



Serpent's Reach

C.J. Cherryh

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Within the Constellation of the Serpent, out of bounds to all spacefarers, humans live among the insect-like aliens--and one of them, a woman named Raen, is bent on a revenge that will tear apart the truce between human and alien. "Brisk pacing . . . and genuinely brilliant world-building".--ALA Booklist.

Serpent's Reach Details

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Author : C.J. Cherryh

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From Reader Review *Serpent's Reach* for online ebook

Casey says

Serpent's Reach is an early CJ Cherryh novel. Published in 1980, it's one of the earlier stories in the Alliance Union universe. The Morgaine Cycle and The Hanan Rebellion were published previously, but The Company Wars and Chanur come afterward.

It does read like an early novel if you are familiar with Cherryh. There isn't the level of psychological exploration in the characters that is normally present, but there are the seeds of it. Lots of maneuvering by characters though.

This might be a fair novel to start with Cherryh's catalogue, if reading her for the first time. However, it doesn't seem to be readily available in print. I had to get an inter-library loan for a falling apart hardback.

Serpent's Reach refers to the area in the Alliance-Union universe where the story takes place. The stars in this area are inhabited by the Majat. They are an insect-like hive-mind alien race, with a cross between bees and praying mantises (plural?) coming to mind for me. Bees for the social structure, praying mantis what I assumed they looked similar to.

The main character, Raen, is a young female, part of Kontrin Family. The Kontrin were originally merchants/traders who had first contact with the majat. They settled on the planet, giving azi to the majat, and the majat providing something akin to precious jewels.

No one else in the universe is allowed interaction with the majat, except the Kontrin, so they have a monopoly on the trade, and it's made them wealthy.

Furthermore, since the majat have a hive-mind that has many years of memories, it decided to give the Kontrins the secret to longevity, since they didn't like those pesky humans dying off so quickly and new ones appearing. I'm not sure if it's true immortality, but there are elder members of the family that are a few hundred years old.

After all these years, the Konrin Family is sprawling. There is a system of Houses, which then contain Septs. Each family member has a House and a Sept. It was too difficult for me to keep track of, honestly.

There is a big family dispute right in the beginning, which includes a lot of violence. Raen, part of Sul Sept, Meth-maren House, runs off during the attack and ends up as the last living survivor of her immediate family. The attackers, Ruil Sept of Meth-maren House, aligned with red and gold majats.

The majats color coding refers to their corresponding Queen. I don't think they are literally that color, but I could be wrong.

Raen vows revenge. She survives on her own, drifting to different places in *Serpent's Reach*. Her life is in constant danger, with multiple attempts on her life. I was reminded of Ari II from *Cyteen* in this regard.

Betas are new, and I am rather certain they're not in another Cherryh novel. I initially mistook them for an azi, but they are not. The betas are born from non-clone human eggs, but they are brainwashed or something along those lines to serve the Kontrin.

Essentially, Raen works with betas, azi, and majat to get her revenge.

Now that I have read a few of Cherryh's books, I appreciate the detail she puts in to creating different alien species. The majat, hisa, calibans, etc. She takes the time to make them unique and memorable. They aren't carbon copies of humans with antennas coming out of their head. They aren't all out to kill all humans either. They have their own priorities.

Raen has unlimited money in the book, due to a status she was born with. I thought it strange that she was able to keep the status, considering so many people wanted her dead, or thought she was a total outcast. Certainly made things convenient for her. If she didn't have the money and the resources, then she would have had a much harder time in her vengeance.

The ending of the book left me with a lot of questions.

(view spoiler)

General question for the Alliance-Union books. What is up with the human women sleeping with the male azi? Cause the males are all young and in good health?

Overall, the book is a quick read. Don't get bogged down by all the different Kontrin characters that come out of the woodwork. I tried to keep track of them in the beginning, but then gave up, and it didn't affect anything. Just remember it's Raen vs. everyone and that will be enough.

There apparently is some conflicting information as to when Serpent's Reach occurs in the Alliance Union timeline. From the Wikipedia article, possibly the storyline starts in 3141. To contrast, Union was formed in 2300 and Downbelow Station events take place in 2352.

Probably safe to say Serpent's Reach takes in the distant future compared to the rest of the books in the timeline, and stands safely alone. It makes sense, considering I don't remember any references to majat. I wonder if Cherryh ever wanted to go back to that time and write more books?

Will Emmons says

C. J. Cherryh is prolific and beloved, so a lot of the commentary about her books is about relating them to her other books--a hazard of writing dozens of novels in the same continuity. I haven't read any of her other books yet, so this review will be about Serpent's Reach mostly on its own terms. For me, a newcomer to Cherryh, this novel was compelling and self-contained. I liked this novel enough that when I finished it, I immediately downloaded another book by her.

People who enjoy prose for its own sake will like that the novel is polished, well-plotted and well-written. Things are revealed in a slow and satisfying way throughout. I've read elsewhere that people sometimes feel like her novels have too many moving parts. Tastes vary, but I did not find this novel's breadth distracting. I liked the social science- and entomology-inspired speculation

and fabulation for their own sake, but I also think they added verisimilitude. In the real world, even a single person's narrow life exists in the context of intricate overlapping forces. That Cherryh can write these sorts of intricacies into a coherent narrative is impressive.

The book's title refers to a certain sector of space quarantined by the broader galactic authorities around it. There dwells an ant-like race called the majat. Humans have been trading with the majat for 700 odd years. The majat are divided into four hiveminds, marked by color. Each hivemind is an immortal collective intelligence.

Cherryh makes good use of the space opera trope of political drama. The Reach is governed by a single near immortal aristocratic family with many branches. Before first contact, the majat did not have an idea there could be such a thing as a mortal intelligence. Their discomfort with the finality of death drove them to bioengineer their aristocratic trade partners toward immortality.

Our protagonist Raen is the last of her branch of the family. She seeks revenge against her distant relations who killed her immediate family, at times calling upon the assistance of the blue hivemind, bourgeois interests, other rogue aristocrats and a small army of genetically engineered slaves.

The fabulation involving Raen's relationship with the majat is what won me over to this book. As a teenage orphan, she flees to the hive and is succored back to strength. Cherryh succeeds at making the reader share some of Raen's comfort with the bugs and their ways. The majat are portrayed in very tactile and musical terms. Raen is unbothered when they taste or touch her. When they speak strangely in human language or "boom" in their own majat song, it's both believable and endearing.

Raen appropriates an azi, a member of a slave caste who is genetically engineered to die at 40 and psychologically programmed for servitude. Her azi man Jim starts as an amusement and sexual convenience, but they start to fall for each other after a fashion. There's no cheesiness to it. Jim's development toward personhood is one of the more poignant parts of the novel.

The psychological programming is one of the more interesting themes. The immortal aristocrats initially grew a servile human population called betas. They ideologically programmed them to strive for wealth and idleness, which led the betas to create the azi to do work for them. The betas and the azi alike are ideologically conditioned to accept the whims of the aristocracy. Raen, the last of her kind and an outsider, wraps her mind around this and does not like it.

Other major themes are the meaning(s) of life, death and immortality and the relative ignorance of humankind about the universe. There's also a comedy of manners aspect to the aristocrats' internal social conventions and behaviors. Without getting into spoilers, the novel's ending is well-executed. In a surprising way, it hooks back to a theme one could have mistaken for a throwaway bit of world-building. I recommend this book for people looking for a smart adventure in space, people who like political thrillers, and social science and entomology nerds.

Mel says

Incredible concept of evolved insects w/a collective consciousness, and their approach to being colonized. As collective consciousnesses, the four hives are four ENTITIES, who had different responses to the protohumans that colonized them. (I say protohumans of the Kontrin b/c IMO the closest resemblance to us

in that universe are their creation called the betas, who in turn made the azi. but that's just how I'M reading it) Quick read, and well worth the time.

DoctorM says

I read lots of sci-fi in my Lost Youth, but fell away from it once I went to university. I discovered Cherryh in grad school--- took "Serpent's Reach" home one random Friday night...and was enthralled. Here was sci-fi that was austere, cold, well-crafted, with characters that had depth and intelligence and plots that weren't (allowing for aliens and interstellar travel) just silly or trivial. Cherryh wrote about what happens to human societies interacting with the truly alien, about politics in an alien key.

"Serpent's Reach" is a key early Cherryh, and, to my mind, one of her very, very best. The aliens in the novel are probably the best insect-creatures in sci-fi, and their human trading partners/allies are ever so subtly *other*-than-human in their ways of thinking and plotting and playing at politics, wealth, and war. "Serpent's Reach" has been a favourite of mine for half my life now--- and one of the very few sci-fi novels I'd like to see filmed...and one with a captivating and darkly brilliant and remorseless heroine.

(Though...live action or anime for the film? Hard to say...)

Elar says

I love how insect hive-mind civilization interacts with humans. Author does great world building describing different social classes, gene manipulation etc.

Kris says

This novel is set in the far future of the aftermath of the Company Wars. The Serpents Reach is a small section of space that is centered on one planet initially where an alien life form is found that is ant-like in nature but possessing intelligence. Only one group of humans are allowed to interact with them and they form the Kontrin Company to interact and eventually trade with the aliens, called majat. The Kontrin become the de facto rulers of the Serpents Reach and the story is about 800 years after the initial discovery and centers around a young Kontrin called Raen. There is plenty of political intrigue and assassination as well as outright attacks. The main plot is about Raen and how she handles her immediate family being killed and plotting her revenge. This is a fast-paced story and a little unlike C.J. Cherryh's usual pattern of everything told through the main character. This time we hear of events from other characters as the plot advances which quickens the author's normal fast pace. This is an intriguing blend of alien civ, human intrigue and treachery, as well as some major consequences for people and aliens over reaching their desires. It is a stand-alone story that I think is one of the best stories C.J. Cherryh has written because of the tight story line, sympathetic characters, and wonderfully inventive world. Highly recommended.

Kate says

First book I ever read of C.J. Cherryh. Loved her ever since!

Michelle says

This is one of my comfort books. As usual, Cherryh avoids the anthropomorphic trap with her aliens.

John says

Read 1993, re-read 2017, 2018. One of the classic Cherryhs, written before she got the idea that a 300 page story needs 600+ pages to tell.

Meri says

One of my ultimate favorites, amongst all of her books.

Ted Cooper says

Cool premise, I'd guess that Ann Leckie probably read this before writing the Ancillary novels. Sadly, the story kind of falls apart in the end.

Honza Prchal says

Highly trippy. If you like films like Inception, you'll love it. If not ... it'll seem like an odd trip into the 1970s.

Jerry M says

My very first C. J. Cherryh novel. What a pleasant surprise when I happened to stumble upon this gem of a story. Not only was I treated to a rather good story of revolution and considerations of self awareness, but it also introduced me to her, quite extensive, Alliance-Union universe.

The cool thing about Cherryh's universe is that the stories both are insular and connective at the same time. Each can be read (for the most part) separately from the others, however, once you gain a more thorough understanding of her universe, small asides from the characters about distant places make more sense (especially when they have their own novels).

Cherryh's idea of the Alliance-Union universe, and how it came to be, is rather genius and is worth the read, and that story gets told quite often in her novels. Running throughout her Alliance-Union novels are the azis, artificially created humans, basically clones, built for certain tasks (think workers and drones in a beehive colony). In the hands of some other writers, this would be a convenient convention to get rid of "how does this society do this?" type question. But in Cherryh's hands, many times, more questions arise over the morality(?) and the unintended consequences of the situation.

With Cherryh, there is certainly something for everyone, and most find all of her work quite appealing. Cherryh is quite worth the effort (you and your azi will thank me).

Paula says

I picked this one up on a whim, knowing little other than the blurb on the back cover, which was all about revenge...

The setting for *Serpent's Reach* was even more interesting than I thought, since it's all about the relationship between humans who've been settled on this particular series of planets, way beyond the edge of what is otherwise explored space, and the insectoid hive-mind inhabitants of those planets. These particular humans are all but immortal, gatekeepers of the things the insectoids make, with humans of normal lifespans (the betas) and genetically-engineered servants to work for them.

Into this setting comes our protagonist, who is the only survivor of a major power play between clans. She is determined to have her revenge and does so, biding her time and then using the power and wealth given to her by her status to effectively destroy the whole system from within. It's a fascinating book, particularly in terms of the relationships between the different races and also those between those humans with vastly differing lifespans.

Perry Whitford says

The Hydri (or Serpent's) Reach are a cluster of stars virtually quarantined from the rest of the Alliance for the best part of seven hundred years. Human traders' first contact with the native Majat race, a giant ant-like hive species, had disastrous effects, before the Kontrin family established a colony based on the sharing of technologies.

The Kontrin enabled the Majat to travel in space from their home world Cerdin, whereas the Majat, as a hive-mind species with a collective consciousness, enabled the Kontrin to achieve the immortality which they had attained, simply because they could not comprehend how an individual could be allowed to "die".

The Kontrin, left to themselves by the rest of the Alliance, create their own society with themselves as masters of a population of mortal humans and clone "azi", which are bred to defer to them. The family split into factions, align themselves with either of the two friendly Majat hives, the Blue or Green (the Red and Golds are "wild" hives).

Cue the usual internecine strife of assassinations and coups, until the house of Ruil is decimated by an alliance of family enemies and Red hive warriors, forcing Raen a Sul hant Meth-maren into exile within a

Blue hive, where she forms her own alliance, plotting revenge.

When I read my first book by Cherryh, titled *Rider at the Gates*, I was equally impressed with the imagination and depth of her world-building as with the superior quality of the writing. I bought the follow up book in that series, as well as this one, which is part of another series of books which form only a small part of her considerable body of work.

Whilst *Rider at the Gates* was an unusual space western, *Serpent's Reach* is very much a conventional space opera, which means that many of the staple tropes abound, such as human and alien species interacting and competing, and characters bestowed with awkward and faintly ridiculous sounding names.

But once again Cherryh elevated her story above common science fiction fair through the vivid nature of her created ecologies and species, her excellent writing, and also, in this case, the plausibility of her plotting.
