

The Devniad, Book 3

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APA:NESFA #298, March 1995

Striking the Chord

Hidden within many SF reader's hearts these days is the faintly ashamed wish for less of a good thing.

"So many books, so little time" on a T-shirt used to be funny. Now -- doesn't it make you wince just a little?

Haven't you ever found yourself wishing that writers of trilogies etc. would cease being paid by the tree?

That authors wouldn't always insist on sharing every square inch of their shared worlds with you?

That Gardner would think it best to maybe take a year off?

That Mars didn't come in quite so many colors?

That fanzine articles didn't take seven paragraphs to get to the point?

Well, if you're desperate enough to try anything to cut through the clutter, I've got two words for you.

Jane Chord.

No, she's not Sally Circle's sister, or A. Square von Flatland's girlfriend. A Jane Chord is not a woman at all, but a literary construct. One that may well revolutionize your reading habits.

Let me explain. I first (and last) read about the Jane Chord in a little article somewhere years ago. Details are hazy. I remember the author was an editor, and the phenomenon had actually been identified by his wife. (Name of Jane.)

What exactly **is** the Jane Chord?

The outcome obtained by juxtaposing the first and last words of a given book or other written work to create a two-word phrase or sentence.

Jane's contribution to world literature is the demented hope that the

resulting verbal unit may contain some relevance to -- even some revelation about -- the work it bisects.

Got it? Suppose a book begins, "Yin had always wondered what transpired within the perfumed recesses of the lingerie shop." And ends 200 pages later with the sentence "For ever afterwards, of all the silken creatures of the inner chamber, none found so much favor as the lovely Yang."

Once our respiration returns to normal, we determine that the Jane Chord here, then, is "Yin...Yang." We also determine that this Chord isolates what may well be the book's central theme: sexual identity or duality. (And we determine not to leave this one lying around for our little sister.)

OK, so the whole thing seems a little much. One step below the *I Ching* or haruspication. And maybe I over-promised a tad about transforming your reading or saving you time. OK, obsessively checking the Jane Chord may just add another useless laminate of complication to your lit'ry hours.

But if you have a life, why are you reading APA:NESFA in the first place?

In my own experience of picking out the Chord from time to time when I finish a book, the result is often gibberish. Sometimes rising to the level of enigma. And occasionally revealing a numinous little nodule of found poetry.

Let's try it, shall we? Here's a smattering of putatively significant Jane Chords extracted from a few books you may have read. Think about the contents, the author, etc., and see if these bring anything extra to the party.

Smith et al., *Future Boston*: "Geology... Boston." Beantown-to-be, rocks and all.

Heinlein, *The Number of the Beast*: "He's...sure." No one ever accused RAH of uncertainty.

Clarke, *Childhood's End*: "The...Sun." A central image of power/transcendence.

Card, *Ender's Game*: "I've...time." Intimations of immortality? After all, this book didn't end Ender, did it?

Haldeman, *Worlds*: "The...stars." Destination universe.

Sturgeon, *More Than Human*: "The...company." Fair description of a melded gestalt personality.

Gerrold, *A Matter for Men*: "McCarthy...way." Right-wing, yes, but I'd say the Chtorr saga is instructional in a "Hobbesian way" myself.

Baker, *The Fermata*: "I...longer." Since the narrator can stop time and fool around in the interstices, maybe he's just talking about experiential duration. Of course, with Nicholson Baker, a sexual connotation is never far away....

Niven, *Ringworld*: "In...ship." All aboard, plenty of room, no waiting.

Bishop, *Brittle Innings*: "After...person." One big character certainly qualifies as an Ubermensch.

Asimov, final autobiography *I. Asimov*: "I...hope." This one is surely *a propos*. Almost heartbreakingly so.

OK, perhaps these are just stunts. Not messages from the author -- or the author's unconscious. Maybe they tell us nothing about a book that we can't get by reading it straight.

But I tell you this. Every book has its Jane Chord. And now, **you've** learned of its secret presence.

And once you know that the Chord exists -- that it's always there, whining its tight little high-frequency note right through the heart of the book...

It's hard not to look.

Backchat on last time's APA:NESFA (#297, February 1995)

To Mark Olson

Thanks for the warning on *Design for Great-Day*; a close escape for me.

About Hornblower in SF: assume you've read Harry Harrison's Honario Harpplayer, with his faithful Lt. Shrub?

To Tony Lewis

Re your question to Mark Hertel about responses to his extra copy distribution: here's one new contributor he snared with this fiendish trick.

Re new area codes: how about when they slipped in this new need to dial the code for many **intra**-area calls? I was fumbling with my buttons for days....

To Joe Ross

Loved the toes in the chaw. Wasted no time calling up my baccy-stained bro-in-law Jim and reading aloud.

Also really like your jambalaya of jokes, quotes, and quiz. Encore!

To Ray Bowie

You make *El Dorado* sound good enough for me to break my vow never to see it out of respect for *Rio Bravo*.

One *Rio* treat: Rick Nelson holding his own with Wayne just by keeping his line readings and moves so light and quick. New California meets Old.