



The Magic Labyrinth

Philip José Farmer

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At the end of *The Fabulous Riverboat*, Sam Clemens finally set out in the great iron riverboat *Not for Hire* to reach the headwaters of the massive river on whose shores humanity has been resurrected. After 33 years on the river, Clemens and his crew--including the giant subhuman Joe Miller--are finally near the end of their journey, and only one obstacle remains: the evil Earthly king, John Lackland. John is waiting just upriver in the *Rex Grandissimus*, the first riverboat that Sam constructed and the one that John and his crew hijacked, and he's hell-bent on sinking Sam's boat (and vice versa). Complicating the battle is the fact that both ships likely contain agents of the Ethicals, the group of advanced beings who created Riverworld for reasons unknown. One or more of the Ethicals themselves may even be on board, as are various humans that the rebel Ethical, known as the Mysterious Stranger (but known to Clemens simply as X), enlisted in his cause, which may or may not lead to humanity's salvation.

The battle is set to take place along the shores populated by members of the Church of the Second Chance, a group that believes they must attain ethical perfection in order to proceed to the next phase of existence. The Second Chancers are not violent, but their charismatic leader, La Viro, may attempt to sink one or both of the iron ships in order to prevent the battle. Among the Second Chancers is former Nazi officer Hermann Goring, who had a run-in with Sir Richard Francis Burton in the first Riverworld novel, *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. Burton and his companions--among them several people who were contacted by the Mysterious Stranger--are reluctantly serving on John's boat in order to reach the headwaters of the river. But will any of the humans working for X survive the coming battle? And if so, how can they possibly hope to penetrate the tower in the North Sea where the Ethicals are thought to reside? And what could lowly humans hope to do against a race so advanced that they can reshape entire planets and resurrect all of humanity? --*Craig E. Engler*

The Magic Labyrinth Details

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From Reader Review The Magic Labyrinth for online ebook

Mark Oppenlander says

This is the fourth (and originally final) book in Philip Jose Farmer's Riverworld series. Picking up the various threads from the first three books, Farmer weaves the stories and characters together and comes to what is meant to be a rousing conclusion. I thought it was just OK.

The book begins with parallel stories that follow King John in his riverboat, the *Rex Grandissimus*, and Samuel Clemens in his riverboat, the *Not for Hire*, as they head upriver in an attempt to get to the headwaters, meet the Ethicals and unravel the secrets of Riverworld. Naturally, there is a final confrontation between John and Clemens and much destruction ensues. The survivors of the battle (no spoilers) head upstream and eventually do make it to the Dark Tower, first encountered in the previous volume.

This book is mildly entertaining. Farmer knows how to keep the action moving. There are plenty of plots and subplots and I was gratified that he seemed intent on answering the various questions and problems he laid out in the series so far.

My two complaints are interrelated. First, Farmer once again takes an awfully long time to get to the point. The first 3/4 of the book gets us only as far as a massive battle between the two riverboats and their megalomaniacal captains. I am sure that many find this material very entertaining, as there is plenty of violence and action, but I found it tedious after a time. I cared far more about the mysteries of the Riverworld, most of which are relegated to discussion in the final 100 pages of the book.

My second complaint is that the exploration of the Tower, the encounters with the aliens and the explanations that go with these things, are far too brief. This section is the payoff after many hundreds of pages of storytelling. Do you think we could take just a little bit more time with it? Instead, Farmer seems intent on racing to the conclusion rather than letting us savor the unraveling of all of these mysteries.

The resolution of the various threads and the answers to the questions about the Riverworld posed earlier are actually moderately satisfying, for what it's worth. I just wanted a little less violent foreplay and a little more of the intellectually stimulating climax.

I also know there is a fifth book in the series, written a little later. I am curious to know what Farmer felt he left unresolved. I guess I will find out soon enough.

Paul says

[

One of the biggest problems is that Farmer has **long** and *boring* storyline

Frederick Bodine says

This was a very good book...if you like this kind of science fiction. It was number 4 in a series that ultimately

ends the series although there is another novel in it. As with all series I am sad it is over but I plan to save book 5 to a later date. The main of the book was awesome and kept me guessing and wondering what is going to happen next. Somethings made very much sense and could only happen the way I expected. Other parts of this book left me happy or sad depending on what it was. Overall this book, this series so far was an excellent reading experience although a bit dated as it was written in the late 70's. I said before that I was a new fan of the late Mr. Farmer but this book has solidified that and not the other way around...still a fan with many other novels ahead that I have yet to discover and experience!

Steven says

This is the fourth and most disappointing novel of the Riverworld series. Although the first three had some problems, they remained interesting. What drove me to keep reading this series was the mystery of why the world was built, and the purpose behind the resurrections. This fourth novel provides the final explanation for everything that is going on and who is behind it all. And that explanation is unfortunately predictable and entirely unoriginal. I will explain what I mean only in the most vague terms to avoid spoilers.

The explanation is predictable because Farmer provided too much of it before the final scene in which the whole truth is revealed. Too many facets of it were already guessed at or revealed to the main characters in earlier books. And so when the final truth is given, only minor details are new -- everything else was already anticipated by Burton and the others. At best we have some of them saying, "Ah, so that is why X happened." But these are only the most trivial details -- all of the big deductions made by the main characters end up being, on the whole, correct. And so there was no big "aha!" moment where the light bulb goes off for the reader.

But perhaps that could have been forgivable if Farmer's explanation hadn't been so trite. Perhaps if one never reads much science fiction this might have seemed original, but as someone who has read widely of the genre and seen many movies and TV shows in the genre, the driving force behind what is going on is nothing new in sci-fi. In fact, it's been done to death. I was highly disappointed in this fact, because the idea of the Riverworld itself is so original that I expected surely to be surprised and delighted by a wildly unique explanation at the end of who is behind it all and why. But we have the same old culprits here that we would have in any other unremarkable and highly predictable sci-fi novels or movies.

Finally, the other problem is that Farmer side-tracked the main plot, which is getting up the river to find the source and learn the truth, for nearly 75% of the book so he could focus on the sub-plot of the Clemens vs. King John feud. This he tracks in minute detail, to the point where I almost gave up on the novel for not caring - because I literally did not care at that point who won the fight. Even within this story, this side-track, Farmer insists on diverting us from the diversion by providing a 2-page biography of just about every minor character to appear in the novel -- about a page on what they did in the real world, and then another page on what they've been doing on the Riverworld. Then the bit character who has just been bio'ed leaps into the fight and, in almost every case, promptly dies. Gee, I'm sure glad Farmer treated me to the history of a character that won't be around in another chapter.

When combined, these negatives weigh down the narrative and bring what had been a mildly enjoyable series to a thoroughly unsatisfying conclusion. Farmer, in the introduction to book 3, claims that books 3-4 were supposed to be a single novel but grew too large to publish in one volume. Had I been his editor, I could have helped him cut the two down by telling him to just get the Clemens-John fight over with quickly, and get back to the real point of the story - the travel upriver.

There is a fifth Riverworld book, but I'll not bother to read it. This one was too poor to want to read any more. I'm afraid in addition, because the ending is so unsatisfying, I find myself unable to recommend the series as a whole. And that's a shame, because the first two books are pretty good, and the basic premise (minus the awful and cliche'ed explanation!) is a good one. It's a shame Farmer didn't do more with this.

prcardi says

Storyline: 2/5

Characters: 2/5

Writing Style: 2/5

World: 2/5

The finale - any finale - has a lot going for it. It is where you get to solve mysteries, make big reveals, bring together disparate threads, and provide the happy (or not-so-happy) ending. Farmer managed to make his Riverworld finale the worst of the four books. If you're out for climactic and adrenaline-laced fight scenes, then you will probably disagree. There was little else, however, to recommend in this volume.

I was negatively inclined before I began, admittedly. I grumbled that the book was so long. The first (and best) had been 220 pages, the second 231, and the third (and worst-to-date) a monotonous 464. I would have liked for the fourth to have returned to the shorter form, but this one was 416 pages long. That wouldn't have been so bad had the author made good use of the pages. Yet Farmer confused background information with character building and thought that a book with multiple perspectives required that the same scene be retold from the different first person views. Thus much of the book was spent going backward or over again what we'd already been through. I'd recommend to anyone who is a skimmer or who is just looking for the highlights to skip the first six sections and begin with "Goring's Past" at chapter 17. That will save you more than a hundred pages, and though I just read this, I cannot think of anything remotely interesting or worthwhile that will be lost when doing so.

My other major grievance is that for about 75% of the book, Farmer forgot this was a work of science fiction. The action and adventures could have taken place on Earth in a WWII setting. Nothing about the big mysteries or of Burton's original quest (began early in book 1) matter for 3/4 of this book. Were Farmer making some point about the habits of humankind or our base emotions, perhaps this could have been an insightful account. Farmer wasn't making big or insightful points, however, he was looking to make the finale exciting in the same way that book 2 and book 3 were(n't). Thus we get 300 pages of the same adventures we'd experienced in those two middle volumes. When the shift does come, it read as if Farmer had been startled by the remembrance that this was supposed to be science fiction. In his befuddlement he threw out bizarre explanations for questions we hadn't been considering, involved us in technical details of problems that hadn't been part of the series thus far, tread on genres and tropes that were ill-suited to the present story, and finally ended with what was one of the least climactic series endings I've ever encountered. These last few chapters could have been good, even exactly as they were written. For them to have worked, however, Farmer would have had to have been building up to and working with these problems and questions over the course of the last three books. Unfortunately, he didn't write those versions of the books.

I do wish to express my gratitude, however, to Farmer for being true to his word in the preamble of book 3. There he promised to resolve the present quest in the next volume. He also promised to write Riverworld fans a spin-off so that they could carry forth with the series. I do like and appreciate it when an author

provides a stepping-off point for readers. Probably it isn't good for sales, as I would have trudged through the fifth in order to get to the ending, but I'm a much happier reader now that I can stop here. And who knows, someday perhaps I'll forget the weariness and grumpiness with which I endured this, and I'll read that fifth after all. For now, it goes to the bottom of the reading pile.

Mike says

The conclusion to the Riverworld trilogy (except that there are number of additional short stories that were published later), this tries to wrap everything up and answer the fundamental questions about what the hell Riverworld was all about. Though the author has his reasons for dragging things out to show some more about the central characters -- Richard Francis Burton, Samuel Clemens, and Hermann Goering -- I felt like a lot of the second and third books were redundant. The mystery is solved in a somewhat rushed manner toward the end, and it is a little unsatisfying given all the build up. It sort of feels like the conclusion/explanation was contrived just in time to finish the story. Still, Farmer's characters are mostly excellently realized, and even with my qualms about some of the armchair philosophy and repetition, I was completely immersed in the Riverworld while it lasted.

Wanda says

WARNING: This review contains spoilers! Read at your own risk!

"This fourth book in the classic Riverworld series continues the adventures of Samuel Clemens and Sir Richard Francis Burton as they travel through Farmer's strange and wonderful Riverworld, a place where everyone who ever lived is simultaneously resurrected along a single river valley that stretches over an entire planet. Famous characters from history abound.

Now Burton and Clemens, who have traveled for more than thirty years on two great ships, are about to reach the end of the River. But there is a religion, The Church of the Second Chance, that has grown up along the River and its adherents, possibly inspired by aliens, are determined to destroy the riverboats. A coming battle may destroy Burton and Clemens, but even if they survive, how can they penetrate the alien tower of the Ethicals, who created this astonishing world? What can humans do against a race capable of creating a world and resurrecting the entire human race on it?"

This book takes an awfully long time to get to the point, namely who are the Ethicals and why have they created this world? There is a LOT of rather pointless fighting, in my opinion, which lends nothing to the plot and includes enough technical detail to send an insomniac into a coma.

When we finally get to hear from an Ethical, Mr. Mysterious X no less, it is underwhelming in the extreme. They are basically "advanced" human people, working under another race, who in turn were deputized by the "Ancient Ones." And they aren't so ethical that they can't disagree and squabble amongst themselves--plus they guard their computers with death rays. Still want to call them Ethicals?

One blessing is that Farmer finally committed to one measurement system, so the dimensions of everything

aren't repeated in both Imperial and Metric.

Although I'm glad to know a bit more about the Ethicals and what they were up to, I persist in thinking that so much MORE could have been done with this concept. I finally realized with this (the fourth) book that religion was one of the issues in play in this series (so I guess its good that Farmer really lambastes the reader with it--I finally caught on). Its just so swamped in details--what they are eating, what they are wearing, how they produced this or that item, etc., etc.

And I think he did make an effort to produce some characters that women could relate to in this book (although the women are still very focused on the male characters and don't talk to each other).

There's only one book left, and what with the abrupt ending of the Magic Labyrinth, I will probably, against my better judgement, read it. Anyone who can explain the title to me, I would be most obliged. I'm probably being as thick about that as I was about the religious themes.

Probably more realistically 2.5 stars.

Cross-posted at my blog, The Next 50, at:

<http://wanda-the-nextfifty.blogspot.ca...>

Hypatia says

I was a little disappointed in this book. It was not a great end to the story, among other things. I finished the last page and turned the page expecting more. I also found this book to contain more casual sexism and racism than I had noticed in previous books, and it bothered me. None of the female characters are truly significant, nor do they play much of a role beyond being mates for the male character (except at the very very end). I also thought they competition between John Lackland and Samuel Clemens was unnecessary. The whole series could have been at least a book shorter, and it didn't feel necessary. There was lots of tension already with the mystery of the situation and wondering what was going on with the Ethicals and X. Also, as my husband said when I was telling him about this book, you have all the famous people who have ever lived to choose from, and this is the story you choose to tell? There were some interesting metaphysical and philosophical discussions near the end, but it still wasn't great.

Ron says

If you're thinking that anybody can write a book, then this series is the series for you. If you're thinking that anybody can write a great book, then this series disproves that theory.

The first book was very good. The next two were a waste of time since they didn't progress the story. This one was overly long and didn't reach what I would call a satisfying conclusion. I won't go into any details other than to say that I found myself skimming page after page. Did I really need an entire chapter on a dogfight between 4 planes that ended with all 4 crashing?

Manny says

I'm virtually certain I got as far as this volume before I abandoned the series, but I can't remember a thing about it. All I can recall is that we were given the explanation for Riverworld, and I just thought "Huh"?

I guess I wasn't in a receptive frame of mind, given that some other people appear to like this book. Sorry.

KayMac says

Riverworld series (books 1-5) Review

An "IMO" review, if you're looking for a description of the Riverworld or plot summary Wikipedia does the trick.

I enjoyed Riverworld (1-4 at least), though it's not the kind of series that left me scrambling for the next book. The premise is unique and very interesting, the author does a lot with it. However, as the series progresses the pacing and narrative quality declines with an almost geometric exactness. If the first book is "five stars" the last book is "one star".

OK, so the series starts out strong and declines over time. As a reader I have zero patience for filler or fluff. That is, expository digressions that have little or nothing to do with advancing the story. If these narrative departures serve to fill out a character that's one thing, but if I find myself 20 pages into a meandering trip down some nobody's memory lane I start to get frustrated. That's the primary weakness of the later books in my opinion, and what made the last book "Gods of Riverworld" all but unreadable.

I can overlook impossible technological leaps (of which there are many), nonsensical economics, or improbable motivations because, hey, it's science fantasy! But I cannot stand filler! The whole story comes to a standstill for dozens of pages at a time (40+ pages in one case I bothered to count in "Gods") because a trivial character who does nothing important gets demented-old-lady-on-the-bus levels of exposition. Filler! Fluff! Aimless boring irrelevant drivel! That's why the last book gets only 1 star, it's a poor conclusion to a series that started out so strong.

Nearly all the characters with dialog are genuine historical figures. Some of these characters behave true to their historical selves (Burton, Rotten John), some undergo intriguing changes (Herman Goering becomes a pacifist after years of spiritual/moral anguish), and others seem to have a cartoonish quality or just plain retarded (such as Sam Clemens aka Mark Twain).

I'm not familiar with all the historical characters, but I do know a thing or two about Clemens and Burton. Burton was a sort of real-life Indiana Jones, only much much cooler. He's one of those larger than life people for whom the saying "you can't make this stuff up" seems to have been invented. His character is the backbone of the five-book series, making most of the important discoveries, outwitting or fighting the antagonists etc., which is fitting.

But then we also get Mark Twain/Sam Clemens... Clemens is perhaps the second most important protagonist, and one of the book series' greatest weaknesses. Clemens is portrayed as a dithering, avaricious, childish man who seems to run his own advanced eponymous nation (Twain-land in Esperanto) on the Riverworld just because the author wanted it to be so. In fact, he is far less interesting or likeable than Rotten John with whom he shares power for a time.

Clemens makes all the wrong moves, alienates all the wrong people, snatches defeat from the jaws of victory so many times I nearly gave up the series because of him. While the author's prose are seldom elegant, Clemens' lines and actions make him appear to have brain damage, which is frustrating since the actual historical Clemens was justifiably famous in his own lifetime for wit and human insight. In the books, he is thoroughly unlikable and not in a rascally Southern way either. Eventually he dies for good, to the reader's indescribable relief...

Riverworld is a passable five book series that could have been made great if heavily abridged into a two or three book series. Don't bother with the last book "Gods of Riverworld" at all, just don't...

Florin Constantinescu says

Keeping up the good level from book #3, "The Magic Labyrinth" brings together most open threads from previous books, most characters (even a forgotten Hermann Göring) and delivers what-looks-like a satisfying explanation when approaching the end.

Strangely enough, the very end of the novel remains open somehow. It's easy for us to believe it now, almost 40-some years after, fully knowing that a fifth book exists. I wonder how it must've felt in 1980, when 50 pages before the end you thought this is it, then to be turned around and left a little perplexed by the ambiguous ending.

Otherwise the plot of the book progresses well enough and the style he maintained since the second book remained just as solid.

Marcin Dominiak says

Po przeczytaniu ponad 3000 stron sagi, który? rozpocz??em w sposób zupe?nie losowy, musz? przyzna? ?e jestem bardzo zaskoczony jak szybko uda?o mi si? przez nie przej??.

Philip Jose Farmer stworzy? niezwykle ciekawe uniwersum, w którym wszyscy ludzie, którzy kiedykolwiek ?yli, zostali jednoco?nie wskrzeszeni na planecie, przez któr? ci?gnie si? kilkumilionowej d?ugo?ci rzeka, a ?aden z jej mieszka?ów zupe?nie nie ma poj?cia jak to si? sta?o i jakie istoty sprawi?y, ?e dostali "kolejn? szans?". Wskrzeszeni ludzie nie zostali jednak wcze?niej ocenieni pod k?tem ich ziemskich dokona?, dlatego tu? obok siebie wskrzeszani s? ?redniowieczni królowie, neandertalczycy, czarnoskórzy bluesmani, skandynawscy awanturnicy, nazistowscy oficerowie, czy mityczni bohaterowie sumeryjskich utworów literackich. Doprowadza to do niezwykle ciekawych procesów tworzenia si? pa?stwowo?ci, religii, czy rozwa?a? na temat etyki i filozofii, a tak?e pochodzenia duszy. Warto wspomnie?, ?e z biegiem lat wi?kszo?? mieszka?ów planety zaczyna porozumiewa? si? ze sob? za pomoc? j?zyka esperanto opracowanego przez polsko-?ydowskiego uczonego - Ludwika Zamenhofa.

Przez wi?kszo?? ksi??ki uwa?a?em, ?e jest ca?kiem dobrze napisana i oparta na bardzo ciekawym uniwersum, ale ko?cowy dialog wyja?nij?cy natur? planety i genez? zjawisk, które si? wydarzy?y, przekona?y mnie, ?e Farmer stworzy? nie tylko ciekawe uniwersum, ale tak?e ca?? skomplikowan?

koncepcj? filozoficzn? na temat "u?wiadomo?ciowiania" si? wszech?wiata i tego czym tak naprawd? jest dusza i sk?d si? wzi??a, a tak?e tego czy jeste?my pierwsz? i jedyn? ?wiadom? istnienia ras? we wszech?wiecie, czy te? prawa fizyczne okre?lane przez nas jako "Bóg" zosta?y w jaki? spos?b wydarze wszech?wiatowi przez kogo? zupe?nie innego.

Bardzo polecam zarówno jako lekk? lektur? (chocia? uprzedzam, ?e stron dotycz?cych codziennego ?ycia w dolinie rzeki jest wystarczaj?co du?o do kilku tygodni lub miesi?cy czytania), ale równie? jako intryguj?c? koncepcj? dotycz?c? pochodzenia duszy i warto?ci etycznych.

Tex-49 says

Il tono della narrazione si solLeva un po' rispetto ai due libri precedenti, il tema avventuroso diventa pi? avvincente.

Il mistero della Torre alla sorgente del fiume e dei creatori del mondo fiume si svela quasi del tutto, ma la spiegazione dell'intrigo dell'Etico traditore (che ha portato Burton a risalire il fiume) ? alquanto ingarbugliata e convince poco.

Non ne parliamo poi delle spiegazioni filosofico-religiose al problema dell'anima in cui ci si perde per tentare di spiegare il mistero delle resurrezioni!

Rodzilla says

OMG we finally get to the end, the goal we've been waiting for!!!1!1!0 Why isn't it more interesting? I think because there's not really a great story here. The end, the Tower, the command center, whatever it is expected to be, is mostly McGuffin and little substance. So, like the rest of the story after the initial Great Idea book, the ride is pretty good: neither disappointing nor exciting. But I can't help but wish there was more to it. Nonetheless, I'll read through book 5 (just started), because, well, I got this far, didn't I?
