

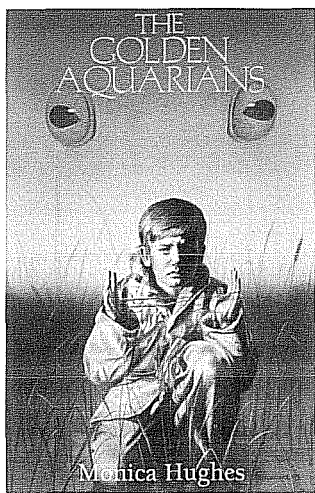
the bottom of a larger issue that drives the whole plot. Unfortunately, there is no character building of anyone but Kepler, with a reasonable sketching in of Ann towards the end. In *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* Hughes gives us a more rounded cast of characters that are at least sketched in—Aunty Janet took two years to hook a rug to soften her family’s sterile living unit.

On the whole, Hughes builds solid worlds in both these books, particularly through details noted in passing about the food, clothing, routines, safety precautions and other matters that bring the places to life. The ideas in both novels are intriguing, and the plots move along well enough that they are fun and exciting to read. The second novel, *Earthdark*, definitely shows a more developed writing ability. However, each book is only just over a hundred pages, and it’s worth reading them together.

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THE ALIEN WITHIN

The golden Aquarians. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 1994. 192 pp., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00224253-2.



Monica Hughes has created another monster in her most recent futuristic work, and, as is her wont, this creature is all the more frightening because he is human. Colonel Angus Elliott, a realistic amalgam of George Patton, Kurtz and Dr Strangelove, is the *nonpareil* of Terraformers, a “planet-maker” who transforms planets into “habitable” environments and in the process destroys whatever life forms exist thereon.

The Colonel hasn’t been home for years, home being Lethbridge, Alberta, where his teenage son, Walter, lives with the Colonel’s caring sister, Gloria. One day Walter gets the call from his father, whom he hasn’t seen for years, and is transported to the planet Aqua to join him in order that he might be made into a man. In short, the Colonel wants to remake his poetry-loving, piano-playing sissy son in the same way that he remakes planets. Happily, appearances to the contrary, Walter is made of stronger stuff than his father thinks. Despite being physically beaten by the Colonel (and by his school-mates), his inherent kindness, good sense, and concern for life wins out in the end. Along with his female companion Solveig, whose mother is the sympathetic and caring doctor on Aqua, Walter, in the face

of overwhelming opposition, saves the planet Aqua from the physical ravages his father inflicts on it, and, in the process, saves the lives of those working to transform it. In a somewhat contrived fashion, I feel, father and son are reunited at the end and spend happier days together in Lethbridge, reunited with Gloria.

Initially, Walter knows nothing about his father—not even his first name—until he reads about his exploits in the newspaper; indeed, his knowledge of what he looks like comes only from the photograph that his aunt keeps of her brother on the top of the piano. Neatly and with masterful irony, Hughes allows Walter to see his father as a kind of magnificent creator: “He used to imagine him, a bit like God, rolling up pieces of clay into worlds and spinning them out into the galaxy.” Naïvely, Walter calls his father “godlike,” compares him to “Superman” and “King Arthur,” and imagines “his big hands [moving] together, almost as if he were moulding a lump of clay.” What Walter initially fails to realize is that his father is working to mould him in the same way as the planets he claims to challenge and in the same frighteningly destructive manner. The Colonel is a “remaker” to be sure but he does it by “pulverizing” and “gouging.” Hughes lets us know that he is as much a force of nature as the various lands he re-shapes, but she also skillfully informs us that he is an unenlightened brute lacking the finer qualities of even the lowest life forms he sets about to destroy. Indeed, one of the disturbing elements in this story is that readers never get to revise their negative opinion of Walter’s father, even though Hughes—who never leaves any threads dangling—intimates that the Colonel’s drive to conquer is born of his sorrow for the loss of his wife.

The Colonel and his son are harmoniously reunited at the end of the novel to be sure, but not because the Colonel has learned the error of his ways and repented. Rather, the Colonel suffers amnesia and returns to earth having forgotten about his past. Those looking for a stock ending involving a repentant villain will perhaps be disappointed with the conclusion of *The golden Aquarians*. But those who know Hughes’ other work will understand that she never allows her readers the facile satisfaction of witnessing a 180 degree turn in her characters’ behaviour just to bring things to a “happier ever after” conclusion. At the end of this novel, one is left with the ominous feeling that below the blocking level of amnesia the same frightening person lurks. The Colonel has not changed, he has simply forgotten. Throughout the course of the novel, Walter has admired, feared, hated, and, finally, come to accept his “transformed” father. The reader, both less initially naïve than Walter and, finally, less forgiving than him, is left feeling profoundly uncomfortable as *The golden Aquarians* draws to a close, a feeling that dedicated readers of Hughes’ novels will recognize as one of the hallmarks of her craft.

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