

FANTASY

**Nepenthes**

John A. Schmidt

CreateSpace

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Two Stars (out of Five)

The protagonist of John A. Schmidt's fantasy novel, *Nepenthes*, is extraordinarily content for a man with no companions or memory of his past. Initially unnamed, he spends his time munching on fruits and nuts, learning to climb the colorful, mysterious towers that surround him, and sipping from the calm waters of the Spring of Tranquility. While his days are predictable and peaceful, his nights are increasingly filled with dreams of a beautiful, weeping woman to whom he feels inexorably drawn. Soon, his dream vision encourages him to leave his home and travel to her side, and he embarks on a dangerous journey that shatters his passive contentment and leads him down a path to both love and war.

The protagonist, eventually named Lord Mystery, is often contradictory in character. Gentle enough to offer frequent hugs to fellow warriors, he is also quick to kill with little or no apparent remorse when he deems it necessary. With the exception of the persistently tearful Goddess of his dreams and Jennifer, a woman he meets on the road who gives him his name, most other characters seem to exist primarily to display devotion to Lord Mystery and the Goddess. Though they soon join Lord Mystery to rise up against The Council—the guardians turned tyrants who have been holding the Goddess against her will—the unquestioning loyalty of the secondary characters lacks credibility and seems largely based on admiration of their leader's ability to kill his enemies.

Settings are described hazily, making it difficult to assess either place or time period. Passages involving the training of warriors become repetitive, and Jennifer's evolution as an integral character is not explained with sufficient detail. Her constant use of a giggled "tee hee" whenever reference is made to sexual situations proves both juvenile and tedious, detracting from the mystical metamorphosis of her character.

Schmidt's choice to write *Nepenthes* in the present tense with a first-person narration is limiting, particularly in terms of describing action and excitement. As a result, prose and dialogue are often stilted and unnatural, as in this passage where Lord Mystery observes an

attack on other travelers: “I recognize the coat. Perhaps it is my first pursuer. He has stopped. No! He has thrown both of the men to the ground. I must go to their aid.”

In spite of the novel’s flaws, Schmidt’s writing shows promise and demonstrates a creative imagination that lends itself well to the fantasy genre. *Nepenthes* is well edited and structurally sound; a change in tense as well as more attention to realistic character development would improve the plot and allow readers to appreciate the author’s unique voice.

The significance of the book’s title is not touched upon until the very end of the story, but motivated readers who choose to research the meaning may be interested to find a definition pertaining to a carnivorous plant. This association may prove intriguing enough to inspire readers to see the story in a different light.

*Jeannine Chartier Hanscom*