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# Books

## *The Dragon of the Ishtar Gate*

by L. Sprague de Camp '30

Doubleday . . . . . \$4.95

Reviewed by Harvey Eagleson,  
professor of English

It is an odd, interesting and amusing experience to review a novel by a man whose undergraduate themes I read and corrected, and with whom I took my first trip into the desert. (Imperial Valley, yet!) Because of these circumstances, what I am about to write is probably more interpretation than critical analysis. Sprague's new novel, *The Dragon of the Ishtar Gate*, is a story of adventure and high derring-do taking place in a romantic period (the reign of the great Persian king Xerxes, 486-465 B.C.) and in exotic places (the Middle East and the Valley of the Nile). It is not a plotted novel like *Ivanhoe* or *The Three Musketeers*, but a picaresque novel like *Gil Blas*, in which the hero engages in an episodic series of adventures, frequently interrupted by interpolated narratives usually told by minor characters. Sprague's novel runs true to type and is related with dash and suspense. The book is worth reading if only for the story.

But the novel has other aspects which to me are more interesting than the story. It has a wealth of detail, some of it gruesome, concerning the clothes, buildings, food, manners, and customs of the various peoples encountered in the adventures, though never so much as to clog the swift action of the story. These details are fascinating and illuminating. I know nothing about the period portrayed, but I know Sprague's delight in accurate and meticulous detail, and I am certain these matters are as correct as possible with what learning is now available. Certainly the scenery is right, as Sprague took all, or at least a large part of the journey which is accomplished by his principal characters.

Further, knowing Sprague's great interest in cryptograms and the double meaning, I suspect that more is intended, though not to be taken too seriously, than meets the eye. The novel is not only a picaresque novel, it is a quest story. The quest story is a well known category of narrative

which was particularly popular in the Middle Ages, the stories of King Arthur's knights being the most famous examples. All quest stories have a common narrative thread. The hero sets out to accomplish some purpose, but must overcome a series of obstacles or temptations before he can accomplish his mission. Sometimes he is successful, sometimes not. Also, nearly all quest stories are allegorical. The hero represents Man, his purpose is Man's ideals, the obstacles those which prevent Man from attaining his ideals.

Sprague's story lends itself to this interpretation. The three leading characters, Bessas, Myron, and Kothar, represent three basic parts of Man's being, the physical, the rational, and the religious or superstitious. The river, of course, is the River of Life, the treasure of Takarta the idea toward which man struggles. In his struggle toward the ideal, he is aided under varying circumstances by either the physical, the rational, or the religious. But, as I interpret Sprague's fable, when Man reaches the ideal he will discover that the religious and superstitious, while it may have been useful at times in the past, is no longer useful but really misleading and treacherous, and so must be discarded.

"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

## *Peacetime Uses of Outer Space*

Edited by Simon Ramo, PhD '36

McGraw-Hill . . . . . \$6.95

A symposium based on a series of public lectures presented by the University of California in 1960, under the direction of Simon Ramo, PhD '36, executive vice president of Thompson Ramo Wooldridge, Inc. The material is addressed to the intelligent layman, and the knowledgeable contributors include Lloyd V. Berkner, James H. Doolittle, Frederick R. Kappel, Vice Admiral John T. Hayward, Leston Faneuf, Leo Goldberg, Joseph Kaplan, Morris Neiburger, Willard F. Libby, Overton Brooks, Ralph J. Cordiner, Brigadier General Don Flickinger, and Edward Teller.