

Reading Guide: GOLEM SONG by Marc Estrin

About the Author

Marc Estrin lives in Burlington, Vermont. He grew up in the Bronx, in an all-Jewish part of the city. His father was a teacher of history. After a lack-luster high school academic record, he graduated *summa cum laude*, valedictorian of his class, from Queens College, with a degree in chemistry. He was granted a prestigious Rockefeller Institute Fellowship but left before finishing the PhD, disenchanted with the world of pure research, and left to take a Master's in Theatre Direction from UCLA. After working as director of several theatre companies and becoming adept at guerilla theatre, he joined the faculty at Goddard College, where he taught for ten years. In the meantime he was also working with the Bread and Puppet Theatre, which took him to Burlington, Vermont, where he became the first Director of their Peace and Justice Center. He had also become certified as a Physician's Assistant, and worked in a Holistic Health Center in Montpelier, Vermont, which he had organized.

In 1985, he left peace work to take a Master's of Divinity from UC Berkeley, and served two congregations as a Unitarian Minister. He was fired from both for being "too political." During the following six years, he worked as a Physicians Assistant at the University of Vermont, and began his writing career in earnest. Along with his work in the peace movement, the other common and vitally important thread in Marc Estrin's life has been music. He took up the cello in college, studied music history and theory, graduating with honors, and is an accomplished musician. He performs (and sings) regularly with the Vermont Philharmonic Orchestra and other musical groups. He also serves on the steering committee of the Vermont Green Party, and is active in Vermonters for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel. He is married and the father of two children from his first marriage. **Golem Song** is his third published novel. A fourth, **Tsim-Tsum**, will be published in Spring 2007, by Spuyten-Duyvil.

About the Book:

Golem Song was actually the first novel Estrin wrote, but it went through many revisions before it could be published, during which time his first two novels, **Insect Dreams** and **The Education of Arnold Hitler** were completed, and published. It grew out of a frightening telephone conversation Marc Estrin received from someone he had known back home in New York City. This person, as described by Estrin, was a poet, jazz musician, and burnt out social worker who had become delusional. He wanted Estrin – because he lived in Vermont where gun laws are more lax – to buy him a high powered rifle with which he planned to shoot black people from his apartment window. This conversation so disturbed Estrin that he wrote it all down, and continued to work with it until it became a publishable novel, much broader in cultural and historical scope, with a full cast of characters, including an appearance by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum.

Marc Estrin's anti-hero Alan Krieger is an Emergency Room Nurse at St. Vincent's Hospital. He is brilliant, well read, an artist, hysterically funny, and capable of great compassion. Inspired by the character Ubu in the French play, "Ubu Roi." He is also totally rude and obnoxious. Defiantly obese – at 5'9", he weighs 290 pounds – Alan smokes two packs of Marlboros a day, chews with his mouth open, and talks constantly. He is a stereotypical male chauvinist, and sexually compulsive. He has two girl friends, neither of whom knows about the

other: the Uptown Jewish one, Deborah, and the Downtown *shiksa*, a blond, German psychiatrist, Ursula. He lives with his mother, of whom he is contemptuous, in a filthy bedroom piled high with books, overflowing ashtrays and other detritus, and keeps a boa constrictor named Shlong (Yiddish slang for penis). Alan's overflow is in his brother's old bedroom, along with a (literal) Roach Motel modeled on Grossinger's, fashioned from small medical equipment boxes, which he keeps stocked with kitchen scraps.

Most important to the plot of the novel, Alan is an ardent Zionist. He is especially angry with his brother Walter's academic lifestyle in Vermont, but most of all with Walter's politics, which are generally pacifist, and particularly so with respect to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

As **Golem Song** progresses, Alan becomes more and more unhinged, exhibiting what we would call "racist ideation." He becomes convinced that Black popular culture is subsuming western civilization, and builds an elaborate philosophical and theological rationalization for killing Black people. Ultimately, he determines that his destiny is to become a Golem, the legendary Frankenstein like creature fashioned from mud by a Rabbi in 16th century Prague to save the Jews from an approaching pogrom. Like the Golem, he will save the modern Jews from the Blacks, and fashions a plan to shoot black people from his apartment window. During the course of events, Ursula dumps him, but tries to get him to face himself and what she diagnoses as a narcissistic personality disorder, which has progressed to psychosis. Instead, he proceeds apace with his deranged plans, which end in a bizarre sequence of events involving, of all things, a visit from The Exterminator, as in the "Orkin man."

Ultimately, the use of Black and Jewish racism in New York City in **Golem Song** becomes a metaphor for larger cultural and historical issues of concern to Marc Estrin, including a longstanding debate about Zionism which, for political reasons, has largely been shut down in the United States. The problem with the Golem is that from extreme, unreasoning power comes indiscriminant violence. Indeed, the 16th century Rabbi Loew who created the Golem finally had to kill it, for that reason. The implication in this novel is that the modern state of Israel is the Golem. In the name of protecting itself and the Jews, of transforming itself from victim to warrior, it is on a course that may, in fact, do what Hitler couldn't do – exterminate the Jews and, most of all, what Walter perceives as the essence of Judaism: "the huge effort to carve out, over the millennia, the possibility of kindness among people."

Study Questions:

1. What was your general response to **Golem Song**? What issues or situations in it are relevant to your own personal experience? How would you describe the tone of the novel?
2. Before reading this novel, did you have an opinion, or opinions, about the political issues discussed either implicitly or explicitly, in **Golem Song**? Try to identify and describe these issues and arguments. Did you find them convincing? If so, why? If not, why? Did this novel change your mind about any of these issues? In what way(s)?
3. **Golem Song** is at least partly concerned with the question of what it means to be Jewish. Is it cultural? Religious? Historic? What different points of view about this question can you identify among the characters in the novel? How do you identify yourself, and how do you determine that identity? Would you describe Estrin as "a Jewish novelist?" If so, what do you mean by that?

4. Marc Estrin's books have been described as "novels of ideas." What do think is meant by that? Do you agree with that description?
5. Discuss the character of Alan. How would you describe him to someone who hasn't read the novel? Would you describe him as someone with ideals? If so, what are they? Alan could be considered an example of the "anti-hero." Are you familiar with that term? If so, how well do you think Alan fits that description? If not, does the term suggest qualities to you that would describe Alan?
6. Discuss the other characters in the novel. How do they function with respect to the plot and themes, or ideas, of the novel? What, in particular, about Calvin, presents a problem for Alan? How are we to explain Alan's apparent fondness for Calypso and Hermes? How stereotypical, if at all, did you find the characters in **Golem Song**? Does Estrin find ways to transcend stereotypes? If you think he does, what are those ways? How empathetic towards others does Estrin appear to be? How, if at all, does he show that quality in this novel?
7. How funny did you find **Golem Song**? If you did find it humorous, how would you describe the type(s) of humor Estrin makes use of? What is the function of the humor, as the novel progresses? If you did not find the novel funny, why not? How would you describe Estrin's writing style, over all, in this novel?
8. How does Marc Estrin use music in **Golem Song**? What function does it play in character development, in the movement of the plot? Why do you think Alan puts Beethoven's 9th Symphony on to play during the climactic moments of the novel? Does it affect Alan's actions? If so, why might that be? Is there irony in Alan's musical preferences here or in other scenes?
9. What do you conclude is the theme(s) of **Golem Song**? Why? To what extent does Estrin seem to be concerned about why people hate each other?
10. Would you recommend this book to others to read? If so, why? If not, why not?

Suggested Reading:

Insect Dreams, Marc Estrin
The Education of Arnold Hitler, Marc Estrin
The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann
Dr. Faustus, Thomas Mann
Damascus Gate, Robert Stone
Ubu Roi, Alfred Jarry (A play)
The Living End, Stanley Elkin
The Gospel According to the Son, Norman Mailer
Armies of the Night, Norman Mailer
The Sins of the Innocent, Mireille Marokvia
The Distance Between Us, Masha Hamilton