienism of the novel's universe.

At various places, the novel moves back to the time of the Slaver Empire when much of the galaxy was under the control of the thrints. These vivid glimpses into a fully realized interstellar civilization that was almost completely wiped out are a powerful reminder of how narrow is the range of human experience in time and space and of how even the most powerful and stable civilization can collapse.

Niven implies that the universe will be no easier on humanity, which in this novel is just beginning interstellar expansion, than it was to the Slavers with their seemingly invincible mental powers.

Literary Precedents

World of Ptavvs is part of a long tradition of stories dealing with the first contact between man and alien beings beginning with H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and including Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1963), Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950). In such works, the author can make his statements about the unknown. If the aliens are friendly, threatening, or simply enigmatic, so is the universe. *World of Ptavvs* is closely related to *The Puppet Masters* in that in both books the aliens are hostile and can control humans. Some critics see both novels as commentaries on the Cold War, with the aliens symbolic of servile communism and the humans the representatives of the libertarian West. Although this interpretation is valid at one level, these novels also deal with the question of what men will encounter as they advance into space. The science fiction tradition in which these works belong sees the universe as unsupportive of man's efforts to expand his horizons, but like the frontier novel, they believe that man does have the power to overcome such obstacles. This optimistic view of human effort has a great appeal to many science fiction readers.

Related Titles

World of Ptavvs is the first novel in Niven's future history, the Known Space series. It is also the first in terms of the series' internal chronology and therefore is a good introduction to the series which includes much of Niven's best work, including Ringworld (1970).

Although each individual work can stand on its own, some background information is useful, especially in the later works like Ringworld and Neutron Star (1966). Several of the stories are built around the discovery of other relics of the Slaver Empire and indeed the exploration of other worlds and contact with aliens is one of the principal plot structures of the series as a whole as Niven works on variations of the themes of World of Ptavvs.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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