



The Unreasoning Mask

Philip José Farmer

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It is capable of alaraf drive: instantaneous travel between two points of space. Three of these special ships were built to explore and make contact with the many sentient races inhabiting the universe. Suddenly, one of the ships mysteriously disappears. And then it is discovered that an unidentifiable creature is marauding through the universe, totally annihilating intelligent life on planet after planet. Ramstan, a thoughtful and moral man, becomes a fascinated yet reluctant pawn in the hands of the strange forces which arise to fight the deadly destroyer. Ultimately, he is the one man who, in a fearful race against time, can stop the destruction. But what price must he pay for becoming the savior of intelligent-kind? The Unreasoning Mask is Farmer at his best: fast-paced, complex, slightly mystical, high-action adventure.

The Unreasoning Mask Details

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From Reader Review *The Unreasoning Mask* for online ebook

Travis says

A really trippy bit of space opera that reads like Star Trek on LSD.

Lots of brilliant ideas, and uses of some different cultures than you usually see in Sci-fi and a plot that is unpredictable to the point of you just stop trying to outguess and go along for the ride.

Wild, cosmic and entertaining.

Eli Poteet says

Disclaimer: This is the first P.J. Farmer novel I have ever read. A review on the damn back cover claimed this was a good place to start reading this author; I heavily disagree with this. I found this sci-fiction to be highly confusing and lacking in description. I will acknowledge there to be several concepts I had not particularly pondered upon such as shape shifting space craft and the unique intersection of space exploration with Muslim religion. Also, I did appreciate the use of archaic scientific terminology and attempted future slang lingo; the diction of this author is obscure and disorienting. I will attempt various other forms of this authors work, maybe I just tried to jump into the middle of a plot or don't have a feel on the pulse of this authors brain train.

Juushika says

While exploring in a galaxy-jumping spaceship, Captain Ramstan stumbles upon a planet-wide catastrophe and is dragged into the middle of a metaphysical, multi-sided, ambiguous battle to save the universe. At its best, *The Unreasoning Mask* is an ingenious and epic reconceptualization of the universe--but too often, small and relatively mundane aspects intrude on this grand concept. Those aspects are well-intended and not entirely out of place: Ramstan's point of view narration isn't always convincing, but his characterization is strong--and while he's often unlikeable, his moral journey is always compelling. If it weren't so dramatically outstaged, his world, too, could provide a compelling story; as it is, the human figures, alien planets, and other traditional sci-fi elements build a local stage for the universal apocalypse. The problem is that these aspects run too long, and worldbuilding, politicking, and a few anonymous characters and throwaway relationships begin to crowd out the best of the book--and so that best is left underexplored. Worse still, when the book does finally get down to business its plot grows circuitous. This is supposed to avoid repediton and sustain tension, but the effect is cheap--belongs in an adventure novel where the emphasis is on action, not a book as meaningful and thoughtful as this one aims be.

These issues do weaken the book, but they don't entirely obfuscate its strengths. *The Unreasoning Mask* is always readable, even when it strays away from its true point; the moral ambiguity of the protagonist and the other powers at play do much to sustain its intrigue and forward momentum. And even if it comes late and gets crowded out, Farmer's concept of the universe is fascinating. Describing it would spoil the book; suffice it to say that it's an idea I haven't seen before, and while it wobbles a bit in its attempt to achieve metaphysical meaning (sometimes because there are too many larger-than-life concepts competing for limited space, and always because they're insufficiently explored), it remains satisfyingly large: this is grand

concept which, at its best, manages to be both convincing and inconceivable. I appreciate the opportunity to encounter it, and enjoyed and recommend *The Unreasoning Mask* largely on that basis. But while I admire the book that this has the potential to be, and enjoy many parts of what it is, the fact that Farmer fails to push his novel to its limits is disappointing. Aiming for those limits would have been a risk and challenge--but reaching them would have been incredible. Instead, *The Unreasoning Mask* is only intriguing, irritating, and occasionally ingenious--which is okay, but not much more.

James says

While reading *The Unreasoning Mask* by Philip Jose Farmer I was reminded of a science fiction novel from the preceding century, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In Verne's novel the powerful character of Captain Nemo and his mighty submarine, *The Nautilus*, develop a relationship that may have been inspiration for Captain Ramstan and his living space ship, *al-Buraq*. I have no evidence of this connection, but Farmer's vision in creating Ramstan is on a level worthy of the comparison. It is this vision that makes *The Unreasoning Mask* stand above most space operas; for in addition to the Captain and his ship there is a plot that literally encompasses the nature of our universe and others as well. In the future the fate of the universe rests upon this man's shoulder -- Ramstan. a thoughtful and moral man, becomes a fascinated yet reluctant pawn in the hands of the strange forces which rise to fight the deadly destroyer. Ultimately Ramstan is the one man who, in a fearful race against time, can stop the destruction. But what price must he pay for becoming the savior of intelligent-kind?

In this exceptional race to save the Universe the protagonist is one Hud Ramstan, Muslim captain of an extraordinary space ship known as *al-Buraq*. The ship is a living entity capable of changing shape and seemingly embodying affection for its master as evidenced by walls that quiver with excitement. The connection between the Captain and his ship, with its special abilities which include an instantaneous drive called *alaraf*, is a key aspect of one of the most exciting action sequences in the plot of the novel. However, the main action of the book is on another scale--one that is metaphysical in nature with Ramstan dealing with god through an intermediary called the *glyfa* which is a sentient egg-shaped object that is older than the universe. Ramstan's dealings with the *glyfa*, are aided by three aliens called the *Vwoordha* that are almost stranger than the *glyfa*. The imaginative nature of this metaphysical plot is beyond my descriptive capabilities and I would not spoil the story even if I could, but the plot was able to keep this reader on edge with wonder at what mysterious complications would ensue next. The story was leavened with supporting characters whose relationship with Ramstan provided depth for both his character and the nature of the world in which he was living. One of these, a Dr. Toyce, commented, "You can't turn around in this world without bumping into a question." (p 222) This could be taken in both a serious and a light-hearted way, at least until the ultimate enemy, known simply as the *Bolg*, appeared.

Few novels this short (less than two-hundred-fifty pages) have as many intriguing ideas, complex discussions about the fate of universes, and fascinating alien entities. There is even a mystic named Benagur who is Ramstan's *bete noir* and who succeeds in making his trials even more difficult. The novel combines aspects of an archetypal heroic journey with the action of a metaphysical space opera. In doing so *The Unreasoning Mask* becomes a masterpiece that provides both the serious and amateur interested in Science Fiction with an above average reading experience.

Amy Peavy says

This book was rather deep. It posits that we are tiny pieces inside of a being. Not only are we tiny pieces, but there are also innumerable alternate universes within this being.

I very much enjoyed the living ships. It reminded me of the living ships in a story series by Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette. Specifically Boojum, Mongoose, and The Wreck of the Charles Dexter Ward. These are all available at The Drabblecast among other places.

I also enjoyed the juxtaposition of science and religion. This is something that I think many people struggle with currently. The supernatural world in this book was never fully explained, but I feel like that is just how supernatural things are.

Finally, am I happy I read this book? I think so. The descriptions were very interesting to picture. I found the disorientation I experienced when I opened to the first page very interesting. Farmer just throws you into a new universe/world and it is sink or swim from there.

Nicolas says

Ce roman est dans ma bibliothèque depuis des temps immémoriaux, et pourtant je ne me souviens pas l'avoir jamais lu(1).

Donc, de retour de vacances, et à défaut de nouveautés marquantes(2) j'ai replongé dans mes vieilleries, et je suis tombé dessus. Bien m'en a pris.

Ce roman raconte donc l'histoire d'un homme tenté par une quasi- divinité, qui va se retrouver obligé de sauver mieux que le monde, encore mieux que l'univers : le multivers !

L'idée est tentante, et sa réalisation encore plus étrangement amusante (attention spoiler). Qnaf pr ebzna, yr zhygviref rg Qvrh ar fbag dh'har frhyr rg zêzr pubfr. Rg, uéynf, yn ivr vagryyvtragr, rg yr iblntr fcngvny, fbag pbzr ha pnapre dhv yr zranpr rg pbager yrdhry vy qvfcbfr q'har nezr nofbyhzrag greevsvnagr. Dans ce roman, le multivers et Dieu ne sont qu'une seule et même chose. Et, hélas, la vie intelligente, et le voyage spatial, sont comme un cancer qui le menace et contre lequel il dispose d'une arme absolument terrifiante. Le héros se trouve alors face à un dilemme cornélien : la vie doit-elle continuer à exister pour sauver Dieu ? Voilà une question que l'auteur aurait pu, et même dû, creuser. Hélas, il préfère rester dans une voie spectaculaire et répondre à la menace sur la vie par la violence là où, sans doute, une réponse métaphysique aurait été plus appropriée.

C'est sans doute, avec le manque de personnalité du héros(3), ce qui m'a le plus déçu dans ce roman. D'un autre côté, je n'en attendais pas grand chose ... Et ma déception a par conséquent été assez faible, face à ce roman qui se laisse lire, fait un peu réfléchir, mais n'est absolument pas indispensable. Pour tout dire, le questionnement sur le divin m'a semblé encore plus léger que dans l'Incal.

(1) En fait, ça n'est pas exact. J'ai dû le lire il y a une petite vingtaine d'années, et je n'y avais absolument rien compris, mais alors rien, ce qui s'appelle un vide sidéral

(2) Ce qui est encore le cas aujourd'hui

(3) Doit-on expliquer ce manque de personnalité par l'interrogation centrale du roman sur le rôle des hommes face aux Dieux, en en faisant une marionnette ? Je ne crois pas. Du coup, j'ai eu beaucoup de mal à le cerner. mais c'est peut-être plus lié à l'auteur qu'autre chose.

Ubik 2.0 says

aggiornamento vecchio libro letto chissà quando

Christopher Carey says

I've read all of Philip José Farmer's books, and of his stand alone sf novels, this is one of his best. Apparently I'm not alone in thinking this. *Interzone* editor David Pringle included *The Unreasoning Mask* in his book, *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, and sf author Ian Watson called it "a masterpiece, Farmer's finest."

This novel might be viewed as a thinking person's version of Star Trek's "The Doomsday Machine" or "The Immunity Syndrome"; but it's really much more than that, with its metaphysical themes and implications, as well as its well-conceived world building of alien cultures and psychological examination of human motivations.

Captain Ramstan commands a rare alaraf drive starship which allows it to jump instantaneously to distant regions of space. Just as Ramstan sets off an interstellar incident by stealing the god-idol of an alien world (called the glyfa), he is alerted that one of the alaraf ships has disappeared, a victim of a world-killer called a "bolg." What is the mysterious connection between the glyfa and the bolg, and why does Ramstan begin to have waking visions of a mystical being from his long extinguished Muslim faith? Ramstan, chased by the aliens who worship the stolen god, races across the pluriverse to find the answers.

The Unreasoning Mask is a gripping, captivatingly disturbing book. Even at his most fantastic, Farmer manages to entrance with a compelling degree of realism, in particular in regard to his portrayal of human nature, which in his fiction seems to carry at least as much bad as it does good. Don't miss this darkly riveting sf adventure.

Kirk Macleod says

Philip Jose Farmer's 1981 Science Fiction novel *The Unreasoning Mask* is actually my first dip into his work - last year I read my way through his series *The Dungeon*, but as he was more a guiding force on that series, and didn't actually author any of the six titles included, it's not quite the same.

The novel is definitely space opera, as much of the plot follows a spaceship captain who has stolen a holy relic from one planet and spends the majority of the story on the run from the inhabitants of that planet, as well as his own government, and finally a world killing being that appeared as soon as he removed the item in the first place.

Captain Hud Ramstan, a non-practicing Muslim, is in charge of a shape-changing spaceship with a rudimentary sense of intelligence and a fierce loyalty to him. Initially painted as a straight-forward, morally

black-and-white character, Ramstan's world is through into turmoil when he steals an idol from a world his ship is visiting for no conscious reason, even the captain is unable to understand why he has taken the item, called the glyfa, until it begins talking to him and lets him know that together they must work to save the universe.

The book does get pretty metaphysical, exploring questions of godhood and different levels of reality, but I found it to be a pretty solid science fiction novel, and one that definitely has me interested in reading more of the author's work.

Kevin says

Completely insane.

Fishface says

This is one you may have to read a few times to really get, because there is so much going on. The story manages to reframe the role of humans in the cosmos in a way I've never seen anywhere else. And may I add, yikes!

Angian says

Un romanzo di fantascienza, uno dei più noti di Farmer. E a ragione: una space-opera che fa viaggiare la mente, apre nuovi orizzonti. Un'esperienza quasi psichedelica. Ok, esagero, ma non troppo.

Di cosa parla il libro? Il protagonista è il capitano di una nave spaziale, che viene investito di una missione più grande di lui. Divinità, o "semplici" esseri immortali, gli parlano. Un grande pericolo minaccia il Multiverso.

Non tutto viene spiegato, non siamo dentro CSI: permane il mistero, alcuni passaggi sono dei deus ex machina, ma va bene così.

Di Farmer avevo letto altre cose, più dei divertissements fantasy. Qui siamo dalle parti di una serietà quasi metafisica. Libro importante, per chi ama la fantascienza.

Richard says

There's an interesting central premise in here (one no doubt that many a thoughtful person has come up with under the influence of caffeine, alcohol, or starlight) but you've got to wade through a lot of unnecessary incident and circular detective work to get to it. The ending of Unreasoning Mask is highly unsatisfying and seems to be setting up a sequel - sadly, I'm not interested enough to check it out, if it exists. It also has the annoying sci-fi trope of "mysterious" characters holding back information and dishing it out gradually, so

that you, the reader, will have read a book.

It's really not worth the payoff. If you're not going to read it, the main idea is below. But if you are, and want to punish yourself, then skip the rest of this.

Spoilers Below ...

Basically, our universe is a cell, one of trillions of cells, a multiverse, that makes up a being, a being that has a rudimentary awareness, like an infant, but with the potential to mature and become fully sentient. Mankind has discovered a form of space travel that allows passage between the universes but also creates a kind of space cancer that eventually will break down the "cellular walls" that separate/connect the universes, thereby killing the multiverse being before it can become fully aware. A small group of aliens knows about this and seem to have survived the death of the multiverse a couple of times and are intent on helping it mature to adulthood this time (and also, making sure that they are the ones that get to communicate with it.) They've got a safe way of traveling that for some reason, they don't think to share with anyone. The body of the being has a defense against the cancer that's slowly breaking it down - it's a moon sized anti-body called a Bolg that travels between the universes through a kind of safe osmosis. It goes around destroying life on any planet where humans/aliens have jumped to with their destructive form of space travel.

So, our hero just jumps around in his ship, running away from this thing, causing space cancer, while frequently appealing to the group of aliens to figure out what's going on. You'd think they'd take him aside and say "Hey, quit causing space cancer with your ship - we're trying to talk with the multiverse." Why they don't tell him right away, and why I kept reading, remains the true mystery...

Clyde says

One thing is for sure -- you could never accuse Philip José Farmer of thinking small. In *The Unreasoning Mask* Farmer brings an intelligent shape changing starship that is emotionally attached to its captain. Add to that an artifact called the *Glyfa*, which is itself sentient and apparently older than the universe. Then toss in a danger to all intelligent life in the multiverse that Captain Ramstan must stop and you have the seeds to a damn good story.

Good story -- fast paced and complex.

Eric Nolan says

Extremely interesting ideas and good characters (ok, character really, there is really only one properly fleshed out). I liked this, but for reasons I can't really put my finger on I didn't "really like it".

Sean Meriwether says

What makes Philip Jose Farmer's *Unreasoning Mask* interesting is his visualization of the universe and god as the same thing. The universe is god, an unknowing, uncomprehending super-entity which is comprised of

different universes—it's cells—and we the inhabitants are part of god, yet parasitic. The god-universe is unaware of itself, like a baby, and it is up to us to parent it, teach it to talk, assist it to grow and mature. However, we are only able to know the god-universe, it is also unaware of us as sentient beings. The story runs at a frantic pace as Hûd jumps from world to world escaping not only the Tolt who are trying to regain their egg-shaped god (the glyfa), but also the bolg, a massive planet-killing "antidote" against the humanoid "parasites." To the novel's detriment, almost all of these fascinating points are delivered via monologue at points where even the other characters have been restrained and forced to listen; I would have preferred that it was delivered via dialogue. Great conceptual novel, a little unevenly delivered.

Jaimey says

If you like speculative fiction ideas, explanations and descriptive worlds and don't mind a dated writing style, this would be a good little read. The Unreasoning Mask takes you for a ride on a new experimental living ship that has feelings like a dog for its master, a soft spot for its captain, and a type of hyper/warp drive that Farmer calls Alaraf drive. The ship is very cool and seems to be able warp its living tissue into many different forms. Its crew's purpose is one of scientific exploration. Farmer lets loose exploring some epic and grandiose ideas of a multiverse which also accounts for the use of his alaraf drive.

The ship's captain is Hud Ramstan, a tough ambitious captain with a clean image and of a middle eastern background, he is a cold and detached, uncompromising character. Unwittingly, and perhaps due to forces that he cannot control, Hud breaks his own high morals and is thrown into a situation where he must sacrifice his career and risk his entire crew for his own survival. Paranoia and secrecy seeps in as Hud does his best to hide his intentions from the crew until he can figure out what the forces are that are guiding him.

The book also runs through a few quotes from other writers on perception and the mind. Most well known is the Moby Dick quote on Ahab's obsession for the white whale. It is here that we find the origin of Farmer's vague title, The Unreasoning Mask, which the character Ahab uses to describe his irrational behaviour and satiating need to find the white whale, and how man's deed is in his actions, while the outward appearance is nothing but a pasteboard mask. I also felt a possible connection with the ideas of the metaphysical - that affecting the outside world and making your mark required breaking through certain walls to obtain one's goals.

From the Moby Dick quote, I was able to draw similarities between the two stories - both involving ships tasked for one purpose, but hijacked by its own captain for his own purposes to chase something that possibly does not exist and is based on irrational ideas and disembodied voices. I think from this book I had an idea of Ahab's perspective, such as paranoia of mutiny, hidden agendas, power struggles with ship mates etc. Conversely, while reading this book, I had an idea of what a passenger on Hud's ship would be thinking during the voyage by thinking of Ishmael and Queequeg in their own little world of tasks and trials. Perhaps if I understood Farmer's other quotes, I would gain further insight into his tale, but I will leave that to those more widely read.

Farmer's descriptions of strange worlds is always enjoyable. However, I didn't like it when Farmer would jam massive descriptions into hasty dialogue - it both downplays the beautiful world Farmer created, and it just doesn't seem realistic for a captain to be spouting how the multiverse was created while being attacked. Apart from that, not a bad little read.

Joseph Carrabis says

[There are few things worse than an author who runs out of steam before they finish a book so opts to have the universe implode, everything goes away (hide spoiler)]

Greg Frederick says

If I were to rate this book solely on creativity, I'd give it five stars. However, the meandering plot-line and the fact that the story feels like it ends prematurely left me wanting. Also, the character development is rather shallow for my tastes. I don't regret having read this book, but I won't be reading it again.

melvinhiddenelder says

Farmer is best known for the 'Riverworld' series, this book does not belong in that series, but it is a major work of sci-fi. It centers around Hud Ramstan, the Muslim captain of the remarkable bio-ship Al-Buraq. The action takes place in many universes that actually make up the body of an infantile God. Though the novel can be dry at times, it is an excellent read, and a very exciting story.
