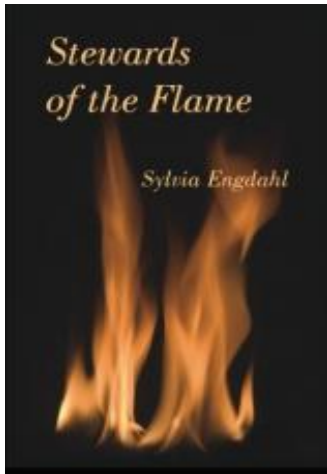


Stewards of the Flame

by Sylvia Engdahl



About the Book

“We are stewards of something in humankind that our civilization no longer fosters: the awareness that we are more than our bodies, that the human mind and spirit is a tangible force that is no less real for being nonphysical. This awareness is a flame that must not be allowed to die.”

When starship captain Jesse Sanders is seized by a dictatorial medical regime and detained on the colony planet Undine, he has no idea that he is about to be plunged into a bewildering new life that will involve ordeals and joys beyond anything he has ever imagined, as well as enduring love. Still less does he suspect that he must soon take responsibility for the lives of people he has come to care about and the preservation of their hopes for the future of humankind.

This controversial novel deals with government-imposed health care, with end-of-life issues, and with the so-called “paranormal” powers of the human mind. Despite being set in the distant future on another world, it is not intended just for science fiction fans and will appeal to a wide range of readers who question the dominant medical philosophy of today’s society or who value personal freedom of choice.

Discussion Guide

1. The “benevolent” dystopian society in which **Stewards of the Flame** takes place is, in the author’s opinion, the logical conclusion of health care trends in our own society. Do you think that given unlimited funding, an essentially similar health care policy would be likely to develop in our world? Jesse reflects, “Not to be treated [for illness] might be crime here; elsewhere, it was sin. People would not vote to permit what they’d been taught to feel guilty about.” Do you agree?

2. Would you find the medical surveillance to which residents of the planet Undine are subjected objectionable or reassuring? Has the story altered your own perception of health care issues in any way? Did it make you less likely to

accept government and/or medical establishment statements about these issues as incontestable truth?

3. Whereas most of the medical technologies portrayed in the novel are either already in existence or expected to be developed in the relatively near future, the permanent preservation of bodies in stasis is an obvious exaggeration --- an extension of today's attitudes to, as one reviewer said, *reductio ad absurdum* lengths. Is this an effective symbol of how death is now viewed by the medical establishment? Does the idea of stasis seem as horrific to you as it does to the characters? Does it evoke legendary images of the "undead" or of spirits who cannot go to their rest because of improper burial, or do you feel that as long as a heart can be kept beating life is present and should be maintained by any means available?

4. The proposed legalization of physician-assisted suicide is a current issue in many states; both advocates and opponents feel strongly about their arguments. The characters in the story are adamantly opposed to artificial prolongation of life, or pseudo-life, by medical technology, yet they are also opposed to suicide in any form. Does this seem inconsistent? The reason why they consider suicide wrong even for the terminally ill is not a common one; does Kira's explanation of it (page 298) seem valid to you?

5. The effect of the mind on physical health is a well-established principle for which research is accumulating more and more evidence. However, at present it is not possible for people (other than a few yogis and shamans) to control their own biological responses consciously in the way the characters learn to do. Do the training methods used in the story --- and the psychological barriers to gaining such control that are explained --- seem credible to you? Is it understandable that Jesse has mixed feelings about it? Would you want to receive such training if it were available?

6. Many people today believe that psi (psychic) powers are real, and parapsychologists have shown, through many well-controlled laboratory experiments, that these phenomena do indeed exist. However, most other scientists do not accept the results of this research; and the public tends to associate such investigation with ghost-hunting, fraudulent mediums, and other sensational topics. Kira, in the book, offers an explanation (page 187) for the widespread resistance to serious consideration of psi. Do you think it may be the correct one?

7. The characters in the story believe that telepathy is not an exceptional talent, but is latent in everyone and has operated at an unconscious level throughout history, exerting a major influence on human affairs. Do you think that this might be true, and that it might explain aspects of culture that are otherwise puzzling?

8. Some of the paranormal skills portrayed in the novel are ones for which there is strong scientific evidence and are exaggerated only with respect to the characters' degree of conscious control over them. But others are further removed from realism. Does the author intend to suggest that the more fantastic abilities will actually exist in the future, or should they be interpreted as symbols of the power of the individual mind? Does their inclusion add to the overall impact of the story, or does it make it less convincing?

9. Why do you think the author combined a critique of today's medical philosophy, a call for individual freedom, and ideas about psi powers in one novel, when many people who are interested in one of these themes have given little or no thought to the others? Is there a logical connection between them?

10. At the beginning of the story, Jesse Sanders is a burned-out starship captain who drinks too much when not on duty, hasn't much confidence in himself, and sees little meaning in his life. The experiences he undergoes not only enable him

to find a meaning, but transform him into a leader capable of taking responsibility for the lives of many people under conditions of increasing difficulty. Do you find this believable? Is lack of challenge a factor in the lives of many underachievers?

11. Peter is a strong and admirable leader, yet he is also emotionally vulnerable and must feel a good deal of anxiety during his recruitment and training of Jesse, considering what is at stake. The narrative merely hints at this because Peter's plans for the immediate future aren't revealed until late in the story. Imagine how portions might be told from his viewpoint if it were not necessary to maintain plot suspense.

12. Although Sylvia Engdahl is an established author who has had many books published by major publishers, she published **Stewards of the Flame** herself. She says this was because it does not fit neatly into any genre. As it is neither an action/adventure story nor 'far out' in terms of the culture and concepts portrayed, it doesn't meet the requirements of the specialized science fiction market. Engdahl has often commented that her novels tend to appeal more to people who don't read other science fiction than to avid sci-fi fans. Do you agree that **Stewards of the Flame** is unlike typical science fiction, and that it is of interest to general readers? Do you feel, as Engdahl does, that the strict labeling of fiction by genre --- which the structure of today's publishing business demands --- artificially limits the audience of some books and may prevent others from being published at all?

Author Bio

Sylvia Engdahl is an award-winning author of Young Adult science fiction that is also enjoyed by many adults. She is best known for her novel **Enchantress from the Stars**, which was a Newbery Honor book, winner of the 1990 Phoenix Award of the Children's Literary Association, and a finalist for the 2002 Book Sense Book of the Year in the Rediscovery category. All her YA novels were initially published by Atheneum between 1970 and 1981, but have been republished in both hardcover and paperback by different publishers in the 21st century. **Stewards of the Flame**, which she published independently in 2007, is her first adult novel. She is happy to answer questions from readers via e-mail or message board.

Critical Praise

'**Stewards of the Flame** is a brave book, and the numbers of those holding to the sentiments it conveys are growing. While the novel portrays extreme measures taken to prolong life to reductio ad absurdum lengths, it can't be faulted for challenging our comfort zone, when after all, that is one sure measure of worthwhile fiction.'

Stewards of the Flame

by Sylvia Engdahl

Publication Date: September 7, 2007

Paperback: 460 pages

Publisher: BookSurge Publishing

ISBN-10: 1419675060

ISBN-13: 9781419675065