

The Devniad, Book 5

Bob Devney, 25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760
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The Question of Honor

Honor Harrington is the heroine of David Weber's increasingly popular series featuring a far-future space navy heroine. Definitely books in the guilty pleasure category, quite suitable for beach blanket bibliosity this summer. Concealed, of course, in an issue of *Foreign Affairs Quarterly*, or perhaps *The New York Review of Science Fiction*.

Since sunblock running into my eyes makes me scream out loud, I've just stayed quietly indoors and finished the fourth in the series, *Field of Dishonor*. (The first three are, in order: *On Basilisk Station*, *The Honor of the Queen*, and *A Short Victorious War*.) Obviously, I liked the books enough to keep reading. But there are a few things about them that make me **want** to scream out loud.

The More Things Don't Change, the More They Remain the Same.

Let's just say that there aren't a lot of innovative speculative fiction ideas here.

The time is something like 2,000 years in the future, and the place is far, far away. But as with too much military SF, little has changed. The bad guys are still socialists -- the enemy People's Republic of Haven, or "the Peeps." A state that has (surprise!) degenerated into hereditary oligarchy, using war and the Dole to hold its sullen masses in check. The good guys are (another big shock) hereditary aristocrats -- the Star Kingdom of Manticore. This feels like the 19th century British Empire, except more militaristic. Which is equivalent to saying, "like Harlan Ellison only quarrelsome."

I forget just what in classical terms constitutes a mantichore. The head of a lion and the tail of an eagle? The head of a unicorn and the tail of Merv Gryphon? No head, no heart, no guts, just some loathsome slime that calls itself an account executive? (Sorry, thinking about my job again.)

Anyway, in some respects, the only differences between these books and *The Boy Allies and Their Dreadnought*, or *Huns on the Run* are that the Queen is black, the battleships are FTL star cruisers with weapons and tactics borrowed about equally from 1805 (broadships, lines of battle) and 1985 (lasers, missiles, electronic countermeasures), and the hero is a girl.

Snow Queen.

Not any girl, of course. Honor Harrington happens to be a coldly shining star among Her Majesty's space captains. She's the best tactician in the fleet, a glider champion, a tigress at unarmed combat, a better pistol shot than any professional duelist, modestly unaware of her own cool yet icy beauty, and possessor of an uncanny kinesthetic sense, almond eyes to die for, and a cute and furry yet formidable companion/empath/symbiote/pet treecat named Nimitz.

And popular? From planetary rulers and admirals to bodyguards and cabin stewards, almost everybody loves our Honor. Even if a few crew members or fellow officers start out unjustifiably gruff and suspicious, each and every one (except the designated villains, of course) ends up worshipping her.

It's not exactly clear why. Except that she's patient, doesn't yell at her people much, and is invariably sorry when most of them get slaughtered so she can move on to higher command in the next book. Oh, and did I mention her icy beauty? Believe me, Weber did.

Not that Honor doesn't have weaknesses. She's bad at math, for a starship captain, anyway. And she has a temper. Not like you or I would -- she doesn't become cranky with underlings or kick the (tree)cat. But she does get pretty irritable with torturers, rapists, and guys who shoot the man she loves.

Plus she's unskilled at wearing makeup; cool (did I mention icy? This concept comes up *a lot*); self-contained; and tall. These last four traits are not usually looked upon as handicaps for a space navy hero, but I get the sense the narrator somehow feels they're often liabilities for a girl.

Snow Job?

So why make her a woman at all? Why not Captain Homer Harrington?

Not for prurient reasons, certainly. Take a look at the books' cover art -- where you may be shocked, shocked to discover other books often have slyly sexual marketing going on.

These are surprisingly tame. On the cover as well as in the text inside, Honor almost never loses her cool. Let alone rips her bodice.

In fact, there's less sex here than in a Heinlein juvenile.

(Hhmmm. Although -- if Weber follows Heinlein's course, in about 20 years expect to see Honor reincarnated in the body of her treecat enjoying incestuous yet solipsistically justified lovin' with Grandma Nimitz.)

So I don't think Weber means to exploit Honor in any less-than-honorable way. But at the same time, you don't

sense any deep commitment on Weber's part to telling a woman's story, or imagining the ramifications of the choice of his character's gender in any realistic manner.

It seems to me that his Captain Honor Harrington is a woman purely for reasons of politics, marketing, and convenience.

Politics. I'd be the last to describe David Weber's persona as excessively given to political correctitude, on the evidence of these books. But they do seem to take it as given that sexual equality is good, a sign of advanced civilization. So the Manties have a military service that's fully integrated, and perhaps a society ditto. While backward folks like their allies from Grayson -- a patriarchal religious dictatorship that you wonder how Manticore can stomach until you think about the U.S. and, say, our friends the Saudis -- are being gently urged in the same direction.

Marketing. Although military SF is a steady seller, you've got to suspect that female fans aren't its best audience. My sister Liz, though a keener SF fan overall than I, doesn't exactly queue up on publication day for the latest Hammer's Slammers testosterone fest. But she's already agog about *Flag in Exile*, the fifth Harrington, slated for September release.

Convenience. Mostly, I get the feeling that Weber made Harrington a woman to take advantage of specific, built-in plot conflicts from day one. A woman in a man's galaxy, etc. But he doesn't get very deeply into any new thoughts here. He doesn't seem to extrapolate, for instance, from attempts to integrate women into the American military, or from the long experience of the Israeli army. And many questions that interest **me** are never raised.

Example: how about the eroticization of a command figure by subordinates? (Someday I'll treat this in a private monograph entitled, "When Women Are Walking Around on the Glass Ceiling, Will Men Look Up Their Skirts?")

Show Queen?

But enough deep thinking. I can't believe there's no space left for really important questions, like who should play Honor in the movie or on TV?

I'm thinking Bebe Neuwirth, Lilith on *Cheers* and *Fraser*. Icy, she's got. One drawback might be that she can act. How about Joan Chen in really high high heels? Or if we could catch Tia Carrere without makeup and have her play the role in a big refrigerator....

Backchat

**on last time's APA:NESFA
(# 301, June 1995)**

To Leslie Turek

I'm not online yet. Basically because of fear I'd instantly succumb to a life-threatening, divorce-making addiction. So a web APA would miss me for now.

Re your discussion with Mark Olson about trying to enjoy Brother Cadfael although he seems too modern to be a realistic medieval monk, perhaps what's needed is what I term the Chef Boyardee Stratagem. Named after a college roommate's mental trick. Used to his mother's delicious Sicilian cooking, he found he could nevertheless tolerate Spaghetti-Os if he regarded them as a separate food, *totally unconnected* with authentic provender such as beef, tomato sauce, or pasta.

To Tony Lewis

Your tabulation of APA:NESFA's first 25 years and 300 issues was certainly thought-provoking. Column upon column of little figures, standing for year after year of intelligence and wit and obsession and communality and determination and fun and hard work. Congratulations, all!

To Tom Endrey

You make a great case for DragonCon, but. As someone who's totally not into games, could I still have a good time?

Regarding *Crimson Tide*: a good movie, but no *Hunt for Red October* or *Das Boot*. I've heard somewhere that hot writer/director Quentin Tarantino of *Pulp Fiction* fame was brought in to play script doctor, and that the Star Trek dialog you mention was his. Would love to see him do a pure SF flick. *Neuromancer* would play too obviously to his image. How about, say, Ford's *Growing Up Weightless*? Or Sterling's *Heavy Weather*? Any other project suggestions we should fax him?

To Joe Ross

Here's a little quiz I gave people in my office last week. Only one person got it; I think, with your background, you probably will too. "What do the following have in common: Florida, Peru, Monterey, Lee, Monroe, Savoy?"

Enjoyed your report about the Democratic state convention, where people ate a lot and loudly exchanged egotistical opinions. (Why does that sound so familiar?) Have to pass it on to my brother Michael, a sometime Democratic activist in Cambridge who didn't attend this year.

Also liked your précis of the last days of the towns the reservoir swallowed.

Loved your pages of phrases past. My wife Maureen is not an SF person, but it was a big hit with her as well. So good a game deserves a name. Past Blasters? Triviata? FreezFraze?

The answer to my quiz a few paragraphs back is, "All names of towns in Western Massachusetts." Looking at a map, I found tons of names out west I'd never seen before. Turns out the Easterners in my office hadn't either.

To Ray Bowie

Hope your latest operation went well.

Speaking of 50s film schlockmeister William Castle, did you see John Goodman play a similar guy in *Matinee*? It's a Joe Dante flick from 1993. Well worth the rental fee just for the film-within-the-film. It's called *Mant*. You know, "Half Man, Half Ant, All Terror."

Key scene: when the doctor counsels Mant's wife that her hideously transformed spouse needs to "get in touch with the insect inside."

In the background, the poor ant-headed guy overhears this line. Recoils in fright. Yells, "Insecticide! Where?"

To Mark Hertel

Best of luck at your new job. If you'd only told me beforehand, and if I'd been smart enough to diversify my investment portfolio away from lottery tickets into stocks, I'll bet I could have made a killing when Alphatech upticked sharply on the strength of your hiring announcement.

Opening the Hucksters' room later than 10 a.m. sounds fine to me. Who has time to stagger sleepily into the Hucksters' between breakfast and the first panel anyway? And if it helps the Hucksters themselves see more of the convention, all the better. I've had a number of conversations wherein I tell a

dealer about some great discussion at a panel and he or she gets mournful about being chained to the table.

A big con suite sounds good too. Wasn't there one at Noreascon III, with open acknowledgment to Disclave?

OK, Toronto in 2002! Race you to the top of the CN Tower, Mark....

About the rotating APA distribution to the general roster, designed to suck in more contributors. If it's not too onerous, why not just start a second round all over again? And again, forever after. Receiving my random copy of this distribution definitely hit a spark with me. But then it took more months and separate, converging conversations with you and Ken Knabbe at Arisia before I actually put key to board. When it works, another sucker or two occasionally dives in the pool. When not, the noncontributing membership still gets a peek at how the lit'ry folk live -- just another of the myriad joys of membership. Why not?

Found your survey of NESFA's evolution impressive and level-headed. Seems to me that Peggy Thokar performed a signal service with her critical piece some months back. It got people talking, and responding, and taking stock of NESFA past, present, and future. Reading the debate as it unfolded, I learned a lot about the club I didn't know, and came away with renewed respect for all involved. Truly. That goes for you, too, sir.