



Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



The Merro Tree
By Katie Waitman
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Background

Katie Waitman's first novel, *The Merro Tree*, was the winner of the Compton Crook award for best first novel and named the Del Rey Discovery of the Year for 1997. We had the pleasure of discussing the book, the characters and her life working for law professors in California at a recent convention room party. She assures us that a sequel is underway.

Discussion Questions

1. The author told us that the book originally started out as a throw away short story written to pay homage to something in the science fiction field. Given that, can you identify the author's starting point and what she was paying homage to? What other parts of the story might work well as stand alone short stories?
2. Martin, the Earth critic, plays a pivotal role in the story. What does he represent? Is it necessary for him to be human?
3. Like a number of the other books we've discussed, *The Merro Tree* does a lot of time jumping. Does the dual timeline help or hinder your understanding and/or enjoyment of the book?
4. Martin is introduced first in the future timeline, where we see him as a "good guy", yet when we see him for the first time in the past, he's rather nasty. How does our initial glimpse of the "good" Martin affect our perceptions of the earlier, "nasty" Martin? How does this compare with *The Sparrow's* portrayal of the villainous Emilio Sandoz vs the earlier, charming Emilio?
5. One of the issues tackled in *The Merro Tree* is censorship, and the author seems to have some negative things to say about it. Yet she herself has stated that she removed some more intimately physical scenes between Thissizz and Mikk after a recommendation from an editor to make the book more appropriate for younger readers. How does this act of self-censorship affect your perceptions of its messages about censorship? Did she make a good decision?

6. The central theme of the book, on the surface, appears to be censorship, but is the ban on Mikk performing Songdance really an act of censorship? What is the real reason behind the ban? Behind the council? What might the author *really* be cautioning us about?

7. The Council appears to be run as a business rather than an artistically-motivated endeavor. What does this story say about the battle between money and art?

8. The trial is supposedly about Mikk's breaking of the Songdance ban. Yet, over the course of the trial, his moral quality is called into question - his relationship with Thissizz, his interactions with children. What effect does the raising of questions about Mikk's moral caliber have on the outcome of the story?

9. Mikk was asked by the dying Somalites to promise not to perform Songdance, yet he chose to break his vow and perform it anyway. Was he right to disobey the ban? Does it make him a less or more moral character? Should he have been punished?

10. What did Mikk get as a result of his breaking of the ban? The Council? The Somalites? The Galactic Society? How does this compare to the struggles of indigenous peoples to get ancient artifacts and icons out of museums?

11. One of the constant threads throughout the story is Mikk and Thissizz's deep love for one another. Despite the unusual nature of their romance, and the somewhat taboo status, they are open about it. Does the romance come through and work for you as a reader? Is there anything lacking?

12. The author presents a very large scope in her Galactic Society, with potential for tremendous world building. Did she successfully lay out the workings of this society? Did she provide too much detail? Not enough? What works and doesn't in her world building?