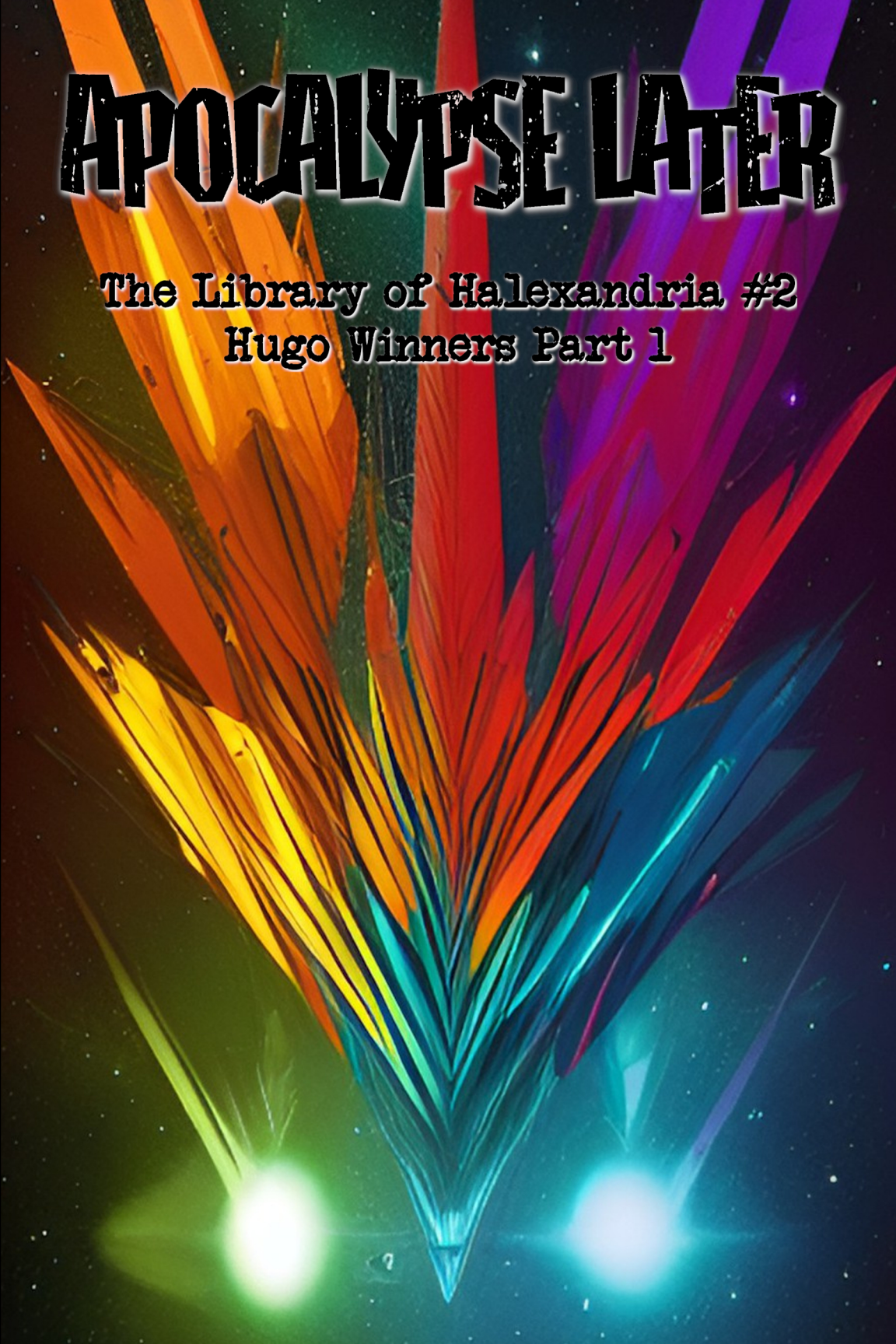
APOCALYPSE LATER
The Library of Halexandria #2
Hugo Winners Part 1

APOCALYPSE LATER

ZINE
ISSUE #5

"That remains my favourite review anyone did of it, just because you grokked so much of what I was going for."

— Jasper DeWitt on *The Patient*

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

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Cultural References in Blazing Saddles
The First Thirty #1
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APOCALYPSE LATER ZINE #5

The Library of Halexandria

BOOK REVIEWS FROM THE NAMELESS ZINE

HUGO WINNERS PART 1

APOCALYPSE LATER PRESS
PHOENIX, AZ

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the second edition of *The Library of Halexandria*, the fifth *Apocalypse Later* zine.

This covers the first half of a journey of discovery for me and maybe for you too, a trip through all the books that won the Hugo Award for Best Novel, supposedly the very best of the very best of science fiction, in the order in which they won.

Now, this zine covers four decades of winners, from the 1950s to the 1980s, but I compressed that reading schedule into one per month, reviewing each at the *Nameless Zine*. The reason was to allow me to catch up, because I didn't know all of these books and I should.

After all, I read a lot and I've been reading for a long time, even though I didn't start reviewing for the *Nameless Zine* until 2014. My parents left books around the house so I'd pick them up and teach myself how to read, soon after figuring out how to walk. My mother was called into school when I was four because I could read before I started there and the teachers somehow felt miffed; after all, it was their job to teach me how.

My first encounter with science fiction (I hadn't associated *Star Wars* with a genre at that point, beyond blockbuster) arrived when I was ten, with *The Day of the Triffids* BBC mini-series, and my mother subsequently assuaged my eagerness for more with Lije Baley, *Way Station* and the entire run of Heinlein juveniles. I was hooked there and then and I've read a lot more since, even before I started reviewing for the *Nameless Zine*. But there's a heck of a lot out there that I haven't read.

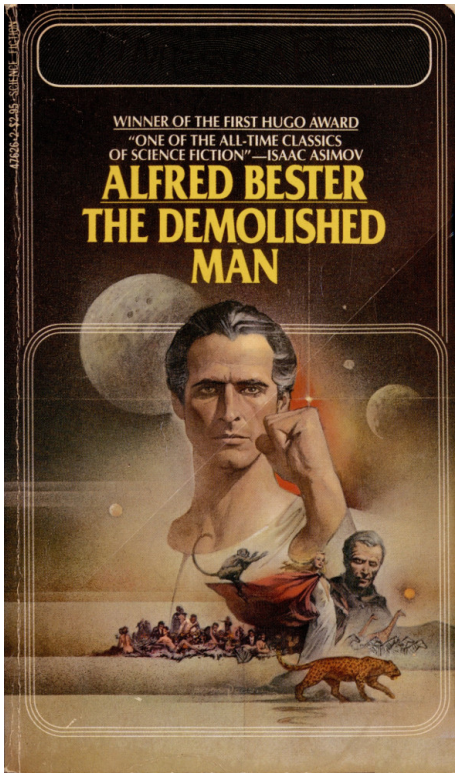
My tastes are such that I've become an expert in a number of niches, whether in books, music or films, but I'm often blind to the mainstream. Sure, I've been reading science fiction since I was ten and I now have an adult granddaughter, but I haven't read all the novels that won Hugos and that's a state of affairs I really should do something about. So I did. And here's the first half.

I got to revisit old favourites like *Way Station*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and *Ringworld*. I got to rekindle my acquaintance with books that I'd only read once, like *Starship Troopers*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *Speaker for the Dead*. I got to experience new favourites like *The Man in the High Castle*, *Dreamsnake* and *Startide Rising* and legendary titles that I'd never actually got round to before, like *Dune*, *Rendezvous with Rama* and *The Forever War*. And I got to struggle through books that I found myself thoroughly appreciating without really enjoying at all, like *Lord of Light*, *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Snow Queen*.

It's been a fascinating journey. Some of these books feel highly dated now. Some are very much products of their times. Some are experiments that connected then but feel surpassed now. Some still resonate as groundbreaking, even though skyscrapers have grown on the ground they broke. And some just feel out of place sitting in this hallowed company.

Join me as I rekindle that journey in this zine. And I'll see you in a few years for part two, the 1990s to the present day. Or check out each new book I review at the *Nameless Zine*, one per month.

— Hal C. F. Astell



ALFRED BESTER

THE DEMOLISHED MAN

PUBLISHER:
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
SHASTA PUBLISHERS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1953

WON IN 1953
AT PHILCON II,
THE 11TH WORLDCON,
IN PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA,
U.S.A.

I have, at least, read enough of these Hugo winners to know that they provide a pretty solid bedrock for the genre, more definitive than the Oscars or the Grammys as representations of how history became the present in its particular space. I know that, while this list of winners is far from a be-all, end-all and, while all are equal in the history books, some are more equal than others, the combined list is an appropriate grounding to the genre and a good reading list for anyone who wants to explore it. To me, writing about it now, Hugo winners are the context I need to have to grok the genre, and I'm running a little short.

Case in point, the winner of the first Hugo for Best Novel, in 1953, was Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*, which I hadn't read. In fact, I'm not sure I'd ever read anything by Bester, who wrote many short stories and another classic novel, *The Stars My Destination*. But hey, the list of Hugo winners is just a beginning; jumping sideways is always encouraged in this sort of self-education.

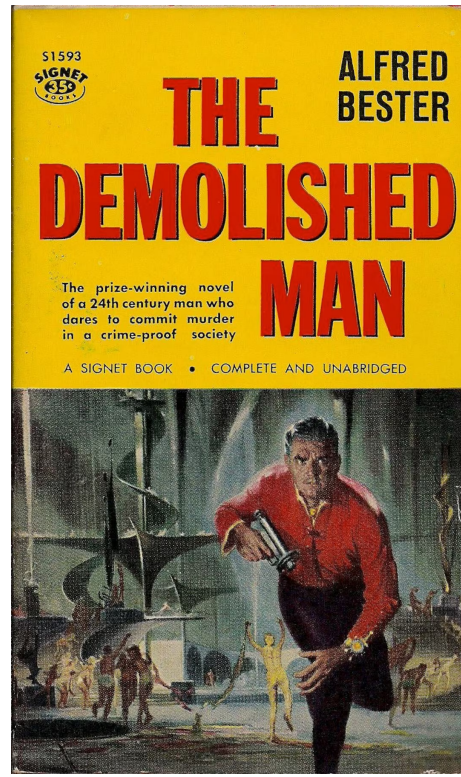
What I've discovered at my first step is that the first Hugo award winning novel is at once dated and prescient, enjoyable but awkward, worthy and infuriating. I enjoyed it but also had some issues with it. I get why it won, over other notables like *City*, *The Sound of His Horn* and *The Rolling Stones* a.k.a. *Space Family Stone*, but believe that far better winners were still to come. A PhilCon progress report states that Wilson Tucker's *The Long Loud Silence* was its closest competitor, which I've never heard of.

This is a science fiction murder mystery, even though the mystery is something of a cheat. We start out watching the perpetrator, as he decides, plans and executes. We know exactly whodunit because we're there in the room when he does it. Then we switch over to the investigator, as he tries not to discover the identity of the murderer, as he figures that out almost immediately, but to battle wits with him in order to document the means, motive and opportunity in a way that would satisfy Old Man Mose, the computer D.A. of the time, a mandatory step on the way to trial and Demolition. So this is a police procedural but an original one because this world also has no secrets, as telepaths can pluck your thoughts right out of your head at will, before as well as after you act upon them.

This approach to a murder mystery might sound odd but even the idea was rather revolutionary for the time. It was first serialised in *Galaxy* a year before Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel*, the earliest science fiction crime novel many of us have read. It doesn't feel much like a Lije Baley book though; it feels more like a cyberpunk novel of the nineties, albeit one without hackers, neon and mirrorshades.

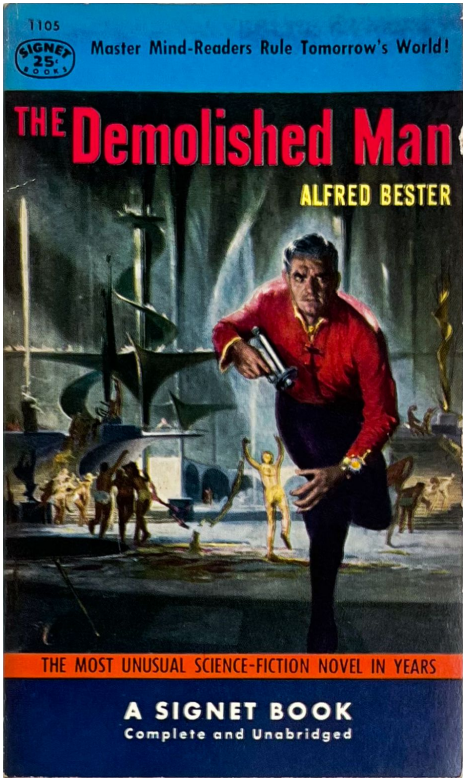
It's an increasingly paranoid psychological battle between anti-hero and anti-villain, with neither of whom we entirely sympathise. The trips into cyberspace are instead trips into the inner-self through the wonders of psychiatry. Instant communication isn't done by implants but by mind-readers known officially as Espers and colloquially as peepers, the talents of which have completely shaped this particular future and its culture.

The murderer is Ben Reich, a surname that surely carries meaning in such a Freudian tale —Wilhelm Reich was a notable psychoanalyst



and a follower of Freud until he went batshit insane. Ben is getting there too, as his dreams are being plagued by a mysterious Man with No Face. He runs a company called Monarch Utilities & Resources which is being overwhelmed by the D'Courtney Cartel, and, when his last ditch attempt to save it through a merger fails, he decides to murder his rival's chief, Craye D'Courtney, a criminal act nobody has committed in over seventy years.

I found the way he does this fascinating. To find out exactly where D'Courtney is hiding, he convinces a class 1 Esper to help him by plucking the information out of the mind of his host. That same peeper, Dr. Augustus Tate, runs interference for him while he infiltrates a party to perform the deed. To further hide his intentions from peepers present, he infects



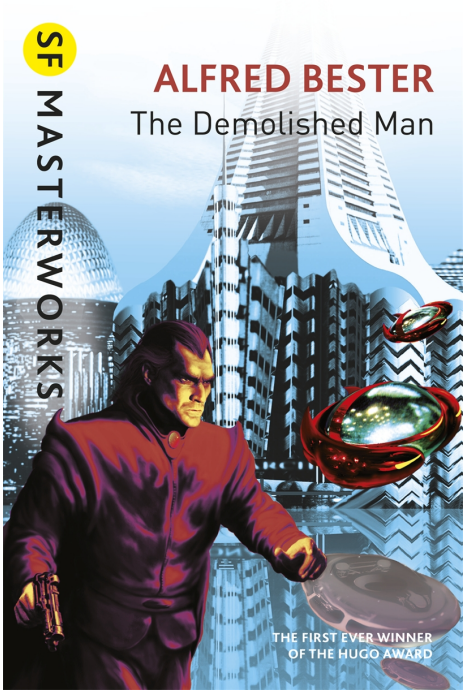
himself with what we would currently call an earworm, a simple but insanely catchy jingle. He creates an environment in which he can easily slip away from the party by manipulating them into starting a game of Sardines, which is played with the lights firmly out. He disables D'Courtney's guards with a grenade that temporarily destroys the rhodopsin in each of their eyes, not only blinding them and knocking them out but also disrupting their perception of time. And, for a murder weapon, he uses an antique called a gun, not something that most of his contemporaries would even recognise. Other clever details are left for later explanation. It's intricate stuff.

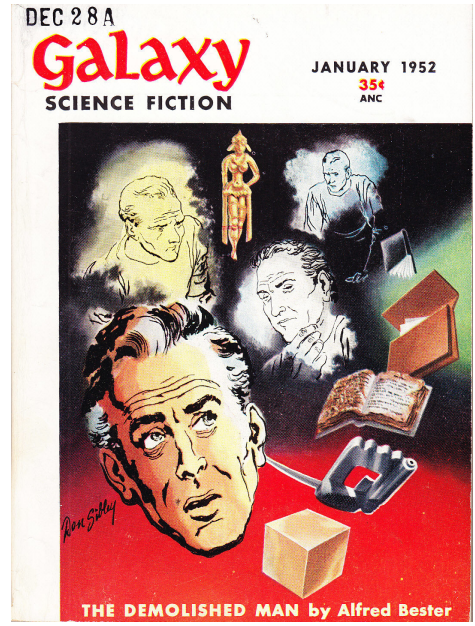
Reich is a ruthless but charismatic man, able to talk people into actions that they otherwise wouldn't dream of, and that fact renders him a particularly memorable villain. What's odd is that he's the focus for a third of the book, the first third in fact, which ought to set him as our hero but clearly doesn't. We do wonder throughout if we're supposed to be on his side, which we're not, rather than Police Prefect Lincoln Powell, another class 1 Esper, as he seeks the evidence that he needs to have Reich sentenced to Demolition. Part of this is surely because we have no idea what Demolition is, but it sounds really bad, and partly because the Espers are a strange bunch, who interbreed to help perpetuate their talents. Bester plays with our judgmental natures. We're also given the impression that Reich didn't commit this murder, when we know full well that he did, so we open our minds to all sorts of wild possibilities to try to explain that away. No, I didn't come close.

The culture of this future world is fascinating. Some aspects are very familiar, such as the decadent socialites at the Gilt Corpse's party, while others are completely alien, like the changes to society prompted by the inability to hide anything anymore, such as the combination to a safe. Some are throwaway, like the odd and unexplained use of punctuation to shrink names like ¼maine, Wyg& or @kins, while others are integral, such as the traumatic shunning that happens when a peeper is expelled from the Esper Guild, thus unable to communicate in the way that his brain needs. It's notably futuristic, with Mars and Venus colonised and an asteroid turned into a sort of theme park and holiday resort, but there are obsolete ideas here too, like the underlying eugenics goals of the Esper Guild and the fact that the computer D.A. works on printed cards.

What surprised me most, though, was the pace and the fact that the whole thing's based in psychoanalysis, which I doubt is a science fiction concept any of us tend to expect as the bedrock for a Hugo-winning novel. The whole thing charges along at a rate of knots, so much so that this could easily be adapted into an action flick, on the lines of *Minority Report*, if only there was an easy way to translate the telepathy shown here through the wonders of layout design into some sort of visual element; conversations between peepers here are fragmented into columns or wilder patterns of text. And I can't talk about the psychoanalysis much because that way lies spoilers, but it's pivotal stuff and that's at once unusual and interesting.

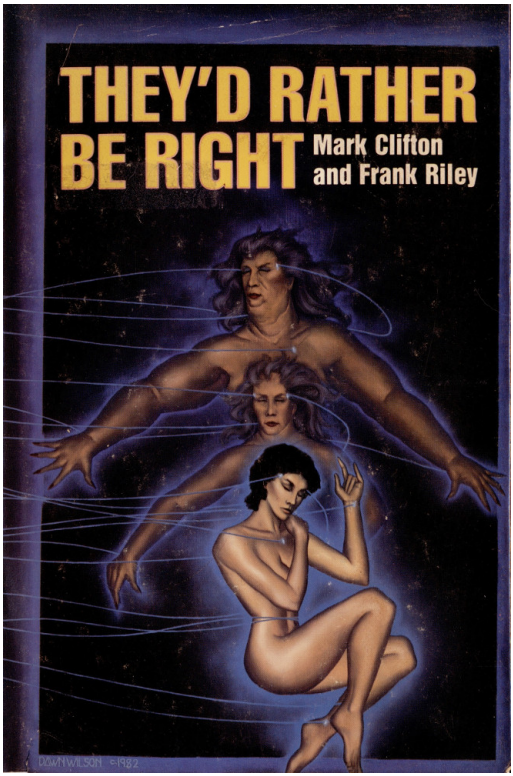
It's hardly a perfect novel, but it's surely a fascinating one and one that's notably ahead





of its time, appropriately enough for the first Hugo-winning science fiction novel. Beyond *Minority Report*, its influence is obviously felt in TV shows as wildly different as *Babylon* 5 and *The Prisoner*.

Some have called out that all the characters of note are white men but, unless I glossed right over it, Bester isn't one for describing his characters physically in any sort of detail and I personally imagined Powell, for some reason, to be a gentleman of colour, one of interesting depth given that he has a wonderful second personality that he refers to as Dishonest Abe, which prompts him to tell complex lies as a sort of challenging intellectual pursuit. It's fair to say, however, that women are emphatically less worthy in this book, even when they're as sharp as the delightful Duffy Wyg&, and that really dates *The Demolished Man*.



MARK CLIFTON & FRANK RILEY

THEY'D RATHER BE RIGHT

A.K.A. THE FOREVER MACHINE

PUBLISHER:
ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
GNOME PRESS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1954

WON IN 1955
AT CLEVENTION,
THE 13TH WORLDCON,
IN CLEVELAND, OHIO,
U.S.A.

This is only my second month spent reading and reviewing Hugo Award-winning novels in the order in which they won and I'm already up against the worst one ever.

Well, that's the consensus to which the sf/f historians have come. A major strike against its worth is that it's hardly stayed in print ever since. In fact, after it was initially serialised in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1954, it didn't see print until 1957 and was heavily cut a year later for release as *The Forever Machine*. It has been reprinted and translated, but I hadn't even laid eyes on a copy until this year, when I ordered one online, let alone read it. Many of these novels, even ones I hadn't read yet, have sat on my shelves for years, picked up at some charity shop or market stall because I knew of their importance. Not this one.

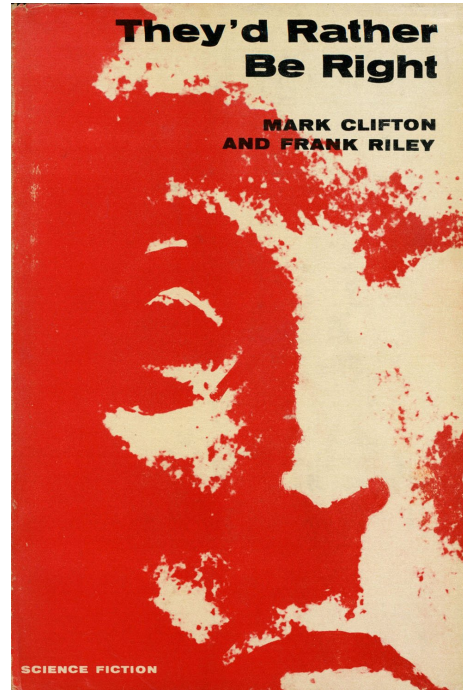
Now that I'm through this, I can state that I've read a lot worse but this really doesn't feel at all like a worthy Hugo Award-winner. It's certainly not in the same class as any of the other various Hugo winners I've read thus far, including its predecessor, Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* in 1953. While there was no nomination list published for 1955, I've read a host of superior books which would have been eligible, including such timeless classics as *The Caves of Steel*, *I am Legend* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The runner up was apparently Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity*, a highly regarded hard science fiction novel today.

They'd Rather Be Right, a title I'm still not grasping, won in 1955, as the Hugos skipped

1954 for some reason, and many since have wondered why, some of them even delving into conspiracy theories to explain this odd anomaly in the taste of voters, who then, as now, were the attendees at that particular year's Worldcon. Wasn't it originally serialised in *Astounding*? Hadn't they published *Dianetics*, the foundation of L. Ron Hubbard's religion of Scientology? They're suspicious characters are those cult members. Couldn't they have rigged the vote? Now, I'm no fan of Scientologists but I'm not buying it. Maybe people in Ohio are just weird. Who knows.

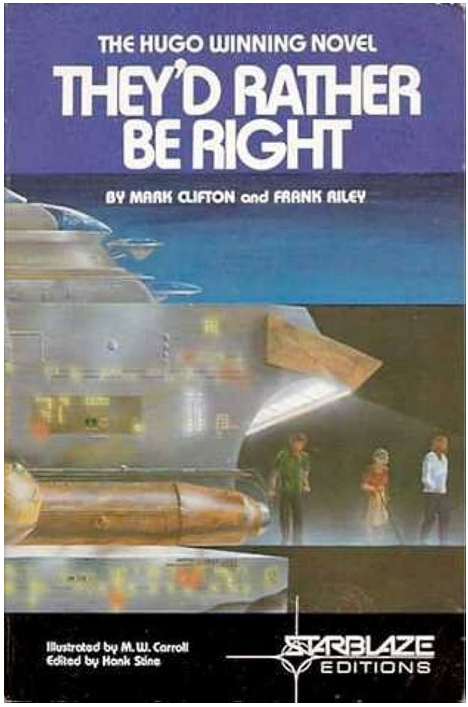
They'd Rather Be Right is a novel by two authors, Mark Clifton and Frank Riley, only one of whom is likely to have been known to the audience. That's Mark Clifton, who was the author of other science fiction novels, as well as a number of well-received short stories. He also worked in personnel and his insights into the human condition stem from his interviews of over 200,000 people he did while in that job. Frank Riley is the pseudonym of Frank Rhylick and this may be the only science fiction that he ever wrote. He was, however, a massively experienced writer, having been a syndicated travel columnist, the author of mystery stories about Father Anton Dymek and an editor for the *Los Angeles Times*. He also hosted a local radio show in L.A.

What they created constitutes a short book but one with less substance than pages. The authors don't seem particularly interested in delving into any of their characters' motivations or explaining the central idea around which the book is built. Instead, they rabbit on about philosophy in rather redundant fashion. Whenever a paragraph is needed to explain a point, they give us six, any one of which would have done the job. If there's substance, it's in



the cynicism they pour into the psychology of crowds, because, while people in this book can be smart individually, they're nothing but an amorphous mass to be easily manipulated by opinion controllers when in larger numbers. "Opinion control" is a big thing here.

The story, or what passes for one, revolves around Bossy, a super-computer which has been fed entirely with facts. Initially, people believe that it's the creation of a pair of esteemed scientists at Hoxworth University: Prof. Billings, Dean of Psychosomatic Medicine, and Prof. Hoskins, Doctor of Cybernetics. However, the key man behind it is really their young assistant, Joe Carter, the one and only mind-reader on the planet. In fact, he isn't merely able to read minds; he can influence them too, by sharing his emotions telepathically. The authors use a couple of words for this ability, like "psionic" and especially "somatic", which



is notably overused.

They're in a vaguely dystopian world, but we're never sure whether it's an alternate one or just this one described in terms we don't usually use, such as the perennial "opinion control". On one hand, it's rather reminiscent of how the "Ministry of Truth" instigated the "bellyfeels" of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published only five years earlier, but, on the other, the term is eerily reminiscent of a "spin doctor" working in "public relations". Whether it's our world or not, it isn't ready for Bossy and so the book begins with it and its creators on the run, hiding in an underground apartment in San Francisco.

Somehow, Bossy, when fed enough plasma, can work miracles. So the scientists hook up their landlady, Mabel, an former prostitute who made good in real estate, and the super-computer promptly optimises her brain and body through somatic therapy, returning this bloated 68-year-old woman to the prime of her youth.

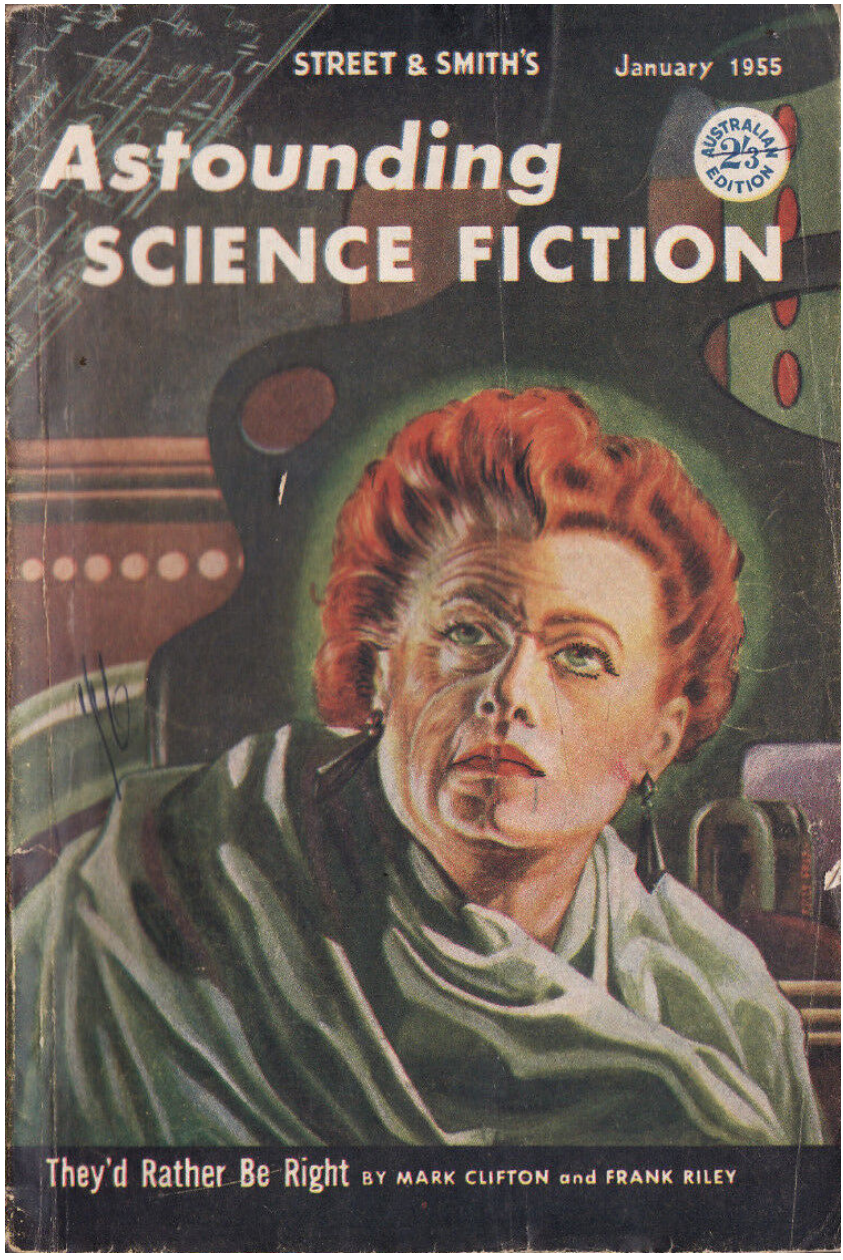
We later discover, when the same process is attempted on Dr. Billings and fails, that it was only possible with Mabel because she's open to change and has no beliefs or prejudices that she's not willing to give up. In other terms mentioned frequently, she's open to replacing single-value ideas with multi-values, even though she, like we, probably has no idea what those are. As you can imagine, the world pays much more attention to the announcement of potential immortality, whether they understand the ramifications or not.

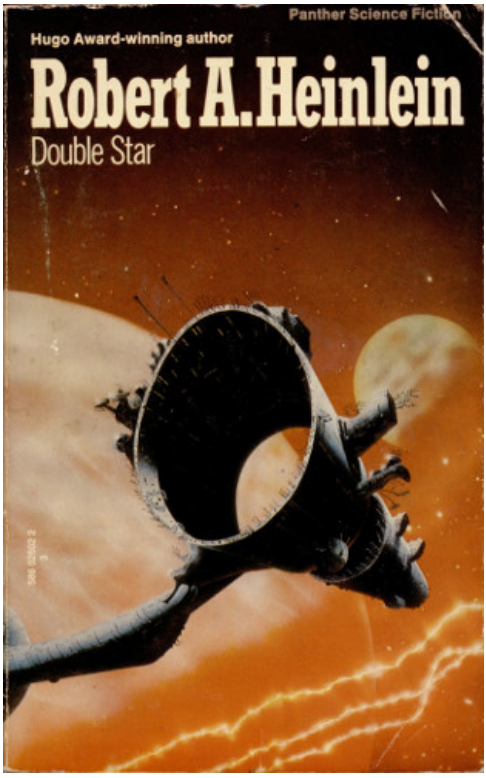
I might suggest that I wish the authors had developed this more, but really I wish that they'd developed it, period. It just wasn't an approach that they were interested in. Joe's a fascinating character, but we know little more about him when the book ends than we did when it began. Once Mabel is young and beautiful, she promptly falls for Joe, who's more than happy with her given that the process also gave her telepathic powers, so he's no longer alone! It would seem appropriate to actually explore this concept, but the authors simply can't be bothered.

It's not all bad, but the highlights aren't particularly notable ones. There's a section midway through the book in which the authors provide a neat escalation of rumours. Not too much further in, there's a similar escalation of assumptions on behalf of a whole slew of people that's handled just as neatly. I liked how these sections were written and I often found myself smiling in appreciation at turns of phrase, epithets or how sentences leap out of control in ways that sound glorious when read aloud. So, there are good aspects to

be found in and amongst the philosophising about science and psychology and whatnot, but they're not in the characters or the plot or the development.

And, without those things, this feels rather out of place on a list of Hugo Award winning novels. I'm on board at this point with it being the worst such example to date.





ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

DOUBLE STAR

PUBLISHER:
ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1956

WON IN 1956
AT NYCON II,
THE 14TH WORLDCON,
IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK,
U.S.A.

I've mentioned before that my introduction to science fiction, almost four decades ago now, included the full set of Heinlein juveniles, along with Asimov's Lije Baley books and Simak's *Way Station*. That's a solid start to a genre (thank you, mum) and I've kept on exploring it ever since. What I haven't yet mentioned is that I followed up by diving even deeper into Heinlein's bibliography, quickly discovering a personal favourite in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, a future Hugo winner for Best Novel. However, this one won first. It was the first such Hugo for Heinlein; in fact it was his first Hugo, period. He would go on to win four for Best Novel, along with seven Retro-Hugos, chosen much later to retrospectively cover years in which the Hugos were not awarded.

I read *Double Star* during that early period of exploration and enjoyed it, but it hadn't stood out above its peers at the time and it hadn't stayed with me over the years since. It was released in book form in between *Tunnel in the Sky* and *Time for the Stars*, two of his very best juveniles, the former of which is one of the earliest books to change my way of thinking.

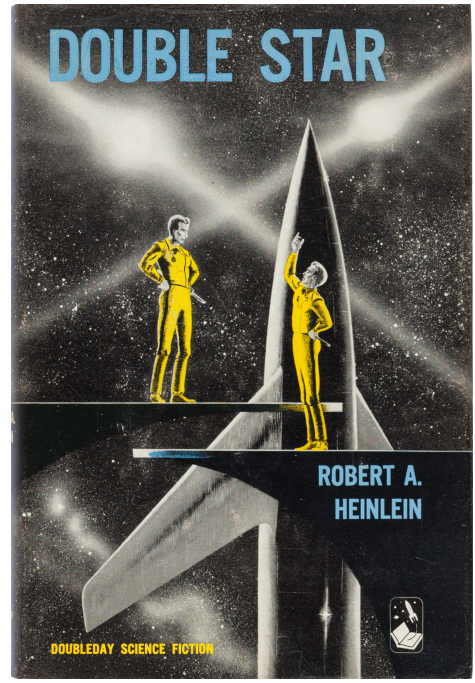
Reading afresh, *Double Star* stands up very well indeed, even though it's an clear science fiction take on Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*. It's short, it's effective and it ends well. What's more, it has a lot of depth if you sit back and think about it. It's a peach of a choice for a book club.

The title does not refer to the astronomical phenomenon that we might expect, as this is a

character study and an attempt to explore the meaning of humanity and the ability of a human being to change. It refers instead to the two key characters, Lawrence Smith and John Joseph Bonforte, as the former becomes a double for the latter, initially for a brief period but, as time goes by, for longer and longer until he eventually becomes Bonforte for all intents and purposes.

We're in our own solar system in the future, which is run by a democratic parliament that's housed on the Moon and with a constitutional monarch reigning but not ruling over it all. It's a time of change, as the government is not entirely representative of the solar system as a whole. The native populace of Venus can vote, for instance, but that of Mars cannot. Change to this state of affairs is a key policy of the Expansionist Party, one that's opposed by the Humanity Party, which currently holds power. Bonforte leads the Expansionist Party, which is expected to win at the next elections and he's about to be honoured by the Martians by being adopted into their race, but a clever plot has placed the future in jeopardy. Bonforte has been kidnapped.

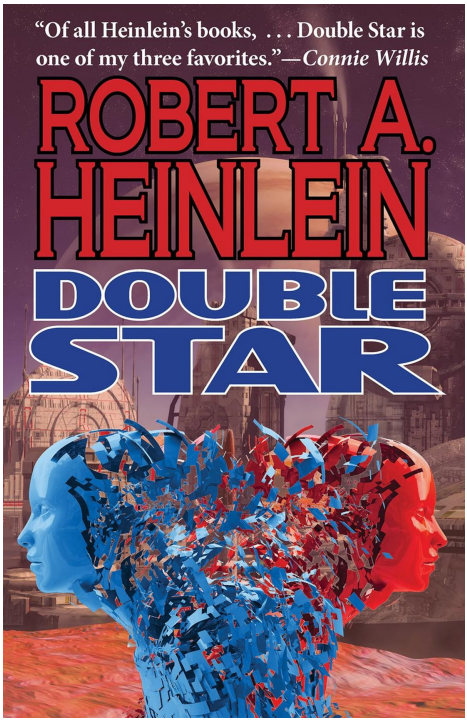
It's here that Heinlein's translation of *The Prisoner of Zenda* comes into its own, as the Martians think rather differently to humans. For instance, they don't comprehend lateness. We're told a famous story about a Martian named Kkkahgral the Younger, who was late for a similar ceremony to honour him, albeit through no fault of his own. The only thing to do was for him to be put to death for transgression of custom, but some elders wanted to cut him some slack as a young and promising Martian. The honourable youth wouldn't have it though! He fought for the right to prosecute himself, did so and won, so guaranteeing his



own execution. That's dedication!

With Bonforte about to be adopted into the very nest of Kkkahgral the Younger, you can see why he absolutely must be there on time. If they can't find him, it falls to his aides to come up with another solution and they do so by hiring Smith, a talented but out-of-work actor known as the Great Lorenzo, to impersonate Bonforte during the ceremony. And with that, we're off and running.

Lorenzo is a fascinating character. He's a very talented actor but he's bad at staying in work. He seems to be a fantastic choice to be Bonforte's temporary double, given that he's physically similar and easily capable of addressing any mild differences through acting talent or basic make-up techniques. However, there are catches, far beyond the fact that the kidnappers are on their trail and willing to kill to keep their plot in motion. One is that Smith



opposes everything that Bonforte stands for and another is that he does so because he's deeply prejudiced against Martians because of their odour.

This prejudice is solved by a psychiatrist who hypnotises him on the way and replaces their odour in his mind with the only perfume at hand, Jungle Lust, but everything else Smith changes himself. The Great Lorenzo changes so much over the relatively brief page count that we really ought to be shocked, but we're not because Heinlein changes him believably and consistently throughout, with a great deal of charm.

After all, he's an actor who's used to taking on the personae of other characters, so it's not too much of a leap to take on the persona of a real one, especially when the situation moves further than expected and he has to continue in the role, studying Bonforte's Farley files as he does so, a perfect mechanism by which he can learn at the same time we do.

The sweep of the story is great fun but I think it's this change that stands out to me. Smith has the beliefs he has for a variety of reasons but, the more he actually pays some semblance of attention to what's happening in the worlds, the more he changes those beliefs. It's a classic American concept for the public to stay informed so that they can take part in their democracy, but it's also a concept that's been mostly forgotten in a world of polarised thought, fake news and controlled Facebook feeds. I could believe that Smith is stuck on a particular side in our modern political culture, only for growing experience to show him that he really ought to be on the other.

I liked Heinlein's approach to parliament too. The reigning Emperor is of the House of Orange, a noble Dutch family, but the general structure is quintessentially British. I followed it all easily because I grew up with it, merely with a queen rather than an emperor. It's fascinating to me to watch an American author explore this territory and not just do it well but with an understanding of the why as much as the what. I don't just mean safe seats and all that malarkey, but the scene in which Smith, attempting to convince the Emperor, one of Bonforte's friends, that he's the man himself, passes over the expected selection of ministers and is given an enticing opportunity to change one.

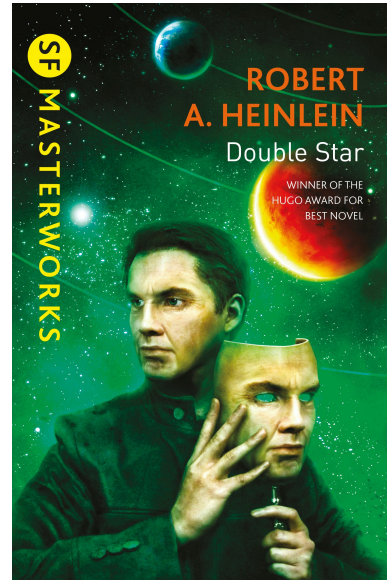
I learned a lot of my beliefs on racial tolerance from Heinlein, whom I feel was notably ahead of his time on the subject, regardless of how some view him today. That's telling here too, not only in the treatment of Martians but in other details as well. For instance, the mini-

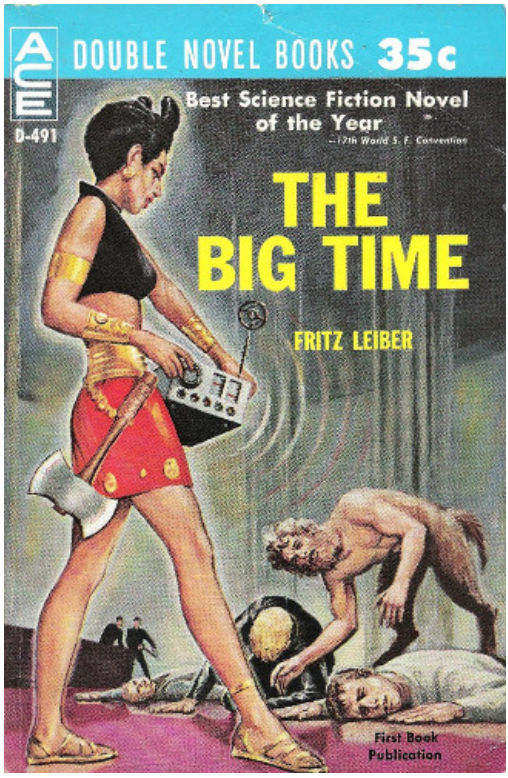
sterial appointment to whom the Emperor has to raise an eyebrow is Lothar Braun, his clear choice being Angel Jesus de la Torre y Perez. It's hard for Americans reading an American novel to be patriotic when neither choice is American. Of course, Bonforte and Smith are.

What's dated here isn't how Heinlein saw race here but how he saw women. There's but one in the story of any substance and she's Bonforte's secretary who's eventually elected to parliament in a safe seat. Heinlein could see equal treatment for races and even species, but he apparently failed to believe that a woman could be elected to office on her own merits. That's more than a little disappointing. That Penny is the only woman in a role of substance is disappointing too.

The other disappointment is technology, because Heinlein, like so many other science fiction writers of his era, failed to predict the insane growth in computing power. Jo Walton, in her commentary on the Hugos, highlights tape spools that contain ten thousand characters and compares that to the thumbdrive she loses so often. Yet there's relatively simple travel between planets and the solar system is run from the Moon. How the one can be so far advanced and the other hardly at all is a real question for the era.

Regardless, *Double Star* is a classic work of science fiction and the best Hugo winner for Best Novel thus far.





FRITZ LEIBER

THE BIG TIME

PUBLISHER:
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
ACE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1958

WON IN 1958
AT SOLACON,
THE 16TH WORLDCON,
IN SOUTH GATE, CALIFORNIA,
U.S.A.

The fourth winner of the Best Novel Hugo, awarded in 1958 at Solacon in South Gate, CA (technically Los Angeles but hey, "South Gate in '58!", went to Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time*, originally published in *Galaxy* magazine. It's an odd novel and I was surprised to find that I'm in two minds about it.

Leiber is an author I know, albeit primarily for his sword and sorcery stories about Ffahrd and the Gray Mouser. He coined the label for that subgenre. His novels, often expansions from short stories, are wildly varied so don't form a career ouevre as much as a career exploration. He won six Hugos, I believe, including a second for Best Novel, 1964's *The Wanderer*.

I'm surprised, having read all the *Ffahrd and the Gray Mousers* multiple times, to realise that I can't remember having read any of these novels, not *Conjure Wife* (though I've seen film adaptations), not *Gather, Darkness!* and not *Our Lady of Darkness*, which looks so far up my alley I should surely read it next.

It's good in a way to realise that, while there are winners I've read widely, such as Robert A. Heinlein, and winners I hadn't read at all, such as Alfred Bester, there are also winners I know and have read but should explore better. I'm taking note of the side trips I need to take as this project runs on.

I'm of two minds about *The Big Time* because it's a really unusual novel in a lot of ways, an attribute that tends to appeal very much to me, but I'm still not quite convinced at how it

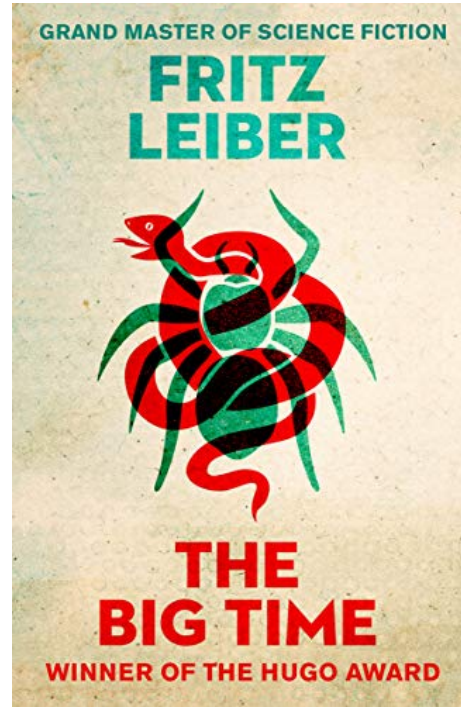
was done. Leiber certainly intrigued me with his approach and he impressed me with it too, but I don't think he completely sold me and that may be why the book, as often as it's been printed, isn't remembered as well as others from this era.

The concept at the heart of the novel is that there are two factions fighting each other through time, a battle known as the Change War. They're nicknamed Spiders and Snakes, though we never meet any of them to see why. Each side is convinced that they're on the right side of history, literally, because they go back and forth to change things and sculpt it to their preference. To fight this war and make these changes, each side recruits people from history, who fight alongside people from other times or even other places, like Venus from a billion years in the future.

It's a heady concept and one well worth exploring within the science fiction genre. However, Leiber refuses to follow any of the conventions that we expect. We're not going to follow those time soldiers here, in their quests to tweak history in this era or that. We see as little of the Change War as we do of its masters, the Spiders and Snakes. Instead we spend the novel entirely outside of time in what's called a recuperation station, a point to which soldiers can retreat for a well-earned break and some, ahem, special attention from an entertainer.

Let me explore how odd this choice is.

It means that this is technically a war novel without a war, a time travel novel without any time travel and a vast trawl through the whole of time and space that takes place in a single location held in a sort of bubble outside of it, which our lead character simply calls "the Place". This is the Big Time of the title, by the



way, which is protected from the changes wrought by the war in the universe at large, known as the Little Time.

Oh, and that lead character isn't a Snake or a Spider, nor even a soldier caught up fighting the Change War. She's one of the entertainers, a human woman named Greta Forzane, who narrates our story in a bubbly conversational manner. While Leiber was writing in 1958, so this is a family friendly read, an entertainer in this context is a combination of nurse, therapist and prostitute, which in its way could fairly describe, in 1958 terms, the role of a stereotypical society-suppressed housewife.

Like 1950s housewives, she does experience the War, I mean the world at large, by taking mandatory vacations during operations, like one in Renaissance Rome where she developed a crush on Cesare Borgia but got over it, but mostly she sees it at a level of remove. Soldiers

arrive at the Place, from wherever and whenever they've been fighting to take a break from it, and she experiences what's happening through them.

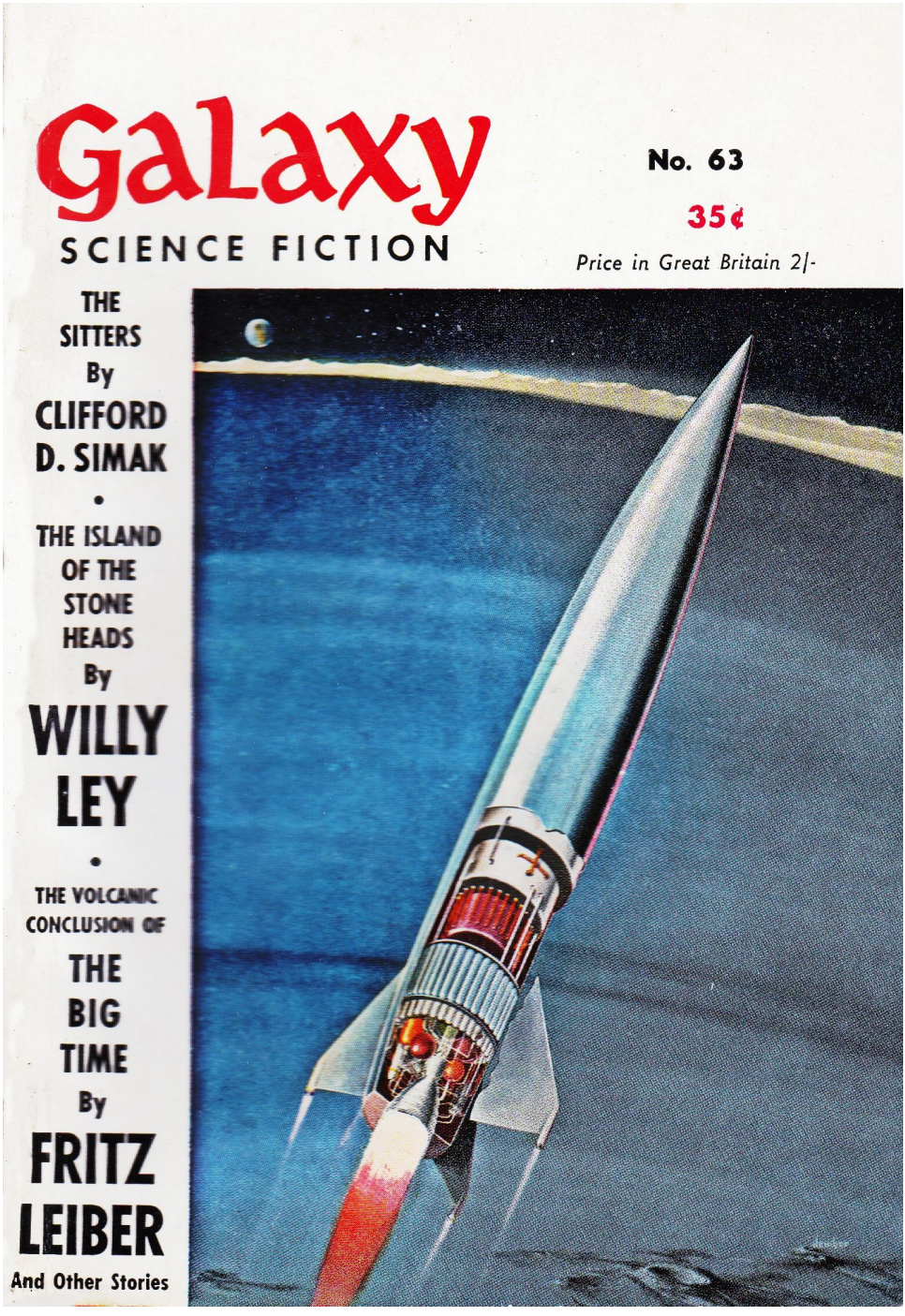
Leiber even refuses to define which side is right, merely showing us a set of characters on one side, that of the Spiders, which include a Nazi flyer, a Roman gladiator and a Venusian satyr from a billion years in the future. Are they fighting for the right side? They're not even sure of that and who would know better than them?

It's a fantastic approach, one that makes it feel like a play rather than a novel, as physically restricted as it is. It would be easier to translate to the stage than *Alien*, which a set of ambitious high school students achieved on a shoestring budget recently. A few props in a single location, a set of characters who rarely leave and a lot of dialogue. That's easy to turn into a production.

However, Leiber then structures everything around something as conventional as these characters having to come together and deal with an atomic bomb in their midst, not least because it's been triggered. And so this is kind of like a locked room mystery of a science fiction novel, merely one told in such a way that the science fiction elements are utterly crucial to how it's set up and how it's solved.

All this makes for a heady mixture. It's short and fluffy, especially given the language with which it's told, almost like 160 pages of gossip, partly delivered in Shakespearean prose and mostly in breathless chatter. However, it also contains a wild array of ideas, many of which only present themselves when we think about the book after closing the last page. It was written over a dozen years before I was born but still feels original and somehow unique, even if Poul Anderson took up the same concept in *The Corridors of Time*.

The Big Time is clearly an important book. I appreciated it a great deal and I'm still thinking about it almost a month after reading it. However, I still haven't quite figured out if I like it or not.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And Other Stories

JAMES BLISH

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE

PUBLISHER:
BALLANTINE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1958

WON IN 1959
AT DETENTION,
THE 17TH WORLDCON,
IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN,
U.S.A.

My sweep through the winners of the Best Novel Hugo reaches 1959 and James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, a book that I already owned in paperback but clearly hadn't read because its final few pages had been ripped out, thus prompting me to search for them online.

I have read quite a lot of Blish though and not just his *Star Trek* books, adaptations from draught scripts, so different to the aired episodes, and a standalone original novel. I have particularly fond memories of his *Cities in Flight* books, which I discovered in the school library as a teenager, though I didn't have a sufficient background in American history (which was not taught in British schools) to grasp that it was a sf commentary on the migration out of the Dust Bowl in the thirties.

This is something very different indeed, a religious science fiction novel, not what a majority of readers expected at the time and which still stands out from the science fiction crowd today. It tasks a team of four scientists with evaluating an alien planet fifty light-years from Earth to figure out whether it should be opened up to the universe at large. One of them comes to a startling realisation about it which sets in motion a rather strange set of events.

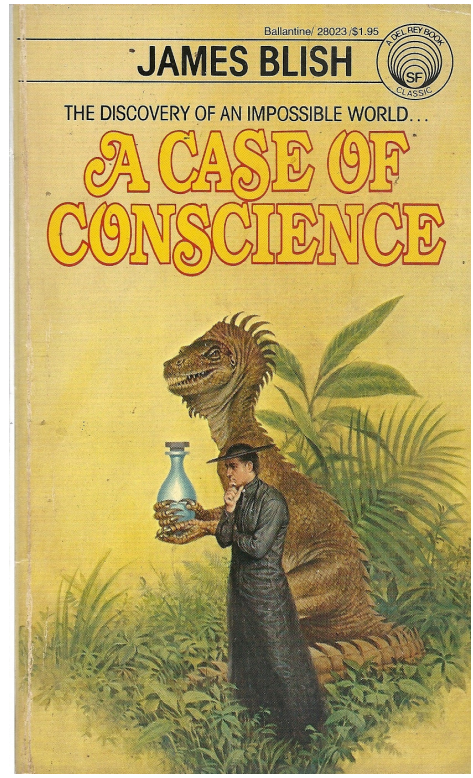
These scientists are notably different, not merely in discipline but also in background and character, to ensure a variety of interpretations when time comes for their recommendations. Our protagonist, for instance, is there as a biologist but he's also a Jesuit and

that becomes even more important. Our impressions of the planet Lithia and, by extension, all of our backseat decision-making, is filtered almost entirely through his experiences.

Initially, these experiences are good. He's Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez, from Peru, and he consistently makes an effort to understand the Lithians, even though a colleague, Cleaver the physicist, really can't be bothered at all. It becomes clear, for instance, after Cleaver is poisoned by a plant, that he hasn't been communicating with their colleagues Michelis and Agronski, the chemist and geologist of the team, as expected. Ruiz-Sanchez finds this out when he visits the Message Tree to do so himself. Only his passing knowledge of the Lithian language and his friendship with a Lithian makes communication possible.

It also leads to this Lithian, Chtexa, inviting him into his house, increasing Ruiz-Sanchez's knowledge of the locals a great deal. What he finds, however, shakes him. The Lithians have no crime, no war and no religion. There are no deviations from a core morality even though individuality is prized. They're scientists who think logically and share knowledge freely. You and I might see this as a paradise but Father Ramon sees it as a trap. He comes to believe that Lithia was created by Satan as a test for mankind.

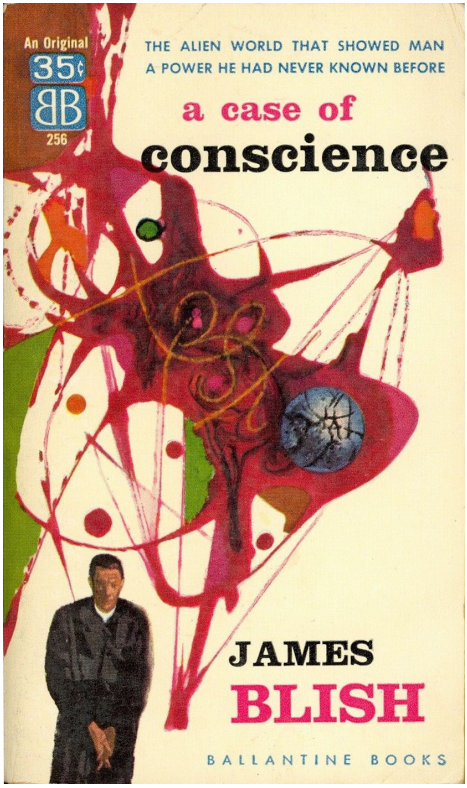
While we might scoff at such an idea, as the good Father's colleagues do in no time flat, he promptly backs it up with science. The planet doesn't make sense in scientific terms, having apparently sprung into place fully formed and not changing over the millennia. The Lithians don't make much sense either, given that their language, customs and history all also appear fully formed in the minds of their young, who grow up without need of parents and only



return home later, and that worries him even though he enjoys their company and admires them individually.

I should add that all this discovery, and the subsequent debate to decide what form the team's report will take, unfolds during the first section of the book, which is fascinating. Blish creates a fantastic world, which we can enjoy just as a creation, but adds an extra level that makes us think. The second section, in which Chtexa gives Ruiz-Sanchez a parting gift of an egg, which contains what will grow into his son, is less consistent but it does progress the novel along to the point where perhaps inevitable things happen. Even there, we're left with an ambiguity as to how and why.

Blish had some serious balls when he wrote this. Not only did he write a religious science



fiction novel, albeit as an agnostic without any preaching in mind at all, he extrapolated the theology of the Jesuits forward to this future 2050 in ways that made sense to him at the time but don't today. In fact, Blish got a few things wrong with his prognostication. For one, Michelis the chemist laughs at the fact that Lithia is teeming with lithium, because rocket ships don't fly anymore and nobody needs the stuff. Our cellphone generation can laugh at him in turn.

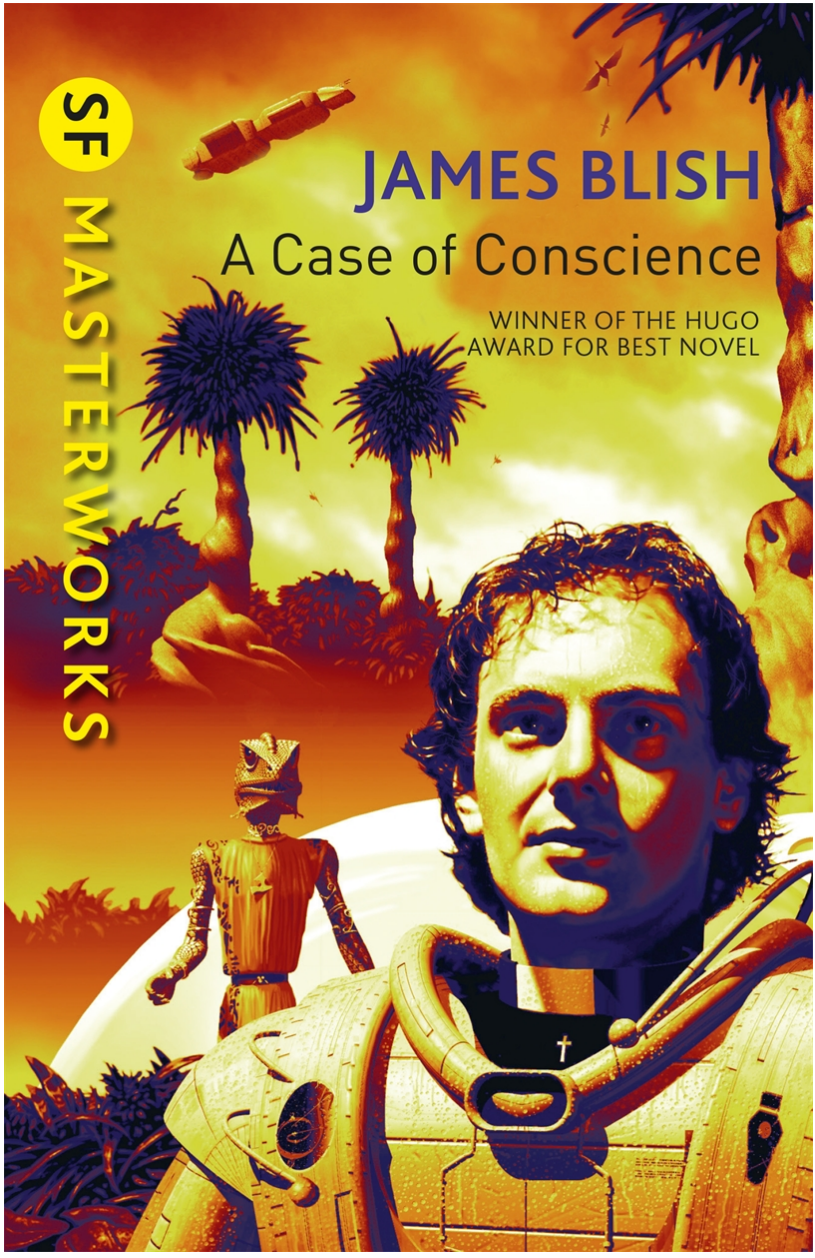
What's more, the very fact that Ruiz-Sanchez comes up with his theory about Lithia is fascinating. We might see it as a particularly religious approach that his superiors might applaud him for taking, but he's actually seen as a heretic, the mere suggestion that Satan has the power to create a planet and the lifeforms on it being enough to shift him into Manichaeism, a heresy that has him summoned to Rome to face judgement from the Pope himself, who has a different interpretation in mind for the whole thing.

I grew up in the Church of England, so I'm familiar with some of the ideas in play here. However, not being a Roman Catholic and not being a particular student of religious history, much of this was new to me. Phrased as it is as science fiction, I read this from the standpoint of society and enjoyed it greatly. As someone who's lived in the U.S. for a decade and a half, watching the battle between church and state, I found questioning by an agnostic American author in the fifties of whether religion should be part of a scientific judgement a fascinating one, especially when it becomes apparent that only the Jesuit of his company would have noticed certain things.

Nothing here is simple, even though it all seems that way, and I enjoyed that immensely. Science fiction should always make us think and this does that wonderfully. The fact that the second section, which focuses on Earth in 2050 and how Egtverchi, once he grows from his egg into the usual bipedal reptile with great intelligence and innate knowledge, can shake that up, pales in comparison to the first is mostly a problem of comparison. It's still good stuff, merely not as good as the section which preceded it.

Blish went on to further explore religion in science fiction, not through sequels per se but in a thematic trilogy that he named *After Such Knowledge*. *A Case of Conscience* was followed by a 1964 novel, *Doctor Mirabilis*, and a fantasy duology comprised of *Black Easter* and *The Day After Judgement*, which took him into the

seventies. I haven't read any of these and may well do that now. I appreciate originality, especially in science fiction, and I have to say that *A Case of Conscience* is unlike anything else I've read. That's a good thing in my book.



ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

STARSHIP TROOPERS

PUBLISHER:
THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY
& SCIENCE FICTION
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1959

WON IN 1960
AT PITTCON,
THE 18TH WORLDCON,
IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA,
U.S.A.

By sheer coincidence, I found myself presenting on the famous Paul Verhoeven movie adaptation of this famous novel at Phoenix Fan Fusion in late May, as one of my fellow Awesomelys picked it for one of our sets. I'd just read the book afresh for my run-through of the Hugo Award winners for Best Novel and it was fascinating to compare the two, not least because the book has garnered accusations of being fascist, but the film is far more overt on that front, its philosophy being a clear "kill everything that isn't like us".

What surprised me most about the book, especially after watching the movie, was how the central war with the Bugs from Klendathu really isn't important. In fact, with the sole exception of the opening chapter, they aren't even mentioned for fully half the page count. Even during the war, we spend a majority of our time on this spaceship or that one getting from A to B with only hints of what's going on elsewhere being picked up at waystations.

I should mention that I have read *Starship Troopers* before but it's been a surprising long time since I read it last. I devoured everything Heinlein wrote as part of my childhood introduction to science fiction and he was the first sf author whose every book I read. However, when I come back to his works, as I do periodically, it's usually to his juveniles or to my personal favourites, like *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. This book tends not to be included among his juveniles, even though it was originally aimed to be one; its rejection by

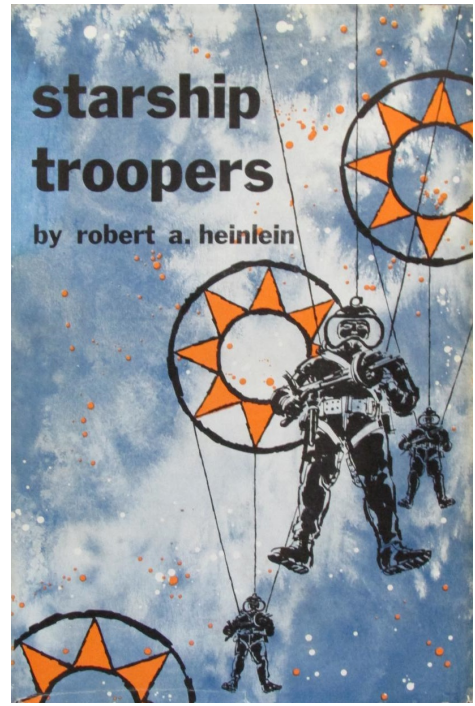
Scribner led to him writing it as an adult novel instead. It is, however, generally regarded as the last of the early Heinlein novels, marking the point at which the author stopped writing for children and started to write for adults.

The book aims to do two things and it does them both very well.

Initially, it explores what it means to sign up for the infantry (here the futuristic Mobile Infantry of the Terran Federation) and endure training and service in it. Our protagonist is Johnny Rico, one of those all-American sort of boys whom Heinlein gradually lets slip isn't, once we've sympathised and identified with them, as another subtle attack on racism. He's actually Juan Rico from the Philippines, and we're with him throughout boot camp, initial deployment and then officer training. When he returns to lead Rico's Roughnecks in battle against the Bugs, the novel promptly ends.

The other is a concept clearly aimed at being a discussion point, in which citizenship, which primarily means the rights to vote and stand for office, is restricted to those who have served. Now, this doesn't just mean in the armed forces, because first responders and other professions count as well; the point is that nobody can become a citizen until they have demonstrated that they can and do put their country first, even before their own life. These are the people, Heinlein suggests, who are most able to make decisions as to how their country should be governed.

There are a couple of points where this is hammered home, but the novel is not overtly preachy. There's certainly value in this proposition but there are drawbacks to it too, most obviously the complete lack of PTSD anywhere in the book. Given that there's an active war against the Bugs, there's no mention of how



this logic would fly during peacetime. It has been argued by some that Heinlein's ideas tie to a frontier mentality within which territorial expansion is key and mankind will therefore suffer during peacetime.

Little of this is in the movie, of course, not least because Paul Verhoeven only read a couple of chapters before deciding that it was a bad book that he had no interest in reading further. So he had others read it instead and craft the script for him. I'm sure he would have hated every moment of what comes out of Rico's History and Moral Philosophy classes in school.

In fact, most of the key moments in the film either don't happen at all in the book or are combinations of varied events. Happily, none of the plot conveniences that I despise the most about the film are present here. In fact, the only moment in the book that seems like a

plot convenience emphatically isn't; in other words, when two important characters meet, it's a) not remotely by accident and b) at the worst possible time rather than the best.

Some ideas from the film do stem from the book, such as the fact that most starship captains are female, but the reasons are never explained. In the book, it's because women are recognised as having better reactions. This is countered as a progressive idea by the fact that women can't serve in the Mobile Infantry, whose members see women as one reason to fight. It's utterly bizarre to see a single novel acknowledge the superiority of women in at least one sense, only to then reduce them to mere objects to fight for in another.

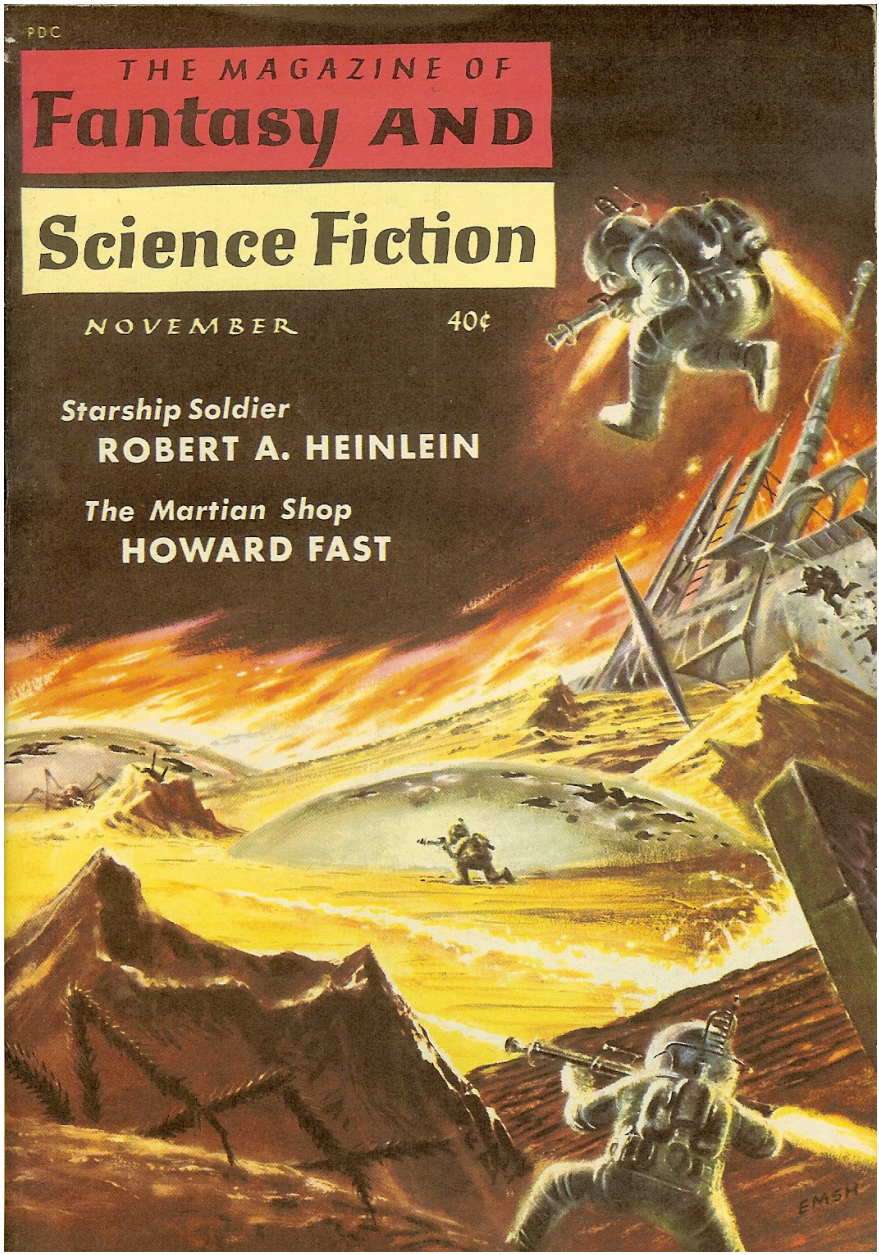
The best thing about the book is the coming of age story of Johnny Rico, an impressive arc masterfully controlled. As much as I enjoy all of Heinlein's juveniles, most of which were also coming of age stories, this one has them beat in terms of detail and character flow. I also can't fail to mention the influence that this novel has had on the world of science fiction. Arguably the entire current military sf subgenre owes its existence to this one book, which includes a number of other winners of the Hugo for Best Novel.

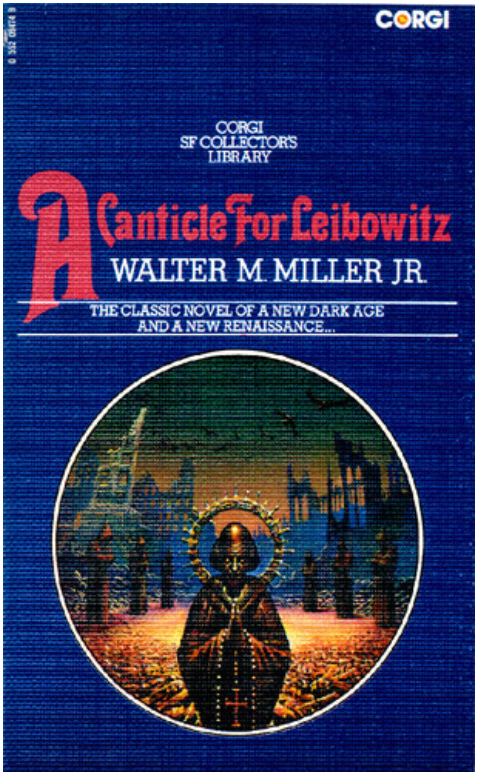
The worst thing about the book isn't its many sections which argue for both corporal and capital punishment; it's the general lack of a plot. Those who read the book under the assumption that it's a thrilling account of a space war will be sorely disappointed. The war is a McGuffin here and the Arachnids serve mostly as an analogy to Communists. The plot is Juan Rico, pure and simple.

Heinlein certainly threw a lot of himself into this book, not least his own experiences in the military, and it's fair to assume that many of the views that he proposes are his own. However, if I've learned anything from Heinlein over the years, it's that sometimes both sides of an argument contain validity. I see this book partly as a coming of age story and partly as a magnificent starting point for discussions in a whole slew of directions. Like so much of Heinlein's work, I find that I can agree with a lot of it, disagree with a part of it and still thoroughly appreciate the whole.

Starship Troopers won the Best Novel Hugo in 1960, becoming only the sixth winner, as this award was not given out in 1954 or 1957. Its competitors were as thoroughly varied in style as they have been remembered differently. Gordon Dickson's *Dorsai!* and Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* are books on my shelves,

albeit very different ones, but I don't believe I've ever heard of Murray Leinster's *The Pirates of Ersatz* and I'm sure that I've never heard of Mark Phillips's *That Sweet Little Old Lady*. Any which way, *Starship Troopers* surely has to be the safest winner of the Hugo for Best Novel up to that point. Even its naysayers seem to agree with that.





WALTER M. MILLER JR.

A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

PUBLISHER:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.

PUBLICATION DATE:
1959

WON IN 1961
AT SEACON,
THE 19TH WORLDCON,
IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON,
U.S.A.

Walter M. Miller, Jr. only published one novel during his lifetime but it won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1961 and has never since ventured out of print. It's really three novellas, each originally published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, rendered into novel form through the time honoured fix-up process, though they're very distinct in the finished work. The three were published in 1955, 1956 and 1957; the novel in 1959.

While *A Canticle for Leibowitz* was his only novel, he wasn't new, having seen over thirty short stories published in the usual magazines. In 1955, a story of his from *Astounding*, *The Darfsteller*, won the very first Hugo for Best Novelette. I haven't read it, or any of Miller's other short work, but I did read *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as a youth, so long ago that my sole vivid memory of it turns out to be false, something that's oddly appropriate given where the story takes us.

It's a post apocalyptic novel, but one that's rather unique. It's not about what caused the apocalypse, here a nuclear winter triggered by a global war, or indeed about the mutants who occupy the radioactive wasteland that used to be the United States. There are no zombies and it's not about survival, at least not in the way that you're imagining. It's about cycles in history, a pitting of church against state and about the preservation of knowledge.

What makes this work so well is that the latter is not presented as a good thing or a bad one, just something that must be done, even

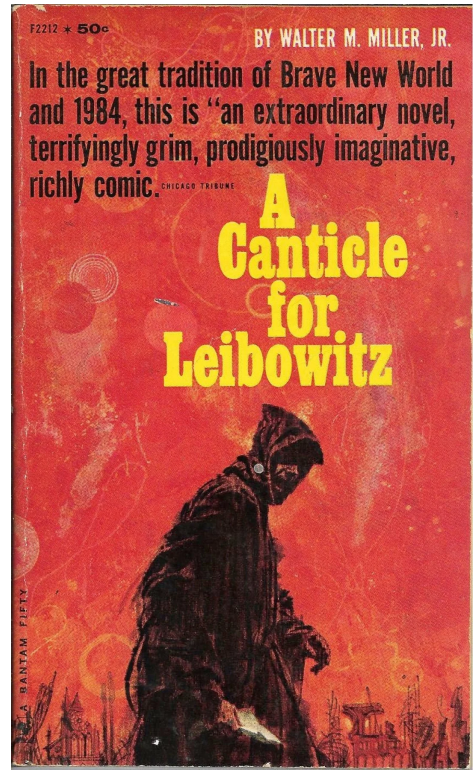
though the cycles mean that it'll eventually lead to an unhappy ending. The monks of the Order of Leibowitz, who are the primary characters, are bookleggers and copyists, dedicated to keeping knowledge alive in a new dark age prompted by fear and hatred of scientists, who after all made the apocalypse possible.

As we join them, in the 26th century, they have lost enough knowledge already that they don't have any understanding left as to what they're copying, but they continue to do so regardless. Brother Francis, a novice, spends fifteen years creating an illuminated version of a blueprint that's ultimately lost to a violent act. It's important because it may have belonged to Leibowitz, the founder of their order, having been discovered in a fallout shelter.

Its loss is disappointing to the reader, not just because it's still more lost knowledge but because Miller writes as if it's going to be important to the story. He builds up Brother Francis and his manuscript in the first part of the novel, only to steal them both away from us. It's annoying and I didn't appreciate it as a reader, but it makes sense. It's really the novel in microcosm: the world had all sorts of people and documents and the global war that destroyed it took them all away. Everything here is a cycle.

I much preferred the first section, *Fiat Homo*, to the other two. While the wider story, which spans more than a millennium, is enticing, interesting and an easy target for discussion, I struggled to get through it.

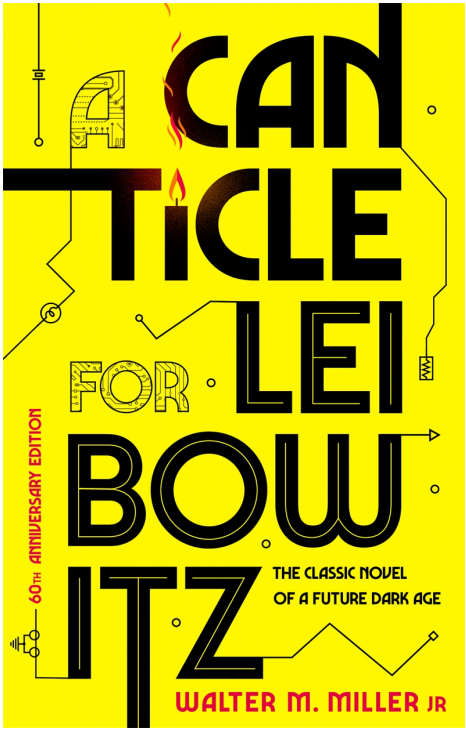
The first section is vibrant, as we see things both from the perspective of our young novice, Brother Francis, who has made a wonderful discovery and is apparently punished for it, and his abbot, who is doing so only because such a wealth of new material will



inevitably delay the nearly completed process to have the order's founder canonised. The initial discovery is made during a tantalising enocunter with a character who we later realise is surely the Wandering Jew. The hope in this section is palpable and it reads quickly.

Fiat Lux, set five hundred years later as the long dark age is ending and a new renaissance is beginning, benefitting from the Memorabilia preserved by the order, ought to be hopeful but isn't because the gradual rise of secular power feels threatening. We're kept too busy worrying to keep hoping. And then, *Fiat Voluntas Tua*, six hundred years on again, is acutely pessimistic because it suggests that everything has been in vain.

I've long fostered a mixed philosophy of optimism and pessimism. I firmly believe that,



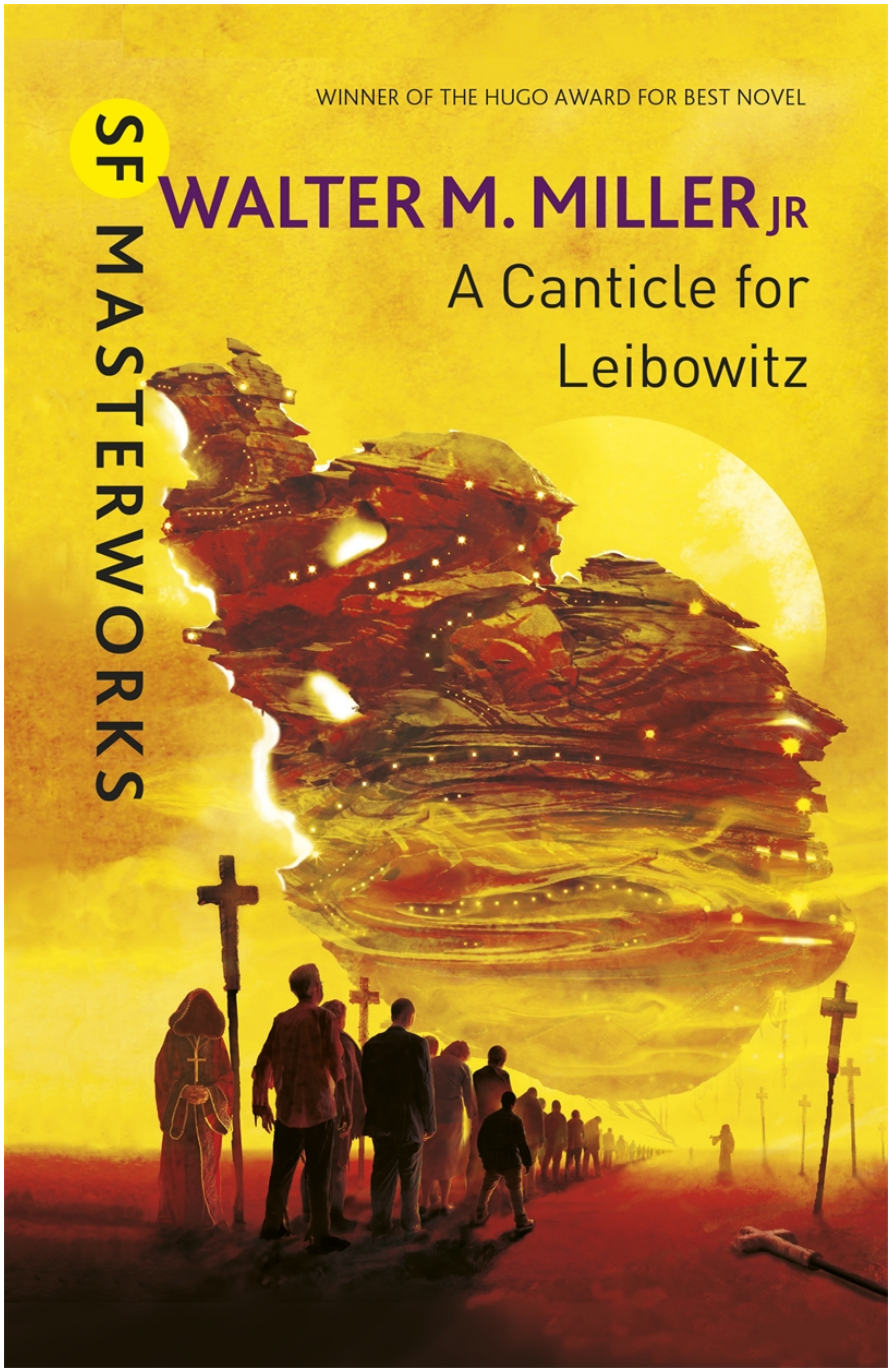
if there's a way for mankind to screw something up, it will, but there will be someone who will manage to figure out a fix. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, written back in the atomic era, reverses my philosophy. It suggests that individuals have a great and abiding power to do great things, but then mankind will use their work to screw everything up. I think it was that negativity that made this a hard slog for me, along with an overuse of Latin (as well as Hebrew and whatever else).

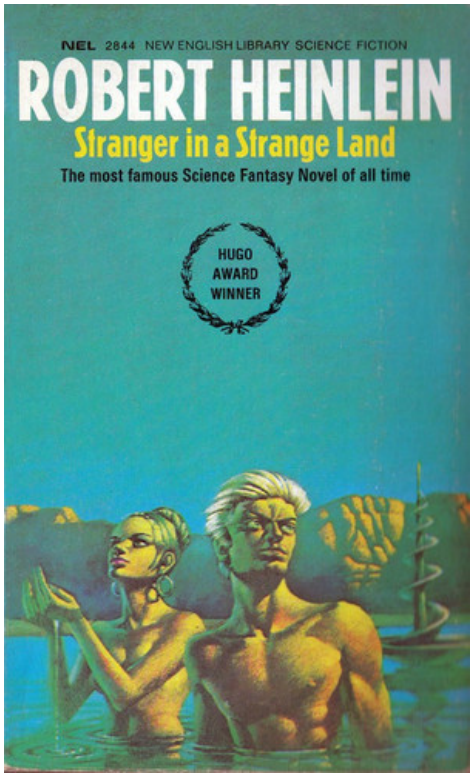
I get that Miller was exploring the cyclical nature of things, extrapolating his time in history into the harbinger of a new dark age. Looking backwards to the end of the Roman Empire, he has the church preserve knowledge until society at large is ready to look at it again, at which point a renaissance will spark vast progress. But, playing to cycles, such a newly enlightened world is inevitably doomed to failure. His end is both optimistic, positing that maybe we can survive this cycle, and pessimistic, suggesting that maybe we'll take it with us wherever we go.

While I had to force myself through this, taking three weeks to read it when I usually review seven or eight books a month, I can appreciate its strength and its power and its different approach. I'm finding these Hugo Best Novel winners from the late fifties and early sixties fascinating, because all of them are looking at the world around them and wondering if it's broken. The optimism of the pulp era was long gone and deep introspection about our lot was in.

Blish took a look at religion in *A Case of Conscience* and Heinlein looked at society in *Starship Troopers*. Here, Miller looks at both of them and, one year on, Heinlein would look at

everything in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The | times they were definitely a-changin'.





ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

PUBLISHER:
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1961

WON IN 1962
AT CHICON III,
THE 20TH WORLDCON,
IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS,
U.S.A.

For each of the Hugo award-winning novels I've been tackling, I read the book, take a lot of notes and, once I'm done, read Jo Walton's commentary on that year's Hugos. I don't always agree with her but I do here, down to a lot of little details. This is an important book, especially for its time, and it's tough to argue against it winning in 1962, but I have the same problems with it that she does, even though, like Walton, I'm a big Heinlein fan.

But let's back up a step. What's it about and why's it important?

Well, it was 1961 and science fiction was changing. Instead of looking out, at the stars and what might be hidden amongst them, it was looking inward. I noted in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* that four consecutive Hugo winners for Best Novel were all introspective. *A Case of Conscience* looked at religion, *Starship Troopers* looked at society, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* looked at both and *Stranger in a Stranger Land* looked at everything.

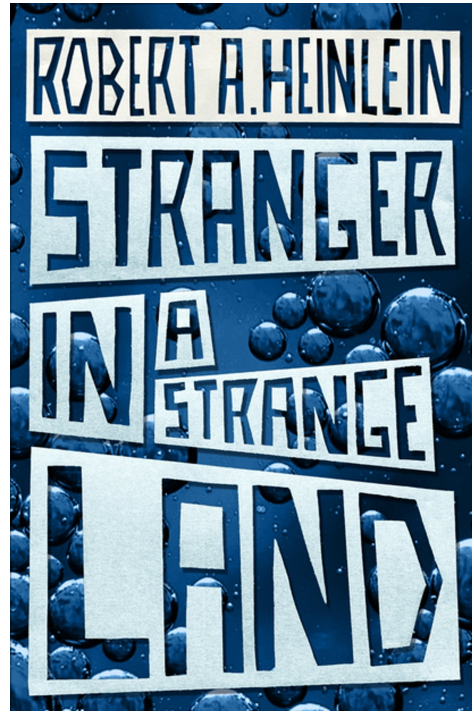
And really that's what it is: the author, through the main character of Jubal Harshaw (is this honestly about the Martian, Michael Valentine Smith?), expounding at length on life, liberty and happiness, not to mention anything else that might come up in conversation. He expounds on politics, religion and personal liberty, for no better reason than that the best hamburgers are made from sacred cows. Oddly, it asks a lot of questions by having Harshaw tell us (and whoever he's talking to) how it is.

It took Heinlein twelve years to write this book, so he was truly railing against the fifties rather than the sixties, but the sixties took his views to heart and this book made the retired Naval engineer, individualist and libertarian a darling of the counterculture. After all, he was preaching about free love and against the government and telling us, "Thou art God". He was happening, man!

And I think this is why I appreciate *Stranger in a Stranger Land* a lot more than I enjoy it. Heinlein was one of the first science fiction writers that I read and the first whose career I devoured. I didn't always agree with what he seemed to suggest, though I did a good deal of the time, but I appreciated how he never felt like anything but himself. He had a host of right wing beliefs and a host of left wing ones, because his mindset was his own and wasn't decreed by this party or that one. He was both fiscally conservative and socially liberal, again without seeing an incompatibility. A man's business was his own and people, including government, should keep well out of it. And, especially through Jubal Harshaw, he made us think about a whole host of topics and come to our own conclusions. I deeply appreciated all of that. Even when I disagree with him, a lot of why I think the way I do stems from reading Heinlein.

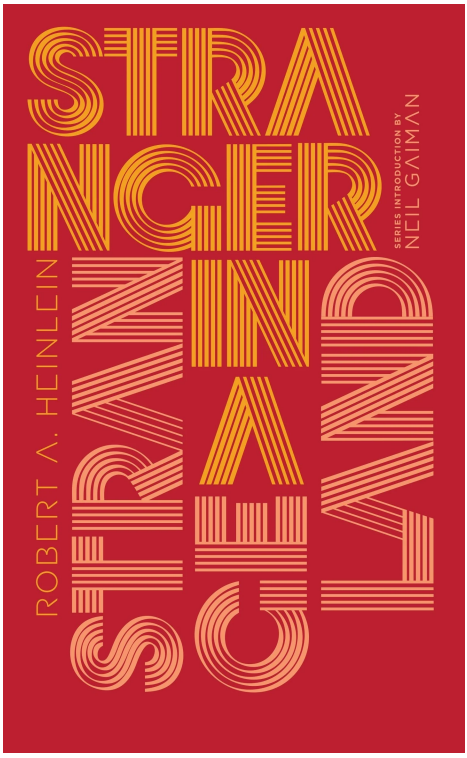
So *Stranger in a Strange Land* is important. Is it any good?

Well, like Walton, I really enjoy it when it starts. We've gone to Mars but the manned expedition was lost. A quarter of a century later, we went back and found a survivor, born on the ship and raised by native Martians, who sent him back to Earth. Being a Martian in every way but his heritage, he's entirely lost on our planet. Being insanely rich because of



his parents and a prior legal decision that effectively gives Mars to him, he's also a very large target. So, the book starts out as a wild adventure, one of his nurses helping him to escape his hospital, keep him from assassination and find him a place to exist safely and freely. This ends up being with Jubal Harshaw. It's all fantastic stuff.

Also, like Walton, I stop liking it soon after that and for many of the same reasons. It gets very very talky. Most of the characters are the same or, if they aren't, they become the same. And, as Walton nails absolutely, everyone is smug. Heinlein helped teach me how to think, but the characters in this book all know that they're right, even if they weren't in the prior chapter, and they tell everyone how it is, as if there's no argument. Harshaw does play a lot of devil's advocate, so he's better for the story,



but he's also the smuggest of them all. He's professionally disagreeable. I always got the impression that if he ever convinced you of something and you started to preach it back at him, he'd promptly take the opposing side and talk you out of it again. He wants you to think for yourself but he knows that, if you think right, it will be exactly what he already knows.

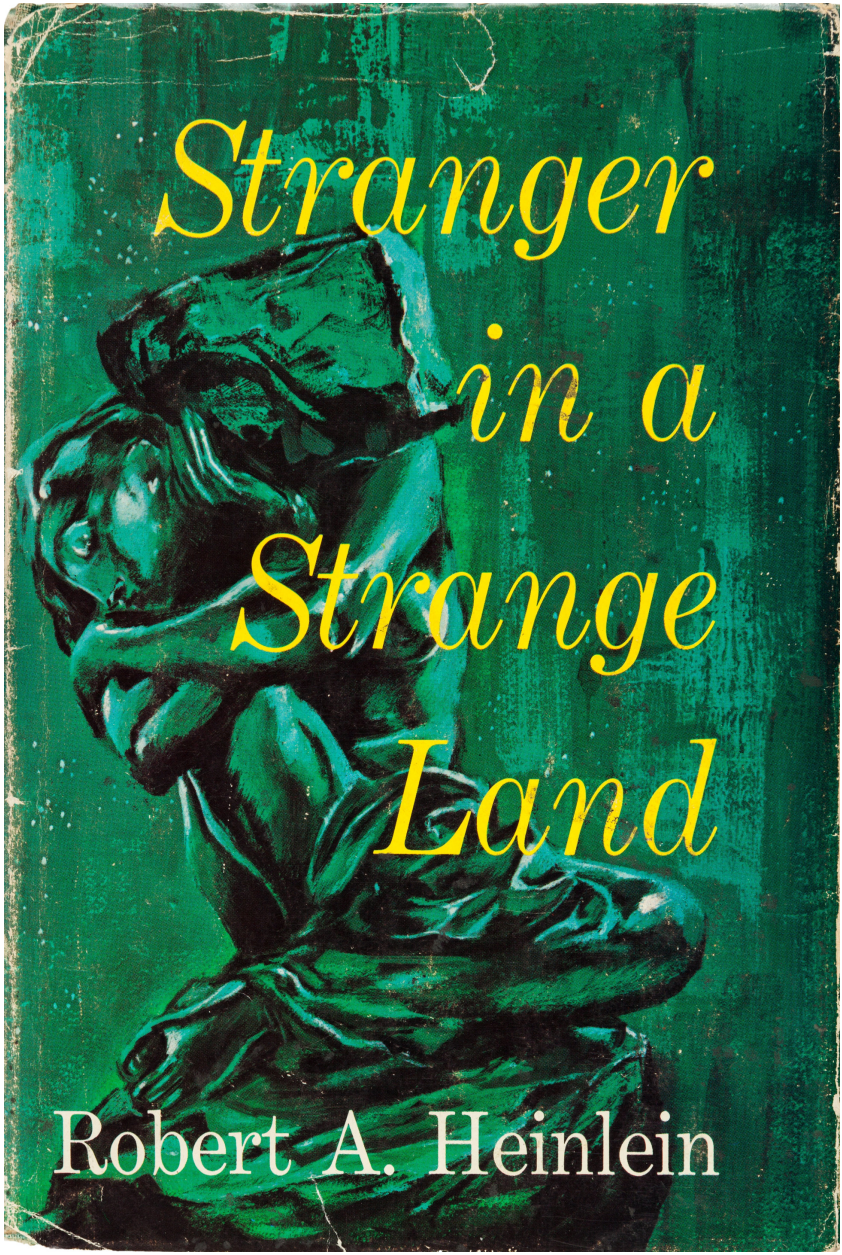
Another thing is that, while I learned a lot about tolerance from Heinlein, who pronounced women as entirely capable and made us identify with a number of his heroes before pointing out that they were black or Filipino, this is another example of how he hadn't got it right yet. In *Starship Troopers*, he had every starship pilot be female because they think faster, but all soldiers are male and women are the reason they fight. Here, he has Smith's mother be the engineer who invents the Lyle Drive which enables travel between planets to be viable, and the most reliable character in the book be Anne, the Fair Witness, but sex is always between men and women; all women, once freed from all convention, are willing to sleep with anyone; and women pop out babies at every chance they can get. He was ahead of everybody else, but he wasn't quite there.

I read *Stranger in a Stranger Land* long ago, after Heinlein's juveniles but before many of his later works. Unlike many of those other books, I had never gone back to it, so I found that I'd forgotten much of it. I'd adopted some of its language, like "grok" to mean knowing something completely. I'd never forgotten the idea of a Fair Witness, someone who, when wearing the cloak of office, has been trained to report on what they see without any assumptions whatsoever. However, somehow I remembered sections of the book taking place on Mars, which isn't the case. Most of the book is spent at Harshaw's house and the rest is with Mike on the road to his inevitable future.

And I'll cut this short (well, shorter) because *Stranger in a Strange Land* is a book that's utterly perfect for a discussion group. Heinlein throws pretty much everything at the wall for four hundred pages (more in the 1991 uncut version) and readers could spend their lives debating what stuck. Mike ends up creating a religion called the Church of All Worlds, something that one fan created for real. It's been around for over half a century now and is a federally registered 501(c)(3) religious organisation. How often does a science fiction novel lead to something like that?

Heinlein would win another Hugo for Best Novel, but it was six years away. I will find myself on safe ground there, because it's my

favourite novel, not just of Heinlein's output | but of all time, and one I re-read often.



PHILIP K. DICK

THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE

PUBLISHER:
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1962

WON IN 1963
AT DISCON I,
THE 21ST WORLDCON,
IN WASHINGTON, D. C.,
U.S.A.

For this month's Hugo Award-winner, I'm up to 1963, when Philip K. Dick won with his alternate history novel, The Man in the High Castle, which has a fresh resurgence of fans due to its recent adaptation to television.

For some reason, I have never read this one before, and I'm not sure why. I've been a fan of Philip K. Dick's work for decades, I have a large shelf of his work and I've read a good chunk of it. One of my favourites is *Time Out of Joint* which was published a couple of years before this one and which has a number of similarities in approach.

Dick dug deep to create all the alternate history needed for this book, but the detail is very much background for a story rather than the raison d'être for the novel. Sure, the basis is the old chestnut of the Axis winning the war, but it goes much deeper than that. Japan and Germany really don't like each other and there are tensions there key to the plot. The Nazis conquered the African continent and then wiped most of it out. They drained the Mediterranean. They created rocket ships for fast travel around the globe, as well as into space, because they've colonised Venus and Mars, not to forget the Moon.

And, of course, the former United States is now fragmented and occupied, as we discover first hand through the primary characters. We start out in San Francisco, now part of the Pacific States of America, run by the Japanese. We follow one character into the Mountain States, which is a buffer zone between the two

occupying powers, the Nazis officially running the Eastern United States and also practically running the South, a racist puppet regime.

All this is the grand stage, but we focus in on a few little actors who are unaware of how important their roles are. Bob Childan runs an antique shop in San Francisco, where he sells Americana artifacts to well to do Japanese. Frank Frink sets up a jewellery business to create his own work, after he's fired from a factory that only produced counterfeits. His ex-wife, Juliana, has moved to Colorado, and has started a relationship there with an Italian truck driver. These are little people but they have a strong impact on the world through circumstance.

There are two factors that can't be ignored here and they both play a major meta role in proceedings.

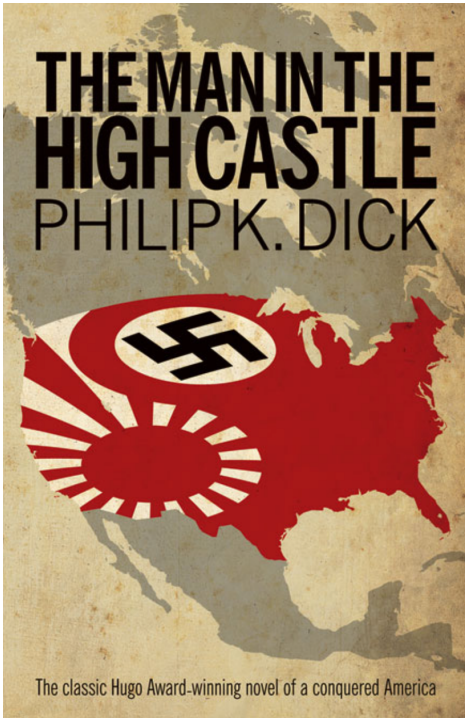
One is the *I Ching*, which is a real book of divination, an ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*. It grants insight and moral guidance to Confucians, Taoists and Buddhists and, in this book, it also grants direction to a number of primary characters, who consult it whenever they need to make decisions. Interestingly, a further such character is the author himself, as Philip K. Dick apparently used the *I Ching* to make many decisions about how this novel would progress.

The other is *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* by Hawthorne Abendsen, which is not a real book at all. This is Philip K. Dick, so we can't simply suggest that it's a fictional book within this fictional book; it's also a fictional alternate history novel within this fictional alternate history novel. In this book all about a world in which the Axis won World War II, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is a book about a world in which they lost. It isn't our reality, but it's a

lot closer to it than the rest of the novel and that's important. The primary characters each acquire copies and Juliana even travels to the High Castle of the title, Abendsen's home, to talk to him about it.

And yes, Dick used the *I Ching* to write a book that features Abendsen using the *I Ching* to write a book. This is alternate history in the sense that M. C. Escher might imagine it. Of course, the fundamental point is about underlying truth. Because Abendsen was using the *I Ching*, he wrote something close to his reality, even though he was living behind a facade that rendered it fiction.

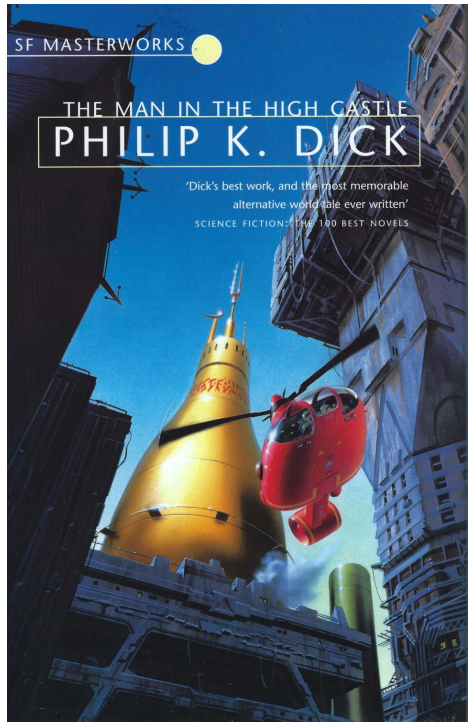
Of course, all this makes for a massively different Hugo Award-winner to any of those of previous years. Philip K. Dick is as far from Robert A. Heinlein as he is from Fritz Leiber or James Blish. *The Man in the High Castle* really

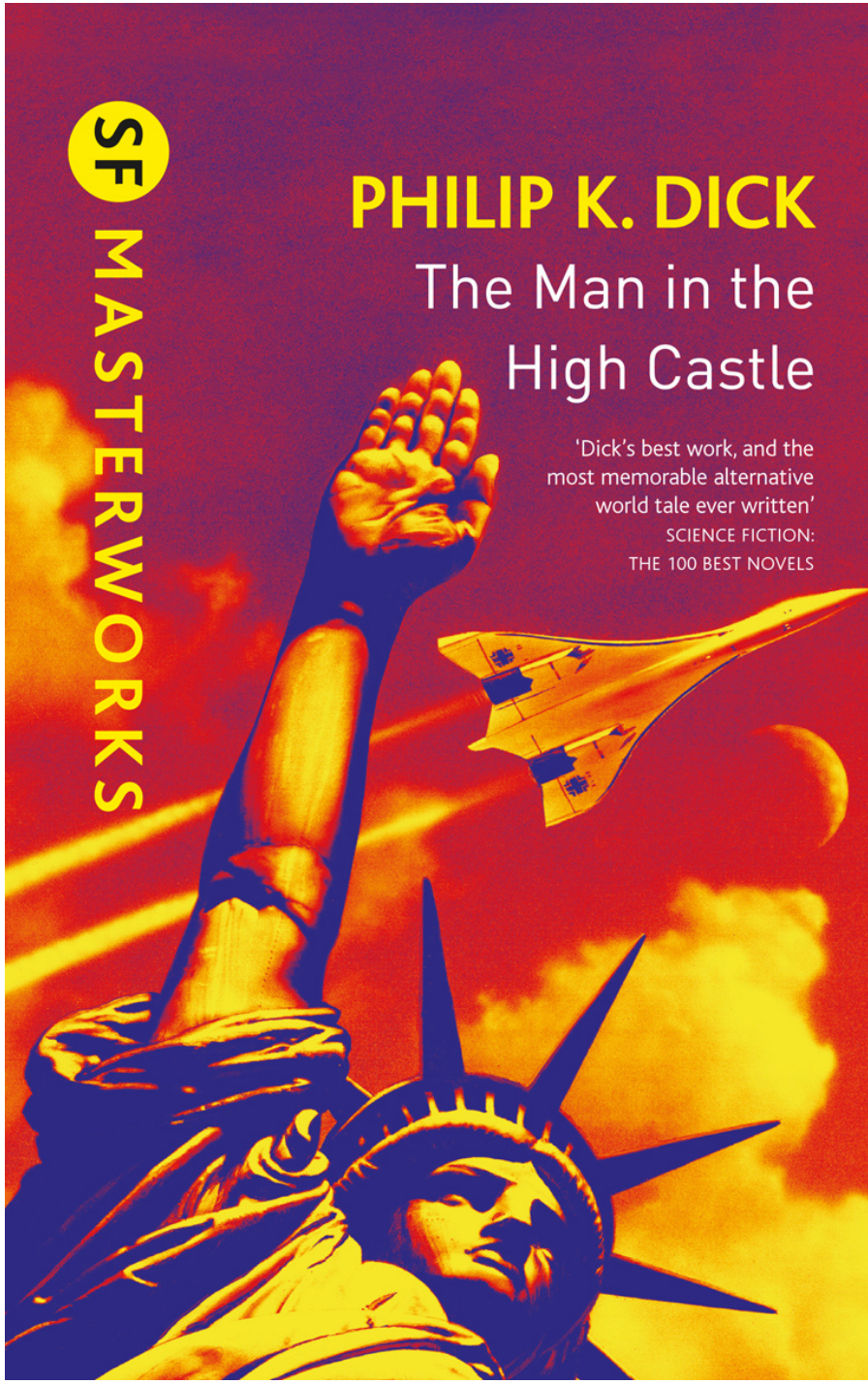


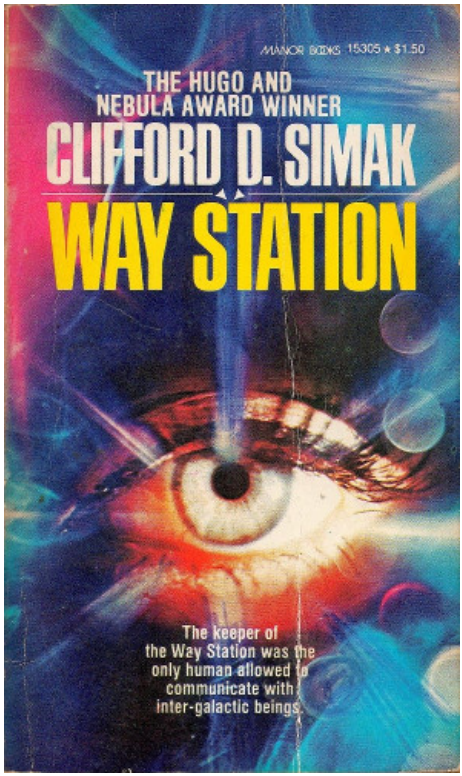
couldn't be any more different than *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which won the same award a year prior, if Dick had tried. Heinlein was tapping into a vein of hope in which anything was possible, which led him to become an odd darling of the nascent counterculture. Dick, on the other hand, was tapping into a firm vein of paranoia where almost nothing is as it seems with truth maybe hiding behind every facade.

And, while that's true for objects, like an antique Colt which turns out to be counterfeit and becomes an important plot trigger (pun not intended), it holds even more true for people. Most of the characters in play are not what they seem. This one's secretly a Jew. That one's secretly an assassin. That one over there is a defector and that one's a spy. This one's merely working a false identity to keep him safe. Friends are enemies. Enemies are friends. And reality and truth may be wildly different creatures.

It took me a while to get into this book. It seems to be set up as an action thriller, but it rarely actually is. It's a flight of imaginative fancy and it's remained in my brain. While I didn't enjoy it as much as a number of other Philip K. Dick works, while reading it, it pops into my thoughts often, even a month after finishing it. I wonder if it did the same for Hugo voters in 1963. It's certainly the sort of book that would stand out on any ballot as something special, even if it didn't seem that way originally, and it still stands out the same way half a century on. No wonder they finally made a TV adaptation of it.




SF MASTERWORKS
PHILIP K. DICK
The Man in the High Castle
'Dick's best work, and the most memorable alternative world tale ever written'
SCIENCE FICTION: THE 100 BEST NOVELS



CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

HERE GATHER THE STARS
A.K.A. WAY STATION

PUBLISHER:
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1963

WON IN 1964
AT PACIFICON II,
THE 22ND WORLDCON,
IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA,
U.S.A.

I believe Clifford D. Simak's *Way Station*, originally published under the title of *Here Gather the Stars* in a couple of issues of *Galaxy* in 1963, was the very first winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novel that I ever read. It's one of the first science fiction books I read, way back in 1981 when I hadn't even graduated to become a teenager yet.

I've mentioned before how I found science fiction. I was blown away by a BBC mini-series adaptation of *The Day of the Triffids* and, talking with my mum about it, discovered that it was based on a book that she had on her shelves along with a whole slew of others from the same genre. Eager to dive in, she gave me the Heinlein juveniles, the *Lije Baley* books by Asimov and this, the only Simak I think I've read thus far for no better reason than I proceeded alphabetically with Adams, Aldiss and Asimov; Blish, Bradbury and Burroughs.

What I don't remember is when I last read *Way Station*. I've certainly gone back to it on multiple occasions after large gaps, but it's certainly been a while. It's been long enough that it played differently to me this time out. And I'll explain why as I go.

It seems like a simple story and it can be read simply, but there's a lot going on that benefits from digging deeper.

Enoch Wallace is a conundrum and people are starting to notice. He lives deep in rural Wisconsin, in an area where people mind their own business, but, even there, people are starting to talk and others are starting to pay

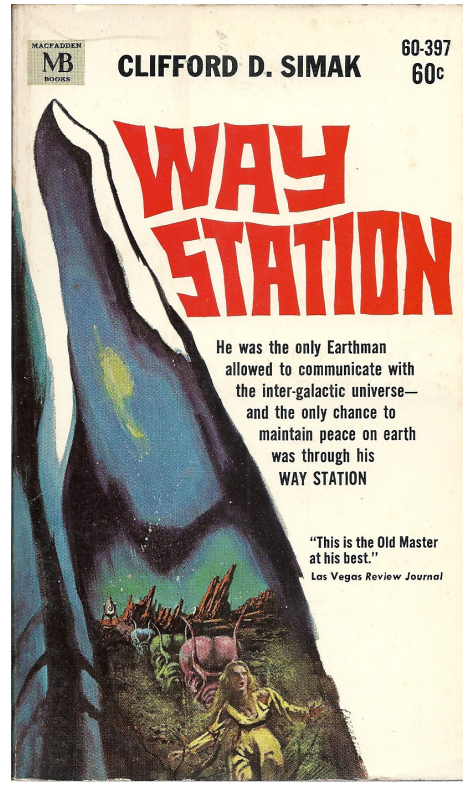
attention. You see, while he might appear to be a thirty year old man, living on a farm his family worked before him, he's maybe four times that age, a survivor of Gettysburg, a subscriber to *Nature* for over eighty years.

What's more, he seems to be doing quite well even though he doesn't farm his land, just sends a pack of gems to New York every five or ten years to keep him in what little funds he needs to sustain himself. He suscribes to a lot of journals and buys a lot of notebooks. No wonder the US government wants to know what's going on, especially as the farm has aged just as well as Wallace himself.

Whatever their guesses are, they're wrong. What Wallace does is no mystery to us because most editions of the book detail it on their dust jackets and back cover blurbs. It's right there in the title of the book: he runs a way station. Sure, the people who come through his way station do not hail from our planet, travelling from somewhere way out there to somewhere even further out there. They are not even coming to Earth per se; it's merely a rural stop on an extra-terrestrial railroad and they never leave the station.

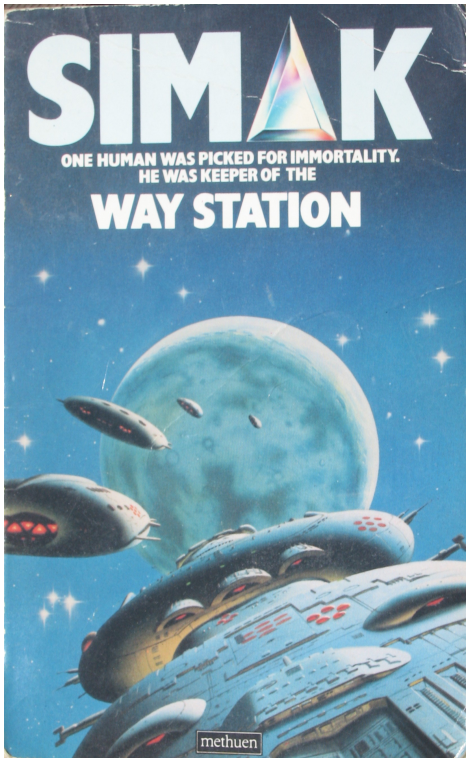
This whole setup enthralled me when I was ten or eleven years old. Wallace knows what everyone else on the planet doesn't: that there really is life out there in the universe. He also knows that it exists in many forms, with many cultures and languages and customs. He gets to experience it all as a host, chatting with his visitors as they pause for a moment there in his station, learning about them all, a part of something much bigger than his own world.

I adored that concept. I fell immediately in love with Wallace's situation, his small part in a big picture. I wanted to live in a house that couldn't age and didn't need maintenance, in



which I had a job that nobody else had and through which an endless stream of wonders marched, often with exotic, sometimes inexplicable gifts in tow, and even more often with conversation and a glimpse into the infinite. Never mind how isolated Wallace must have felt from his own race; he manned a door into the universe.

There are a number of subplots unfolding throughout the novel that initially seem to be unrelated but which all come together at the end. As a kid, I remember not being a fan of how that happened. Maybe it seemed like a cheap way to give the story an end when it should have carried on forever. Maybe it felt convenient in a story otherwise without need for conveniences. Maybe I just wasn't ready



for what it meant. This time, as a granddad closing in on half a century, I was more open to what it means and what it adds to this novel. It certainly did not feel cheap at all this time through.

There's a subplot about the government watching Wallace, but that doesn't go the way it would today. The watcher is a good man and, when he accidentally causes an incident far more important than he can grasp, he takes care of it as best he can.

There's another about a deaf mute girl who lives one farm over, who has no place in the world and is, in her way, as isolated as Wallace is from the human race. She finds her place at the end.

And, in a novel full of hope and wonder, there's a pessimistic side in which Wallace is sure, using alien mathematics, that the human race is about to destroy itself. This was 1963, after all. The Cuban Missile Crisis was only a year prior and the Cold War was in full swing.

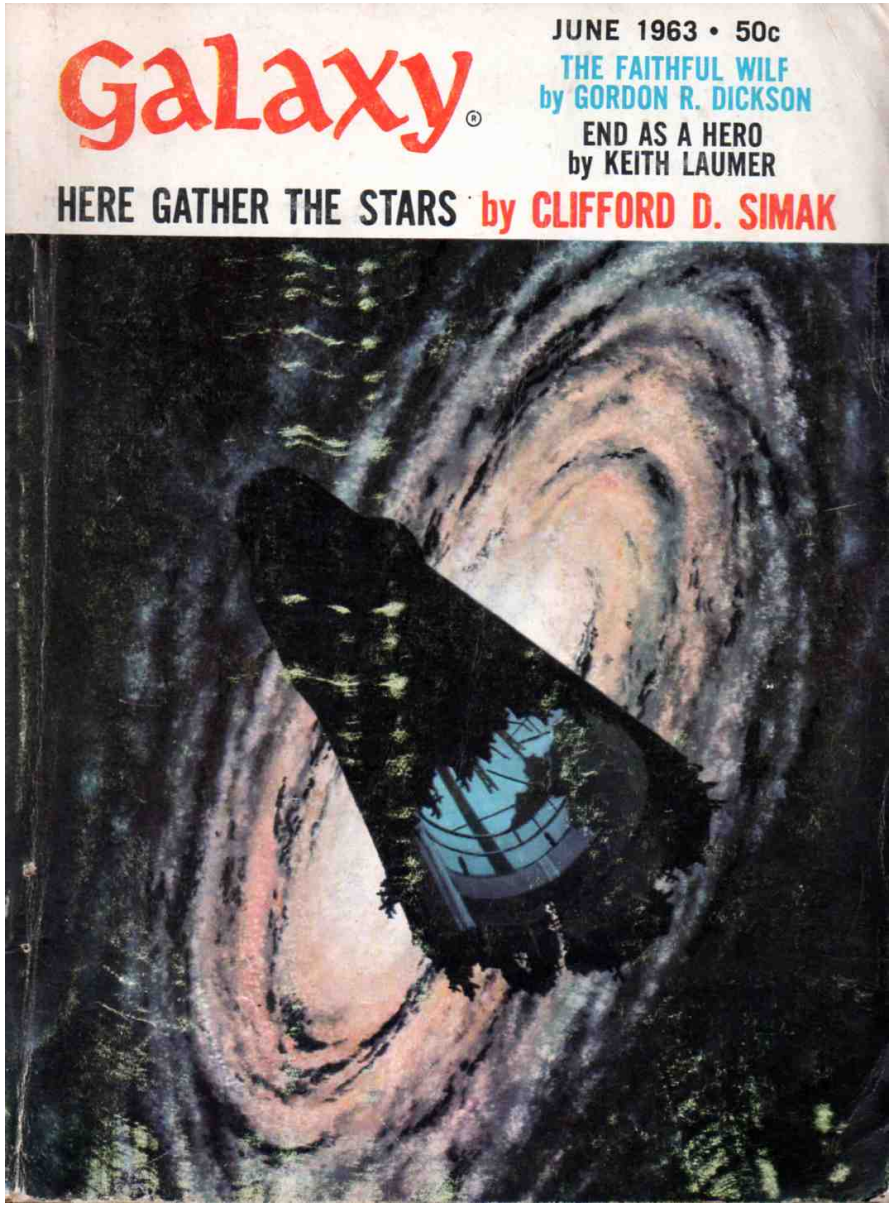
As a science fiction novel, it's mostly about ideas and they're surprisingly grounded in how we choose to live on our planet. There's some xenobiology but this is far from an Alan Dean Foster novel. There's some alien culture and learning but it's here because of how it can be applied to our world. Even the tech, of which surprisingly little is explained, has relevance, right down to the shooting range that Wallace had his alien employers build inside his farm; it's a sort of proto-holodeck with endless scenarios, a quarter of a century before *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

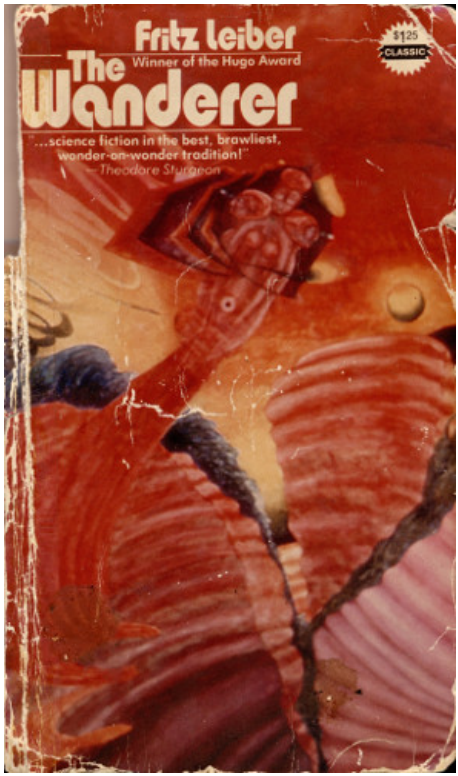
If my understanding of the book changes every time I read it, the one major constant is its tone. It's a gentle novel. For all the chaos that erupts at points and the ramifications of that chaos, it's a peaceful one, a cosy one and a simple one. Even when it's pessimistic, it feels like hope. Even when it's sad, as it is intensely with the friends Wallace conjures up through alien thaumaturgy, not understanding what he's really doing, I sympathise. Even as he sits alone on the other side of a sort of boundary from the rest of his species, I never doubt that he's on the right side of it. There's sadness too in realising that the rest of the world can never know that.

Even though it's been a long while, I knew that I'd enjoy *Way Station* one more time. What surprised me was how much deeper I enjoyed it this time and how intensely it made me feel. I realise now how rooted in its time it was, speaking to an era of abiding uncertainty and potential doom with gentleness, peace and understanding. However, I'm reading it now in

2019, thirty years after a wall fell and ushered in a whole new era. The doomsday clock has moved back and forth ever since but *Way Station* remains as timely as ever.

And that's why this tenth winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novel was surely the best yet.





FRITZ LEIBER

THE WANDERER

PUBLISHER:
BALLANTINE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1964

WON IN 1965
AT LONCON II,
THE 23RD WORLDCON,
IN LONDON, ENGLAND,
UNITED KINGDOM

Given that science fiction is so closely tied to publication in magazines, I shouldn't be surprised that the first paperback original to win the Hugo for Best Novel didn't come along until 1965. It's *The Wanderer* by Fritz Leiber and it's the eleventh winner. It's also Leiber's second win, after *The Big Time* in 1958.

Both his winning novels were new to me when reading for this project, though I'd read a lot of Leiber's short fiction and adore his *Ffahrd and the Gray Mouser* stories. *The Big Time* seems to be remembered better today and *The Wanderer* seems to have most negative criticism, but I think that I enjoyed *The Wanderer* more, as sprawling and oddly focused as it is. Maybe it's because it's such an unusual novel, not just for Leiber but for anyone.

The first unusual aspect is that it explores a story through an ensemble cast who appear in clumps which, for the most part, don't meet at any point within the novel or interact in any way. Sure, two groups do meet early on, but that's about it. Each of these characters is in the book only to highlight how different (or how similar) their reactions will be in the face of a common threat.

That threat is the title character, if it can be described as such. It's not a sentient being, but it does contain many of them. It's a planet, one populated by an advanced alien civilisation with science advanced enough that it builds such planets from scratch, fills them (yes, the insides) with uncounted people and congregates them around suns so densely that little

light escapes to suggest to us that they might be there. As the word planet stems from a Greek word meaning "wanderer", that's what many people start calling it when it emerges suddenly out of hyperspace to dismantle the Moon for fuel.

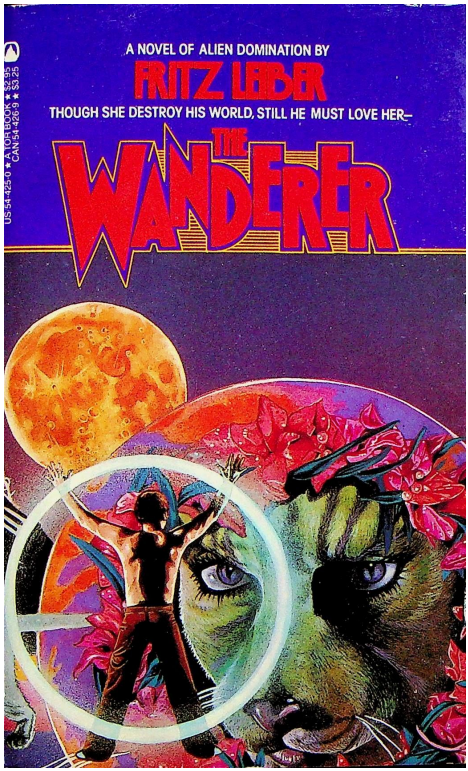
Of course, a planet of a similar size to ours appearing as close as just the other side of the moon means that this is a disaster movie in prose. All the various characters that are in play struggle to survive the resulting chaos of the Wanderer being so close to us. It triggers frequent earthquakes, prompts volcanoes to erupt and creates tides that are eighty times their usual size across the globe. As you can imagine, this wreaks complete havoc and the water in our oceans is hurled about to flood cities, carve out new seas and utterly reshape our map, blissfully uncaring about who and what might be in the way at the time.

Another unusual aspect is that the lead characters are a wild mix of people of science and, well, people who aren't, what Wikipedia currently describes capably as "intellectuals, dreamers, charlatans and misfits". This comes to be because the former, Paul Hagbolt and Margo Gelhorn, are en route to watch a total lunar eclipse from an observatory in California when they come upon a "flying saucer symposium" and stop in for the fun of it. The latter are the staff and attendees of the symposium, who range from skeptical debunkers to wild believers via sociologists and mystics. They're all still there when the Wanderer shows up.

I should add that this is an undated but presumably reasonably near future from 1965, in which the Vietnam War is still ongoing and the Cold War has continued to expand into space. The Americans and the Soviets have moonbases and the latter have reached Mars,

a chilling place to be when the Wanderer pops into sight to destroy their home planet. Talk about sudden perspective! Margo happens to have a husband, Don Merriam, an astronaut on the moon as the Wanderer appears; he's the only one to make it off safely.

A third, and even more appreciated unusual aspect, is that these characters could easily have become the spur for humankind to find the expected solution and save the day, but, well, they don't. Given the scale of devastation that the Wanderer prompts, I don't think it's a spoiler to point out that there is no solution, never mind a quick and easy one. In fact, one of the clichéd ways out of this sort of thing does crop up late in the novel and promptly dies a quick and worthy death. We try. We fail. The universe moves on.



However, that sounds emphatically depressing but this book is far from *On the Beach* or any number of modern zombie outbreak novels. Our primary group is always hopeful, even when they're confronted with horrors as unlikely as the Black Dahlia murderer back in business. Other individuals or groups express their own hope in their own ways, people as different as stoners in Harlem; a poet walking back to Wales; a smuggler turned treasure hunter at sea off Vietnam; a young couple in New York writing a play; and a gentleman not far into a solo crossing of the Atlantic.

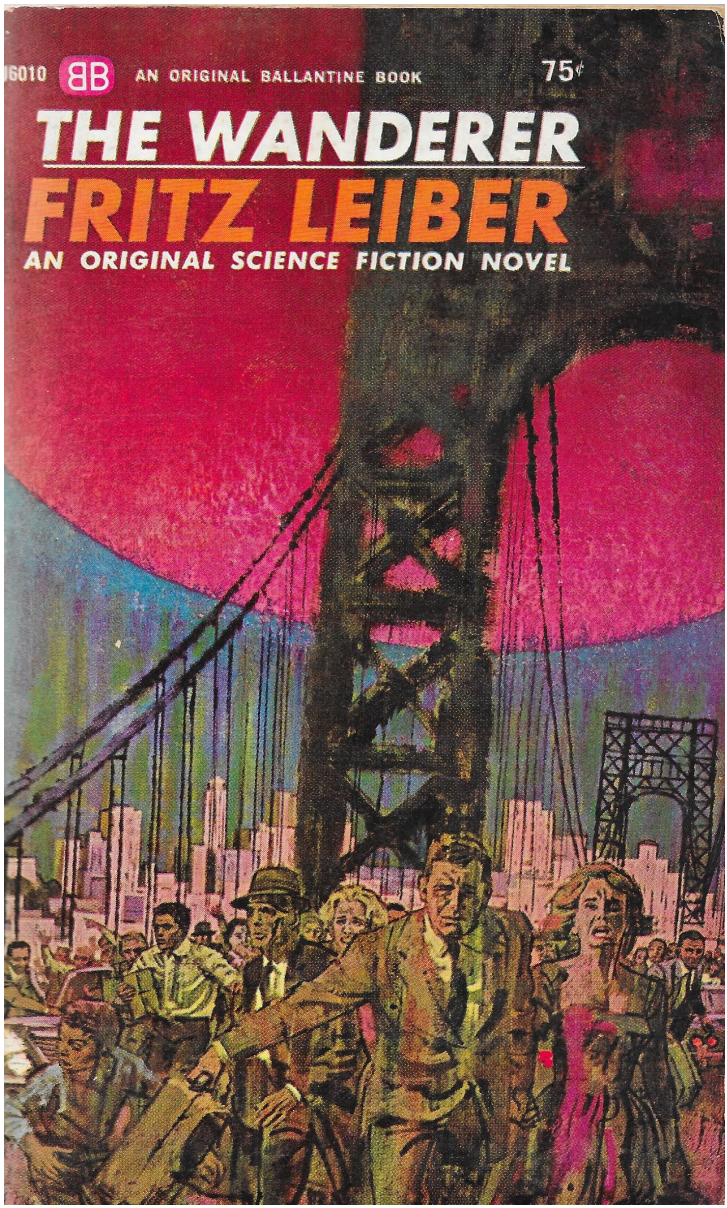
For some, that hope utterly vanishes, which is when Leiber suggests that we would all fall immediately prey to our sexual urges. There's a surprising amount of sex in this novel for a book that isn't salacious in the slightest. The polygamous man doesn't sleep with either of his wives and the non-married couple don't either. However, a young couple climax on a rollercoaster when the Wanderer appears, an abductee gets an impromptu handjob from an alien catgirl on her flying saucer and two high ranking military officers who hate each other decide to drown mid-coitus during a mutual auto-erotic asphyxiation moment. I can't say that I'm sure which one is the kinkiest.

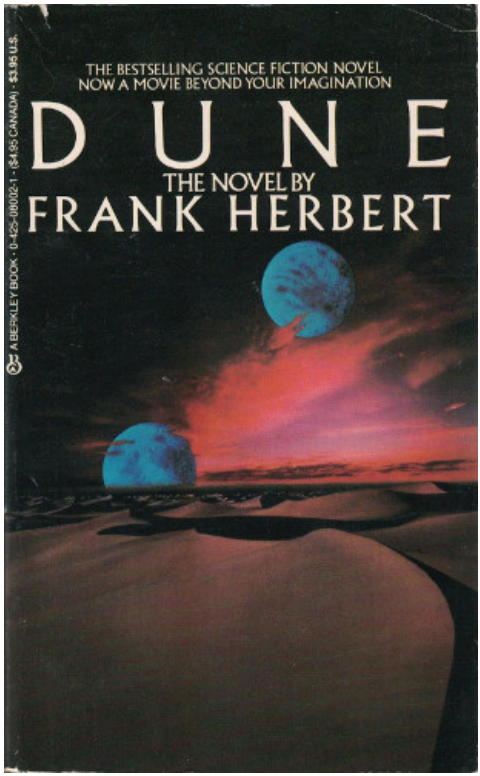
I do like how so much of this riffs on the basic idea of differences and similarities. One of the best points the book has to make is that the aliens who show up to steal our moon and simply don't care about switching on the anti-tide technology they own up to having in order to avoid destroying our civilisations, killing untold millions of monkey people like you and me and effectively ending our species, are "intellectuals, dreamers, charlatans and misfits" just like the folk at the flying saucer symposium who are our most effective leads.

I like less how science fiction is used within the book. It isn't a stretch to see that astronaut Don Merriam is an Edgar Rice Burroughs fan who brings those stories back to mind as his ship falls through the hollowed center of the moon. It's less believable that one of the Harlem stoners starts talking about Pellucidar during a walkabout. Mentioning Doc Smith's *Lensmen* makes a lot of sense, given where we end up. Creating characters for little apparent reason except to subtly parody other writers doesn't. Maybe the millionaire called Knolls K. Kettering III isn't supposed to be what I think he's supposed to be. I hope not but I doubt it.

I enjoyed this romp but, unlike the last half dozen winners of the Hugo for Best Novel, it doesn't feel like it has a fair claim to its prize

(while I'm doubtful that *Stranger in a Strange Land* was the best sf book of 1962, it is at least a credible Hugo winner because of what it did and its large impact as it did so). Annoyingly notable is that the last book to feel unworthy as a Hugo winner was *The Big Time* by the very same Fritz Leiber and that's odd to me because he's a fantastic writer. I should clearly go back to his short work and check out some of his other novels to get a bigger picture.





FRANK HERBERT

DUNE

PUBLISHER:
CHILTON BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1965

WON IN 1966
AT TRICON,
THE 24TH WORLDCON,
IN CLEVELAND, OHIO,
U.S.A.

There were two major changes in science fiction awards in 1966. The Hugos were joined for the first time by a second award, the Nebulas, whose winners are chosen by authors rather than fans. And, again for the first time, there was a tie for the Hugo for Best Novel. *...And Call Me Conrad* (better known as *This Immortal*) by Roger Zelazny won the Hugo, but so did Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which also won the Nebula outright.

Dune, which will see a second feature length adaptation released this very month, has been described both as the best and the best selling science fiction novel of all time. It's also one of the reasons I started this project, because I haven't previously read it and that makes for a pretty huge gap in my knowledge of science fiction. I have seen the David Lynch movie so I am at least familiar with a good chunk of the story, but I'm very happy to have finally read the book to see where all that came from.

It's an easy book to read, for all that it combines planetary ecology with a messiah story. I think what Herbert wrote was an adventure novel, but he did so with such fantastic world-building that it became something much more than that. Most of the book takes place on the dangerous desert planet known as Arrakis but we don't start there. We journey, surprisingly slowly, to it from a more recognisable world, Caladan, along with Duke Leto Atreides and his family, who are to take it over.

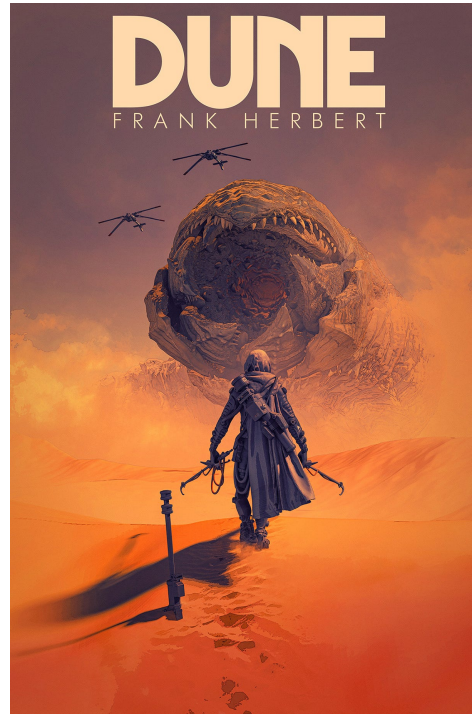
At this point in time, the galaxy is in a state of balance. There's the Emperor, the supreme

leader of all that's known, who's protected by a legendary Sardaukar army. There are some other Great Houses, all wealthy and powerful families who rule entire planets and form the Landsraad to adjudicate on inter-house issues. And there's the Spacing Guild, with a complete monopoly on space travel. We show up right as this balance is shaken, initially through the Emperor gifting the rule of Arrakis to House Atreides as the first move in a chess game that will wipe them out.

But, because this is a huge book, there's a heck of a lot more going on, not least the work of the Bene Gesserit, a sisterhood of eugenicists who are set on evolving their special powers through a secretive breeding program. Their ultimate goal, centuries in the making, is the Kwisatz Haderach, a superbeing who may now exist in the form of Duke Leto's son, Paul Atreides.

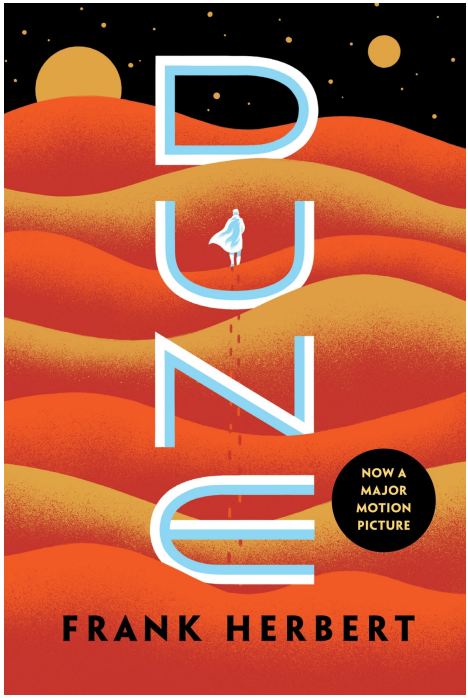
And there's the spice known as melange, the core product of Arrakis. This is a particularly crucial substance both to the Bene Gesserit and to the Spacing Guild, as it elevates not just intelligence but also other mental powers and so makes their work possible. It can only be found on Arrakis, where it's mined at great risk in the desert, and it can't be synthesised, which makes it both massively important and massively expensive.

And so begins the intrigue. One thing that surprised me were the excerpts of books at the beginning of chapters, given that they're all written after the events we're reading about and so constitute spoilers. We learn that this character will be assassinated, for instance, and that character will be the betrayer, before any of it actually happens. It might steal some of the mystery out of proceedings but it crucially doesn't strip the tension away. We might know who and what but we don't know when and there are other factors that we care about too.



Also, while Herbert conjures up an ensemble cast of characters, he takes his time introducing them so that we fully understand who everybody is at every moment, something that many authors have deep trouble with. Herbert makes it look easy and it allows him time to do his worldbuilding which is the most obvious success of this book. We're never lost, even as we move from planet to planet, city to desert, culture to culture. We're so aware of each of these that we feel at home in them, almost immediately.

I was also surprised at how soft the science fiction was. It's hinted that a lot of trouble had come from man relying on machines, so that doesn't happen any more. There are no robots



here, just good old fashioned dumb machines in the hands of human beings. The more complex ones, like spaceships, are given to people who use spice to increase their mental powers. The powers that be rely on mentats, again humans with increased intelligence and focus. Of course, the Bene Gesserit have plenty of training to lead them to results that seem mystical. This helps to keep a far future story timeless.

The real science is planetary ecology, which appears here as a centuries long plan to bring water to the desert. It's background but it's crucial. I adored the irony that Arrakis is the only source of spice, easily the most valuable substance in the galaxy, but, on its surface, it's water that's the most precious commodity. Everything about the Fremen revolves around water, from their culture to their technology. I like how Paul learns how to be one with his environment, as that's mandatory to survive, meaning that the book's title refers obviously to a planet and philosophically to its leading man.

Unlike many far future sf yarns, Earth is never mentioned once, but there's plenty that seems familiar to us. Herbert builds cultures, characters and religion from sources that we recognise, even if none of them appear in an entirely unchanged form. This part is Greek, that Scandinavian that one middle eastern. While the religion of the Fremen, the sand-people, is most obviously based in Islam, it trawls a great deal in from other religions too. What we know moved outwards and grew and changed and evolved.

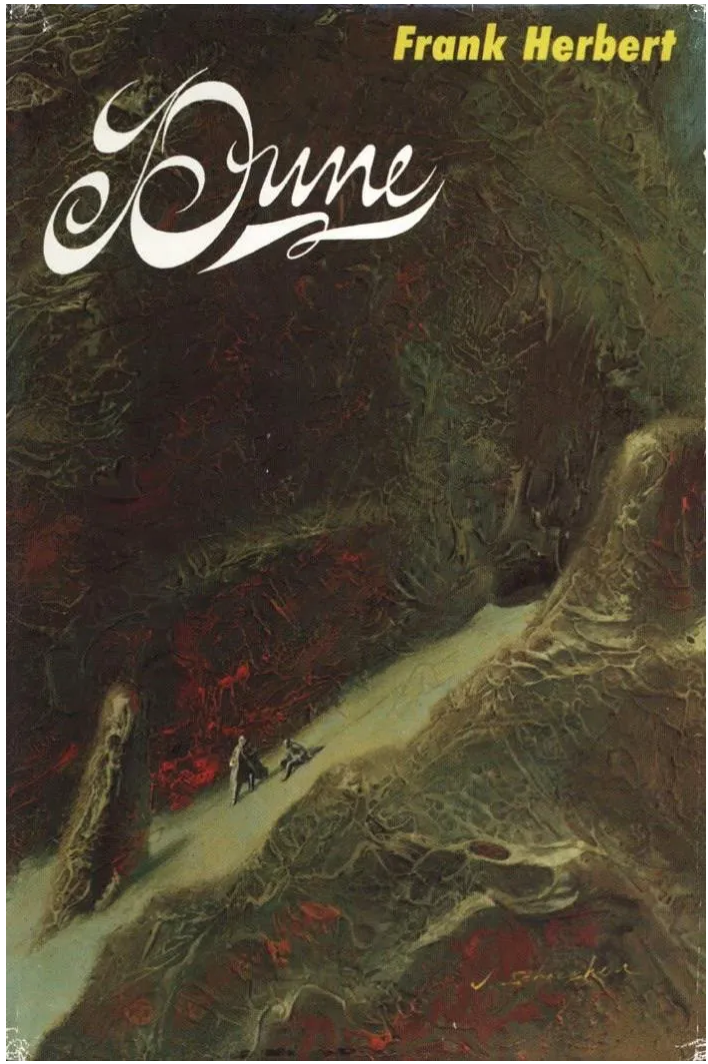
Herbert has been criticised for having a baroque writing style, but I wasn't ever held back by it. He captured me immediately and kept me all the way. If there's any baroque elements to his writing, it may be because the core of the story, when stripped down to its elements, feels familiar from books written by Victorians, like *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Again, Herbert is successful at taking what we know, in this instance history, and adapting it to a galaxy far away in time and distance.

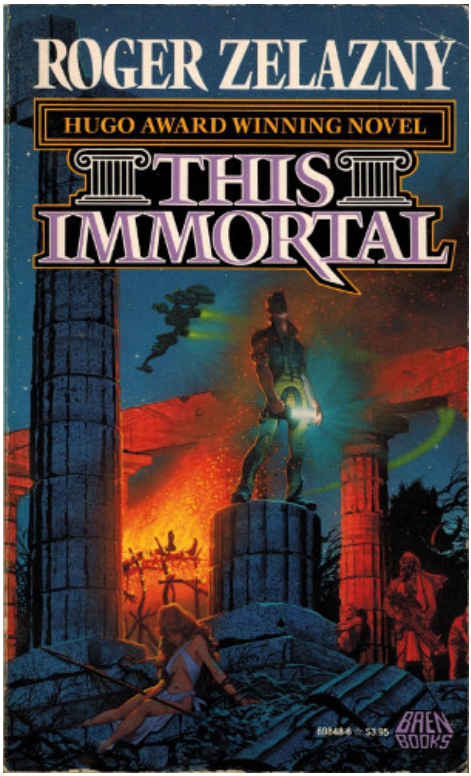
Another surprise for me is how simple that story really is. Herbert has intrigue positioned everywhere, with wheels within wheels within prophecies, but it's easily followed because it really boils down to the Emperor helping the Harkonnens wipe out the Atreides, with Paul escaping the massacre to follow his destiny and become the Kwisatz Haderach, who will gain his revenge. It's odd to find a legendary book of intrigue just a rise fall rise story, but there it is.

While some great and lauded classics end up

disappointing, this one doesn't. It's both of its time and apart from it. It makes sense that it came soon after Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, a title mentioned within the text, as it's another science fiction novel to lean away from traditional elements into mystical ones: drugs, philosophy and spirituality. The focus on water in societal rituals feels very familiar too.

However, *Dune* has gone on to influence far more than Herbert drew into it. I recognised a lot of things from later works here, whether big ones like the Prize in *Highlander* or small ones like the semuta music that influences the drummers in Alan Moore's *Ballad of Halo Jones*. *Dune* is immensely influential within its genre and without. Now, let's see if the new movie adaptation increases its range.





ROGER ZELAZNY

...AND CALL ME CONRAD

A.K.A. THIS IMMORTAL

PUBLISHER:
THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY
& SCIENCE FICTION
ACE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1966

WON IN 1966
AT TRICON,
THE 24TH WORLDCON,
IN CLEVELAND, OHIO,
U.S.A.

In many ways, *This Immortal* is the antithesis of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the novel with which it shared the Hugo Award in 1966. It's a fraction of its length, for a start, having been serialised a year earlier in slightly abridged form in only two editions of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, under the title of *...And Call Me Conrad*. It was also a debut novel for Roger Zelazny, who would win the Hugo for Best Novel outright only two years later.

However, it does contain some similarities. Most obviously, both books placed an entire planet into a balance, in this case the Earth, with one man tasked with saving it, who may or may not be a god. Also, both novels play a great deal with religion and philosophy, albeit in very different ways.

On another level entirely, both books were new to me in this project. I think I would have voted for *Dune*, had I been there at Tricon in Cleveland, OH in 1966, but I think I've thought more about *This Immortal* afterwards.

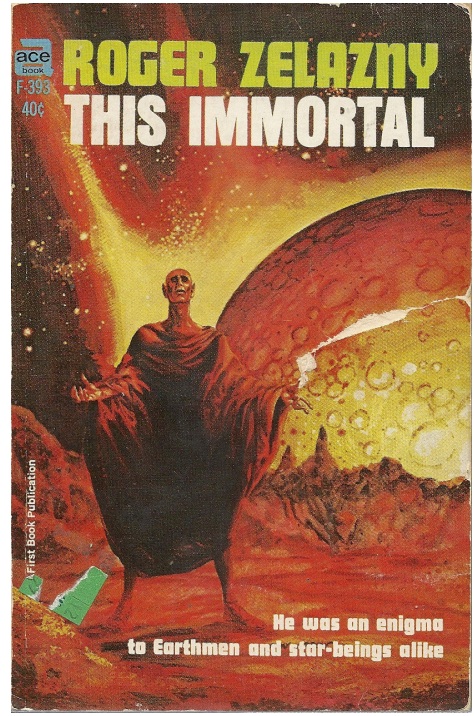
We're in the future and our planet has been devastated by nuclear war, in a conflict known as the Three Days. What's left is a population of only four million, living in an island culture because the radiation is lower on the islands. Compared to a typical post-apocalyptic waste-land, we're doing well, all things considered, but much of the Earth now belongs to an alien race from Vega, who treat it like their holiday home. One of them, Cort Myshtigo, is visiting and expects to be guided around the "old places".

Enter Conrad Nomikos, our narrator and something of a man of mystery. He's the immortal of the title, though we don't know for sure whether he's truly immortal or just long lived. Certainly he appears a lot younger than an old man who is apparently his son. Much is said about him and some of it may or may not be true. He's called a kallikanzaros, a sort of goblin/troll spirit of mischief from Greek mythology. He's called by a whole string of different names, which he may have used in the past. And he's the Commissioner of Arts, Monuments and Archives for the planet Earth.

While we're not immediately sure what to think of Conrad, especially if we know what a kallikanzaros is, we're set up to see him as the good guy and Cort Myshtigo, the visiting blue-skinned Vegan, therefore must be the bad guy. Vegans like Earth women, we're told, and they think everything on Earth has a price. Conrad doesn't want the job of escorting him around but he has no choice but to take it anyway and it starts to puzzle him. Myshtigo isn't what he seems, though he can't tell how or why, and he becomes driven to defend this Vegan from assassination, even though the likely assassin is an old friend.

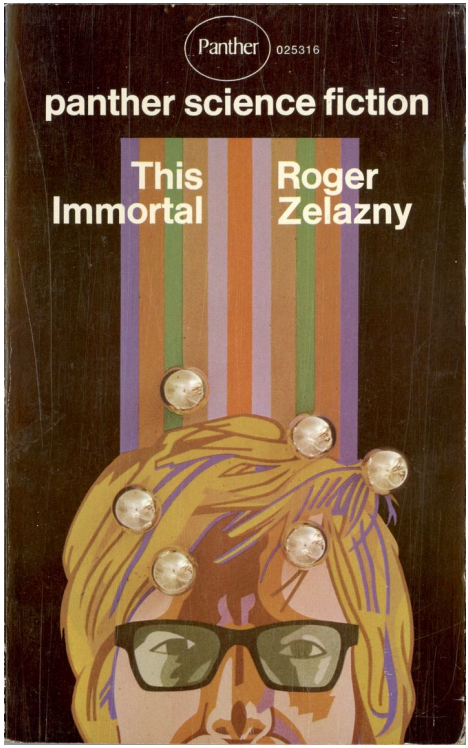
My Baen paperback only nudges past two hundred pages and the font size isn't small, but there's a heck of a lot here. However, I won't summarise things too far, not in fear of spoiling the novel but because the real story takes place in the gaps as much as it does the events we're guided through. Roger Zelazny writes in an impressionistic manner, showing us little things that together serve to build up the big picture.

He almost writes this as legend rather than novel, giving us one account of a particularly pivotal moment in our history that would



substantially match others, should they exist, even if it might differ in some of the details. A future historian comparing all the accounts would conjure a common truth out of them, which also may or may not be true, but would ably shape our understanding of a time and a culture.

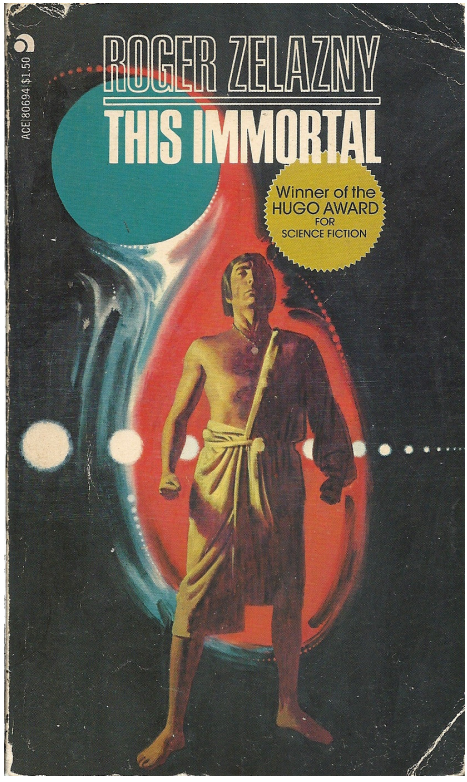
Little moments leap out like moments from accounts of the Trojan War, the life of Jesus or the Arabian Nights, albeit without any fighting skeletons. A man is possessed by a death god during a voodoo ceremony in Port-au-Prince. Egyptians are dismantling the pyramids to re-purpose the stone. We witness an attack by boadile, a forty foot long creature featuring the head of a crocodile that rolls itself up into a ball. An earthquake destroys the island of Kos, home to Conrad's wife, who is presumed lost, and he goes briefly mad, raging with his

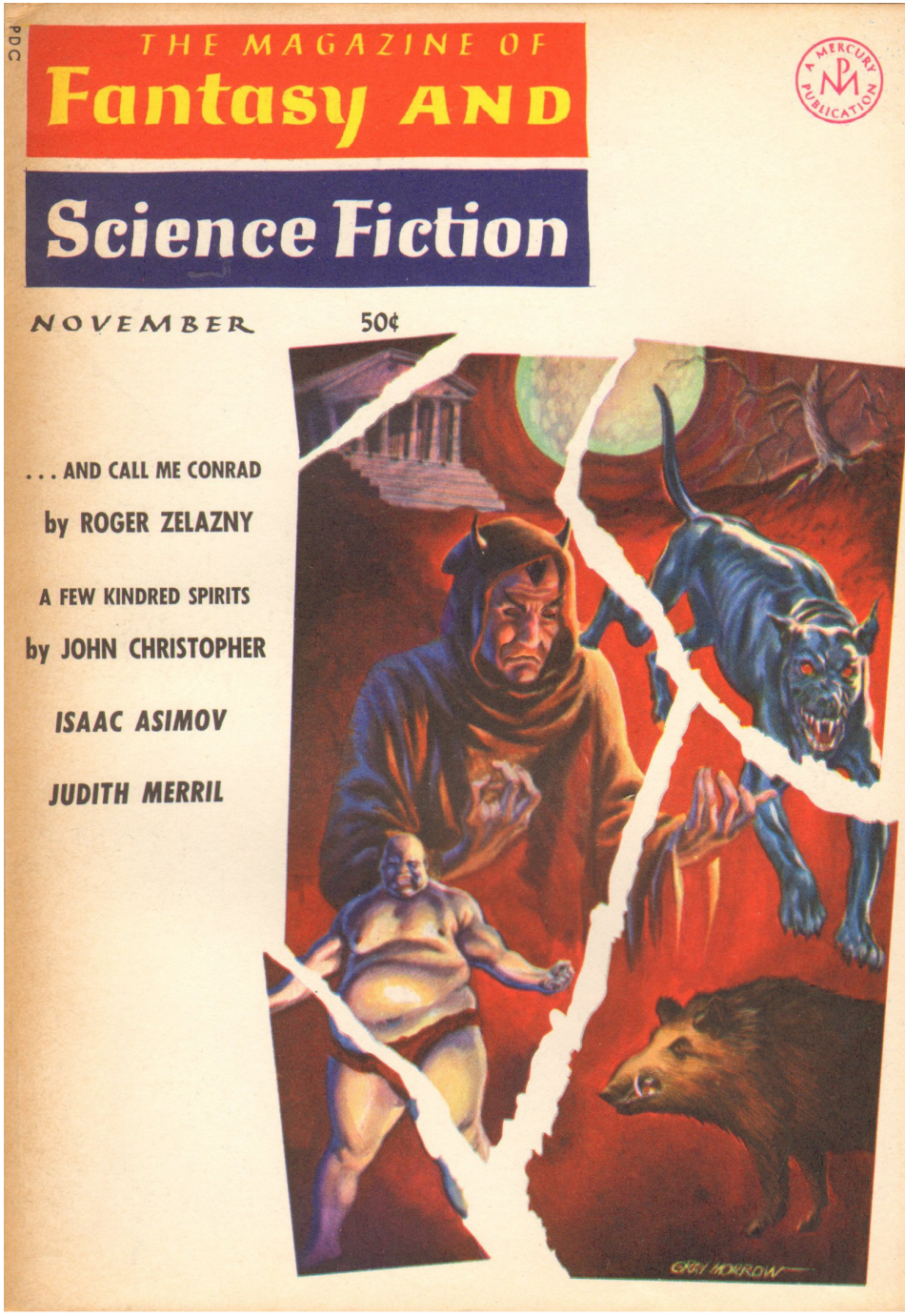


superhuman powers against a golem. None of these moments actually tell our story but they each flavour it well.

Best of all is a twist that isn't really a twist but has the same effect as the best of them. Conrad realises quickly that there's something important about Cort Myshtigo that isn't obvious and, like him, we spend much of the novel trying to figure out what it might be. We're eventually let in on the secret and it's a fantastic one. Once we have that big picture, we promptly reevaluate everything we've read and everything we've enjoyed suddenly feels all the better for now possessing the key to it all.

Roger Zelazny is new to me, though I have a stack of his books here in my library. *This Immortal* seems like a good place to start an exploration of his work, as it's his debut novel, even if he had a string of short stories to his name prior to it. His next was *The Dream Master*, an expansion of a 1965 novella that was adapted into the 1984 movie, *Dreamscape*, which I've seen. After that was *Lord of Light*, which I'll review in March, because it won the 1968 Hugo Award for Best Novel, without having to share it with another book.

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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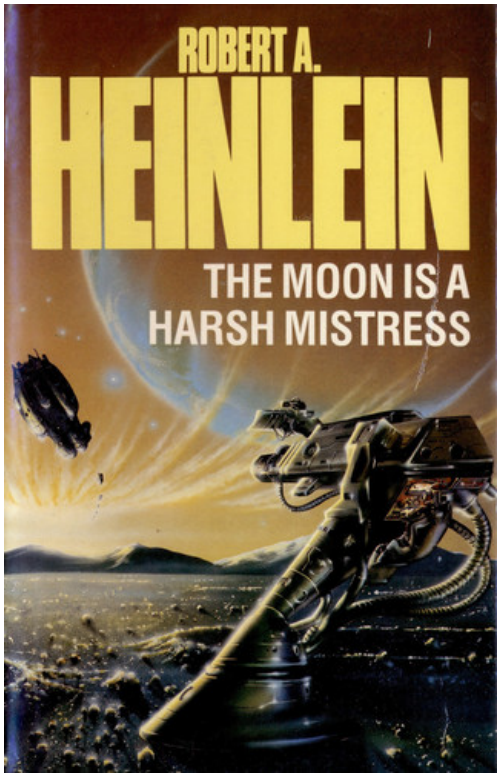
. . . AND CALL ME CONRAD
by ROGER ZELAZNY
A FEW KINDRED SPIRITS
by JOHN CHRISTOPHER
ISAAC ASIMOV
JUDITH MERRIL
GRAY MORROW



ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS

PUBLISHER:
WORLDS OF IF
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1965

WON IN 1966
AT NYCON 3,
THE 25TH WORLDCON,
IN NEW YORK, NEW YORK,
U.S.A.

The list of Hugo award-winning novels that I'm working through includes many that I haven't read before and many that I have, but I haven't read any one of them more often than this one, my favourite science fiction novel of all time. I used to re-read it every few years, but it's been at least a decade since my last time through, so it read a little fresher than usual this time out.

Bizarrely, it was nominated for a Hugo for Best Novel twice. Firstly, as a serialisation in *If* magazine during 1965 and 1966, it lost out to a tie between Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Roger Zelazny's *...And Call Me Conrad*, better known as *This Immortal*. A year later, it was nominated again, as a published book, both for the Nebula and the Hugo, losing the former to another tie, this time between a couple of heavyweights, Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17* and Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, but winning the latter, beating out both Nebula winners. Talk about some serious competition!

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress is a special novel and, while it always did a lot of different things, it seems to do more on each re-read. There are two very obvious ones to start with.

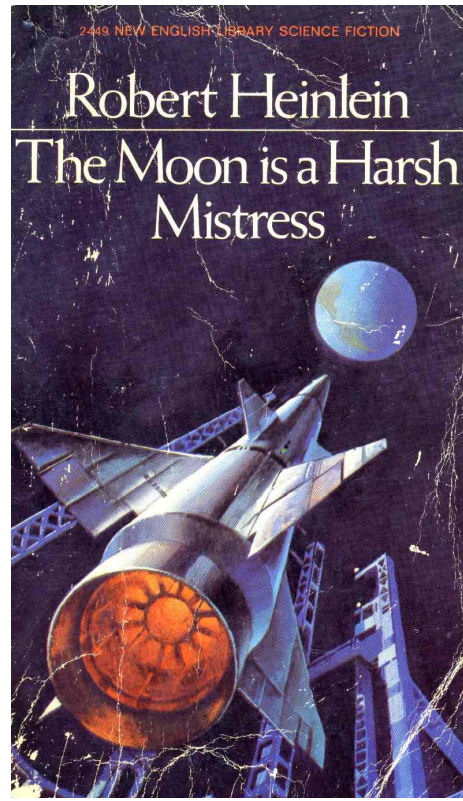
It's about a computer that wakes up, but as a child, an incredibly intelligent one from the outset but one with a penchant for practical jokes who has much learning to do. And it's about a revolution on the moon, to which that computer is an important part, perhaps the most important, ironically given that it's the Holmes Four supercomputer that belongs to

the very authority that the revolution plans to overthrow.

Both of those stories are fantastic. They're deep and vibrant and heartfelt and traumatic and I'm surprised all over again that the whole thing wraps up in under three hundred pages. However, as much as I feel for and care about Mike, that child computer, every damn time, it's the other stories that have resonated with me and have done a great deal to change the way I think. No, I never became a libertarian, although I'm often just as stubborn, but this book was the starting point for a very topical life-long lesson about tolerance and diversity.

You see, the Moon is a dumping ground, a place for the governments of Earth to send its unwanted: mostly criminals, but some political exiles too. Think Australia to the British in the late eighteenth century. However, just like with Australia, these Lunar convicts bred and the growing numbers of descendants who were freeborn gradually forged their common identity. One surprise to me this time through was in how little that translates to a wish for revolution. Sure, most Loonies despise the Warden, their token authority figure, but few despise him enough to actually put their lives on their line to overthrow him. Well, until this book begins, Mike wakes up and a few key players bump into each other, that is.

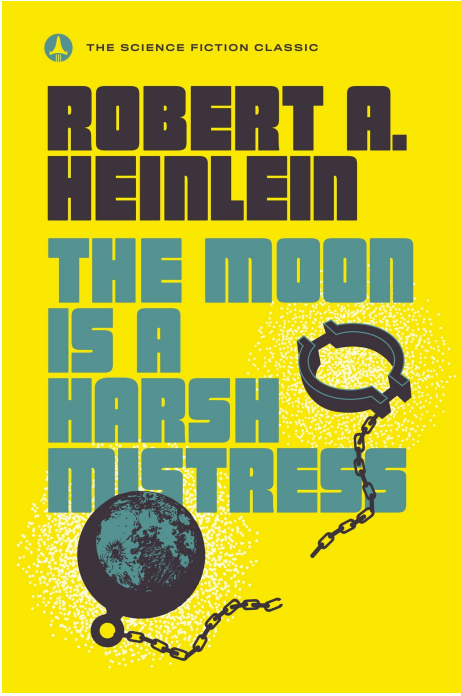
These key players are Mannie, Wyoh and Prof and even the names highlight a diversity that I hadn't read in science fiction before. For instance, Mannie is short for Manuel Garcia O'Kelly-Davis, born in Luna City with a very varied heritage. Wyoh is Wyoming Knott, a neat pun that fortunately isn't overused. Her convict father was transported and her mother chose to accompany him, so making her and five year old Wyoh "volunteer colonists".



She grew up in Novy Leningrad and moved to Hong Kong Luna. And the Prof is Bernardo de la Paz, a Peruvian by birth who was sent to the Moon for being a political intellectual. Luna is completely integrated racially.

The diversity doesn't end there. Beyond two gentleman of colour and one lady comprising that core trio, Mannie is also disabled, having lost his left arm in a drilling accident, though his high technology prosthetics actually make him rather more able than the others. Wyoh is a professional host mother who has birthed eight children for others, though none for herself, because radiation from a solar storm during her journey to Luna damaged her ova.

Mannie is also part of a line marriage almost a century old: he's the fifth husband of nine



and he has "seventeen divided by four" children. This gets him in trouble during a key visit to Earth, when he's arrested for polygamy in the American deepsouth in a scene that had an impact on me as a young reader and stayed with me. Not only is this line marriage legal on Luna but Mannie happily talks up its benefits, especially its stability. However, he's arrested on Earth for what is seen as a "moral" crime. That seemed unfair to me as a child who didn't grasp what it really meant and, the older I get, the more I understand why it's unfair and how it's dangerous to judge others according to my personal standards or any others I can conjure up from any source.

You see, line marriages and other unusual forms of matrimony are commonplace on the Moon (Wyoh married twins at fifteen) because two specific conditions exist to shape Loonie society. One is that men outnumber women to a massive degree, leading to a culture where women are especially valued and so always get their way. The other is that Luna is an anarchist society with zero laws (just a set of rules applied by the authority) but easy to access airlocks. Anyone who causes trouble is quickly and permanently removed from that society, which becomes just a little bit more polite and a little more focused on reputation.

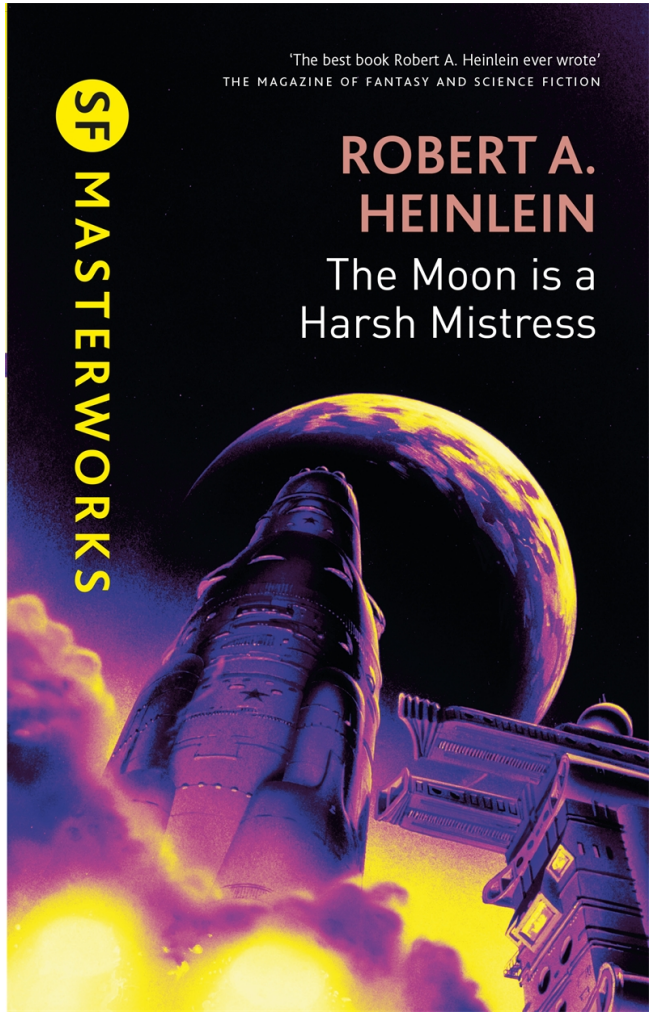
Heinlein does a fantastic job of creating this unusual society, not least by telling this story in the hybrid language of Luna which includes words borrowed from a host of languages and dialects, most overtly Russian and Australian, and which is lacking the definite article in Slavic style. It's eminently readable (far more so than the Nadsat slang of *A Clockwork Orange*) but different enough to underline how Luna isn't us on the moon, it's a uniquely polyglot society that has its own identity.

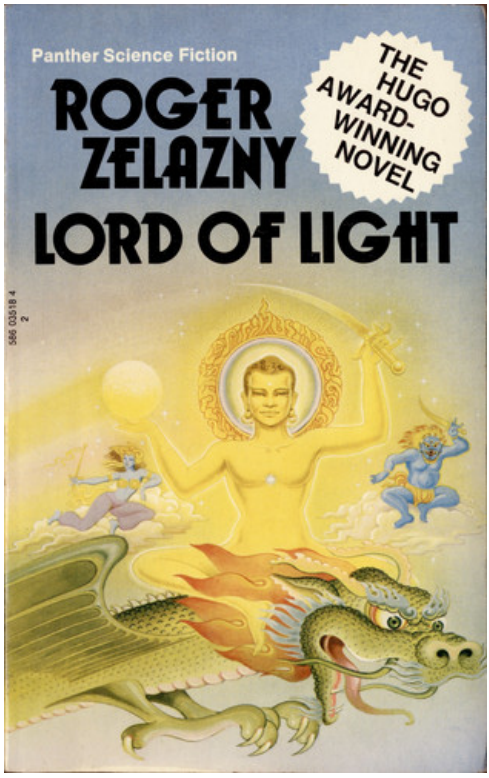
It's always fascinating to talk politics and Robert Heinlein, because he's a writer who has been condemned for being a fascist (*Starship Troopers*) but who was also a darling of the hippie movement (*Stranger in a Strange Land*) as a progressive thinker. He's often considered a Libertarian, but he really had his own politics which sit very closely to Prof. de la Paz, who considers himself a rational anarchist. "I am free, no matter what rules surround me," he tells Wyoh. "If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free, because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything that I do."

There's so much here to absorb, obviously or by osmosis, that it really does warrant multiple readings over multiple years. It's a book that never stays static; it grows as we grow and we grasp more of it. While there are

lessons in many of Heinlein's books, there are so many in this one and they're so layered that we can't catch them all, certainly on our first time through. Best of all, they're expressed without any preaching, which is a welcome change from *Stranger in a Strange Land*. They're also condensed so well that they fit alongside multiple stories within an outrageously small page count. Ian McDonald didn't get remotely this deep with his Luna books and they were a trilogy.

I've only scratched the surface here and I'm not going to write ten thousand words in a review, which would be easy. I'll shut up by suggesting that this is one of the truly pivotal science fiction novels. If you haven't read it, you should. If you haven't read it recently, it's probably a decent time to reread it. Heinlein certainly doesn't get everything right, but he just as certainly tried and the attempts are as important as the successes. Best novel ever.





ROGER ZELAZNY

LORD OF LIGHT

PUBLISHER:
THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY
& SCIENCE FICTION
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1967

WON IN 1968
AT BAYCON,
THE 26TH WORLDCON,
IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA,
U.S.A.

Real life as the sixties started to come to a close was tumultuous, to say the least, and it's not surprising to find science fiction following suit. The Hugo for Best Novel in 1968 went to Roger Zelazny for the second time in three years. He won first with his debut novel, *...And Call Me Conrad*, mostly better known nowadays as *This Immortal*, and I rather liked that book. Unfortunately, much of what I didn't like grew into *Lord of Light*.

I struggled early and often with this book and really can't say that I found much enjoyment in it. What worked for me were its core ideas, which are notably wild and wonderful. Two thirds of the way through, I found myself explaining what was going on to my better half because they're exactly the sort of ideas to pass on. This would be a great choice for a book discussion, because there's so much here to talk about, in hindsight, from the ideas to the way that the author chose to frame the story that explores them.

But in hindsight, after reading the entire book, because it takes a while to make sense and it all sounds better than it actually is.

For a start, it's a set of linked stories much more than a novel, two of its seven chapters published separately in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Also, these chapters are not presented in order, the first an introduction, after which we leap into flashback for the next five, and then a climactic final chapter that continues from the first. The initial problem I found was that I didn't realise this until a long

way in.

Partly this is due to the flashback chapters taking place in isolation from each other with sometimes vast periods of time in between them. They don't just roll onwards. Some of the characters, being effectively immortal by shifting their consciousness into new bodies as a technological form of reincarnation, have multiple names and multiple bodies, which are completely different ages, so it's tough to keep track of who's who, especially when they act in utterly different ways at different points in time. I experienced many light bulb moments as I realised so and so was also whosit.

It's also in part because, on a first reading without a bigger picture in mind, there seems to be no reason whatsoever for us to be told these seven particular stories in this particular order. It all seems highly arbitrary. I often wondered if Zelazny actually had a point to all this or whether he was just happy to philosophise at us for hundreds of pages at a time. Even the genre is hard to nail down, because this is a science fiction story that's predominantly told as fantasy and that's deliberately jarring much of the time.

Eventually, it all makes sense and I'll try to explain so, if you're new to this one too, you can avoid a lot of the pain. We're on an alien planet in a dark age for the dominant population, which is "human", even though the Hindu gods are real and living up to the myths we know. That's because they're not gods at all; they're actual humans from Earth (here called Urath) who arrived on this planet on a colony ship. Their advanced technology allows them to pretend to be gods and so "guide" the civilisation of the natives.

The core of the novel is a conflict between these "gods". Most of them seem to be happy

to preserve the status quo, leaving the natives in the dark ages by suppressing technology like the printing press when it shows up, so they can lounge around in Heaven, in the form of a domed city and forest that's situated on the North Pole, living the good life. However, Sam is an Accelerationist, so believing that the right way forward is to gradually introduce a stream of technology to the native population. By the end of the book, this turns into war.

I love this core idea and there's a heck of a lot more to it than I've explained above in a skimpy couple of paragraphs.

The First, who are the surviving members of the crew of the Star of India, transplanted an entire culture onto a new planet for the sole reason of perpetuating their own power. That is a huge concept. They each adopt a godly persona, one of the Hindu deities, and shuffle around if one is killed so that they appear to

be immortal. And they're not far off, because reincarnation is a reality here through body transfer, reserved for the gods themselves or a few others who are seen as appropriate. That leads to the full caste system and a whole textbook in worldbuilding.

The next genius step is for Sam to then undermine this age-old system by becoming the Buddha. Could there be a better way to turn people away from a religion than by founding another one? Best of all, while he's a fake Buddha with his major hidden agenda, he manages to convert an assassin sent by his opponents and that assassin happens to gain enlightenment, effectively providing a real validity to the fake religion. There are so many levels here.

In a way, this is one humungous LARP, with a planet as a playground and eons as a time-frame, where one player decides to change the rules during the game, to an overwhelmingly negative approach from the rest. Oh, and millions are part of the game without even knowing it. There are so many ways to look at what the author did here and each may add to our understanding of why it was seen as a special achievement back in 1968.

One way is to look at it as layered myth. A bunch of people create myths out of whole cloth, which over time generate other myths. We're given a bunch of stories that could be seen themselves as myths. And, the net result of these myths that we're given is to create more myths. What's the truth here? Does it really matter? When given a choice between the truth and the legend, print the legend, right? Thank you, *Liberty Valance*.

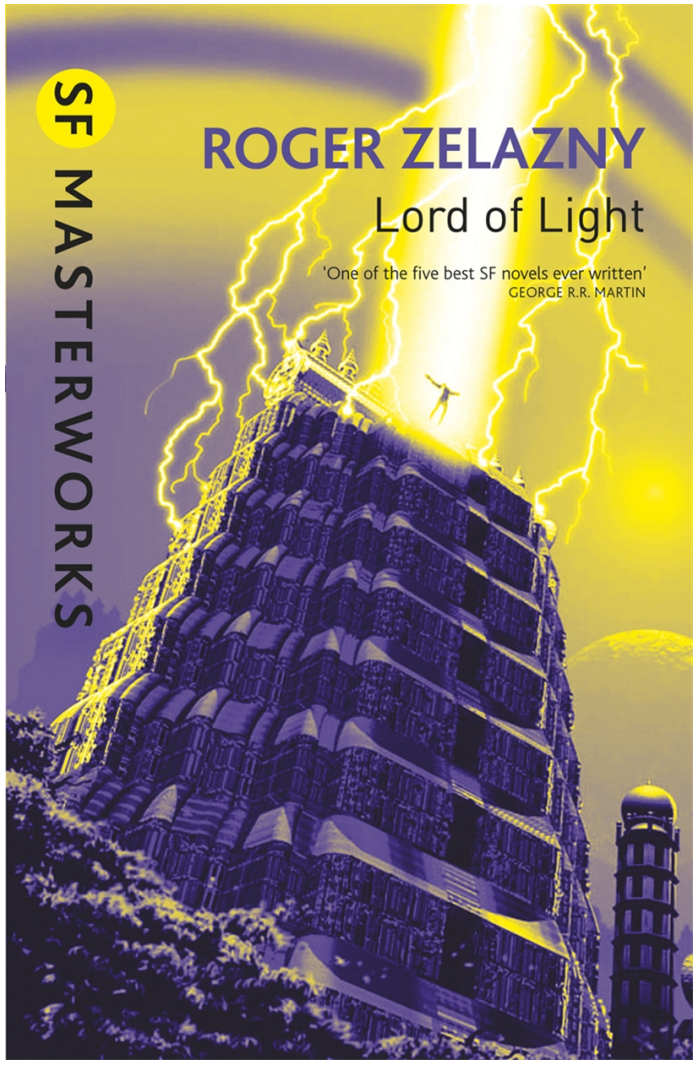
I love the ideas and I'm sure that, over time, they'll resonate more and more as I realise some other aspect that I hadn't considered before. This is deep stuff indeed.

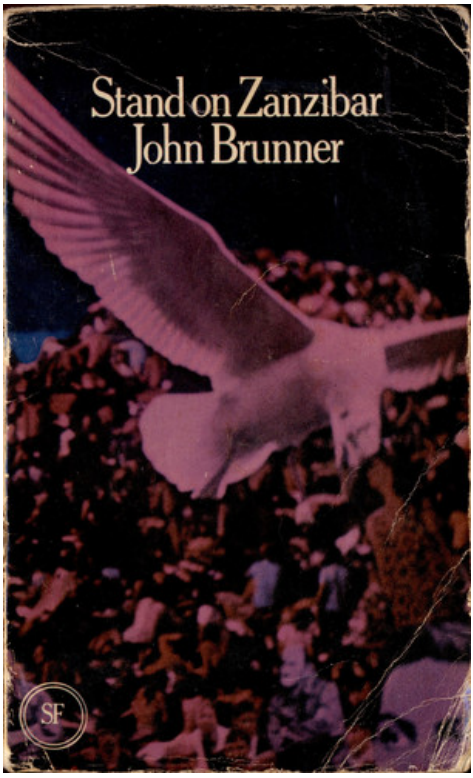
The problem is that Zelazny knows it and runs wild with it. At points, and I mean a lot of points, this becomes an exercise in philosophy that forgets it has a story to tell. I understand that he wanted to blur the genre boundary, allowing us to read this either as fantasy or as science fiction. That means little explanation of technology, more hiding it behind curtains. For instance, in the second chapter, Sam, as an old Prince Siddartha, journeys to the city of Mahartha to visit a priest in what is quint-essential fantasy. However, he's really there to barter for a videophone call to Heaven.

So, even though I love the ideas, I struggled with the book. I hated all the philosophising. I hated the vagueness, which instilled confusion to me, not mystery. I hated the fact that we're on an alien planet presumably in a far future time, but with constant reminders of our own

time, through language or cultural references: “booze” here, and “taped” there and “sure” this and that. How would a peasant boy in a mediaeval city in an artificially created Hindu culture know how to play the *Blue Danube* on the violin?

All in all, this is one of those books that I’m happy to have read, a long time after I should have read it, but I wasn’t particularly happy to actually read. The problem with that is that it self-perpetuates. Maybe you read it back in 1968 when philosophising was in vogue and you were as high as a kite and these wonderful ideas continued to resonate with you, so you remember it fondly. Maybe if you try it again, you might see how much of a struggle it is to actually read.





JOHN BRUNNER

STAND ON ZANZIBAR

PUBLISHER:
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1969

WON IN 1969
AT ST. LOUISCON,
THE 27TH WORLDCON,
IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI,
U.S.A.

Reading even just the winners of the Hugo for Best Novel, it's become clear to me that the sixties were an ambitious time for science fiction, in which many authors attempting to do things that hadn't been done before and, in so doing, stretch the boundaries of the genre. Books were bigger, often because they were published as books instead of serialised novels in magazines, and they got progressively more experimental. None of that is a big shock but I suddenly don't see the supposedly paradigm-shifting arrival of the New Wave as particularly surprising.

Stand on Zanzibar is New Wave and the first novel to win the Hugo that was not written by an American. James Blish may have lived in England for years, but John Brunner was born English, even though his key gimmick, the odd structure of the book, was borrowed from an American author, John Dos Passos, who used it most notably in his *U.S.A.* trilogy, published in the thirties, and even though his lead characters, if they can be called that, are American.

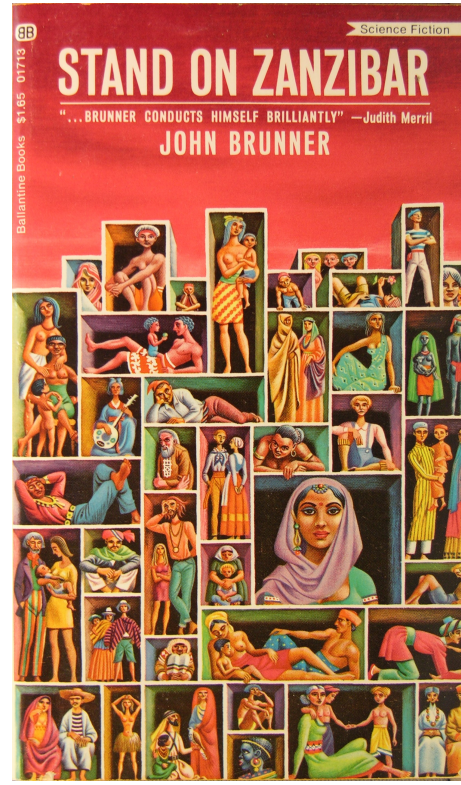
This structure is obvious from moment one, when we're thrown into it with no real explanation to guide us. Rather than just settle down to tell a story, the novel is split into four different types of chapters, only one of which tells that story. Those are *Continuity* chapters. *Tracking with Closeups* are prose chapters about characters we don't know and have no idea how they fit into the bigger picture, or even if they will. *The Happening World* is a rapid fire blitz of information in collage form, almost

like a Twitter feed nowadays. *Context* is what it suggests, often taken from imaginary books by Chad C. Mulligan, a sociologist who we might call an influencer today, who also shows up halfway through the book as a character.

This approach is initially challenging. We're not given any prose until page 23 and we're a hundred pages in before we start to grasp who the key characters might be. Add to that a lot of linguistic play, including puns, often in the chapter titles, and a whole slew of futuristic slang, and the effect is not unlike travelling into the future without preparation, trying to fend for ourselves in a culture we don't know, with information thrown at us from all sides until we're utterly lost as to what's important and what isn't. We don't even understand the memes.

Eventually, we get used to the approach and settle down to follow the story at the heart of the novel, which, just to confuse even more, diverges into a pair of stories which eventually kind of rejoin. Ironically, after we work through details that we don't understand for hundreds of pages, Brunner suddenly decides to explain them. For instance, it's clear from early on that a computer called Shalmaneser is a) important and b) special, but we're given little detail about it until three hundred pages into the novel.

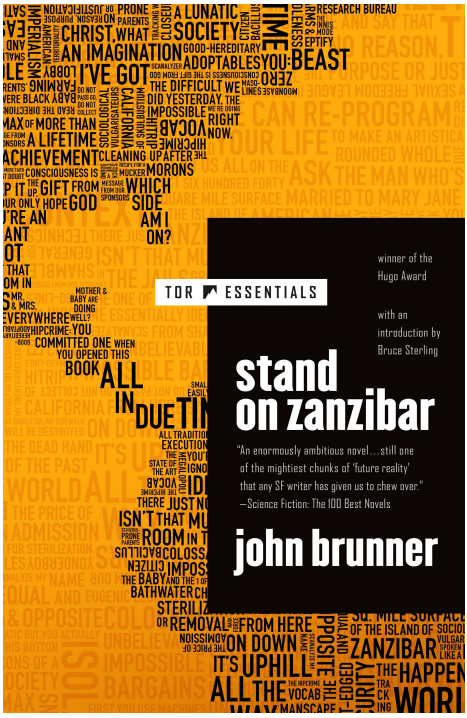
Looking back, once read, the point of the book really doesn't seem to be to tell a story at all. It's telling that the Wikipedia page has a section to explain its title, a second to cover its structure and a third to detail the various imaginary books quoted within this one, but the one about plot skimps a great deal, caring more about Brunner's extrapolation of current trends and his use of slang than Donald Hogan and Norman House. Each is a major player in



his own way in this future world, but they feel far less important than the gimmickry. I can understand why James Blish felt that Brunner was writing to win an award.

For the sake of completeness, Hogan and House start the book sharing an apartment in New York. Hogan is a synthesist, which means that he spends his time absorbing information and looking for patterns, though it doesn't seem like he's doing anything at all until he's activated by the US government as a spy. House is a businessman at General Technics, a megacorporation, and he is given, as the only Afram, or African American, member of the board, a key job, to effectively buy an entire African nation.

One half of the story follows House as he



struggles to understand the nation of Beninia, an impoverished third world nation but a bizarrely content one, whose people seem to be immune to invasion. The other follows Hogan as he's transformed into a killer and sent to Yatakang, an East Asian island nation, which has apparently made a key breakthrough in genetic engineering and will be optimising their population genetically.

While both subplots are engaging, neither seems to be going anywhere, as the substantial page count rapidly decreases. It could be said that both reach a conclusion but neither is able to reach the sort of conclusion that we might reasonably expect. Instead, how they develop and conclude gradually seems a lot less like story and more like yet another detail in the background of a thoroughly detailed future dystopia.

And, really, that's what matters here. What Brunner was doing was looking at the world of 1968 and extrapolating everything he could into a future world of half a century hence. Yes, that means it's set in 2010, a decade ago as I read. That also means that most readers are going to judge it on how well he figured out our world, which is fair enough, I guess, albeit unfortunate for a novel that does so much more than guess.

The starting point is overpopulation, as highlighted in the title. It was a thing, apparently, in the early twentieth century, that the entire population of the world could fit onto the Isle of Wight, as long as they all stood up and packed in as close as sardines. Brunner suggested that the global population in 1968 would have to find a bigger island, the Isle of Man, while the increase by 2010 would mean that something like Zanzibar would be needed. He's rather close, but few people outside the UK would grasp that growth, the Isles of Wight and Man being British islands and Zanzibar being where Freddie Mercury was born.

He got some things pretty damn close. Tobacco is banned, for instance, once it had become clear how deadly it was, but marijuana is legal and commonplace. That's a very astute forecast that was merely a little ambitious. His new concept of muckers, a word derived from "amok", feels eerily similar to the many mass shooters in the US, whatever form, though he applies it globally and in a very different way, even though he highlights extremism, racism and a growing social divide.

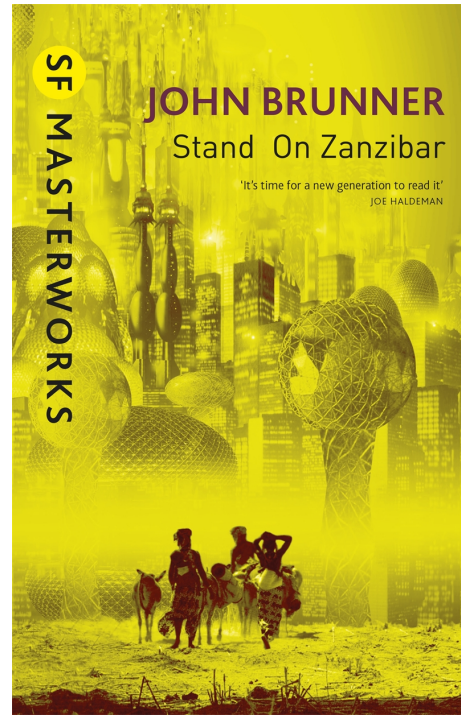
Some things are still worthy of debate. For instance, in one of his books, Chad C. Mulligan suggests that neither Christianity and Islam will outlive the 21st century. That might seem ridiculous in our current fundamentalist times

with regards to both, but the majority of the developed world is demonstrably getting more secular. The idea of Mr. & Mrs. Everywhere, an omnipresent pair of artificial characters who allow viewers to interact with television, is antiquated in style but not in technology, given that they're avatars used to increase customer comfort, a common approach today.

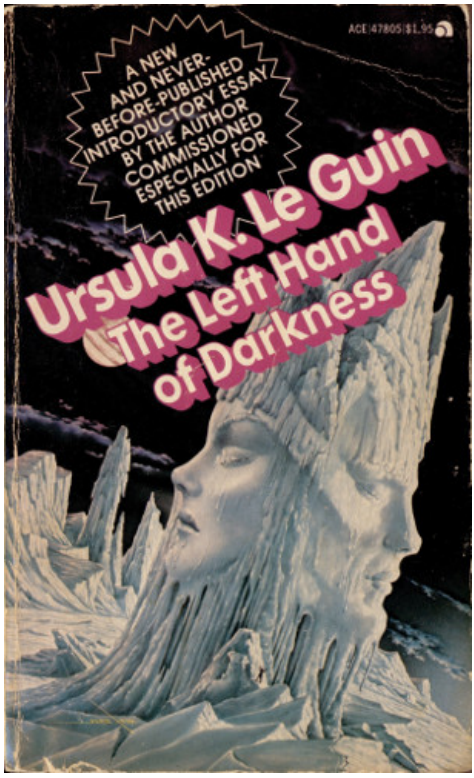
Others are wildly off the mark. For a start, Brunner expected the automobile to be a thing of the past in 2010, replaced by acceleratubes. Yeah, right. And he not only suggests that Puerto Rico will have become a state, but also Isola, a name he gives to the Sulu Archipelago that we know as the tail end of the Philippines reaching down towards eastern Malaysia and Indonesia.

The most important conceit that he got wrong, though, is how the human race would react to the idea of sharing a single planet with seven billion other people. His legal restriction on allowed child count does fairly echo China's One-Child Policy, but that failed in fascinating ways and nobody else found an incentive to follow suit. Also, Brunner sees nations across the globe enacting a set of eugenics laws as a means to control who can have children, especially by barring anyone with hereditary conditions. That's certainly not where we ended up.

Nobody's going to guess correctly at slang terms from half a century out, of course. It's hard enough to do that a year out. However, some of what he has here seems so oddly sixties that it's hard to give it credence. For example, nobody uses am or pm in this 2010. Everyone says anti-matter or poppa-momma, which feels like something hippies might say when they're insanely high but nobody else, ever. Slang has a tendency to contract rather than expand, making examples like Afram for African American far more believable, even if we never actually went there.



And I'm going to shut up now, as there's so much in this book worthy of discussion that I could carry on for thousands more words and that wouldn't help anyone, and so I'll end by comparing it to *Lord of Light*, its predecessor as Hugo Award-winner for Best Novel. Both are experimental in structure, broad in outlook and fascinating to talk about. They both feel like they're important books, but more so after we've read them than during. When people talk about their very favourite science fiction novel, both show up often. And I had a whole bunch of problems with them both. I have to say that I prefer *Stand on Zanzibar* to *Lord of Light*, though, for the simple reason that I can see myself more likely to go back to it one day.



URSULA K. LE GUIN

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

PUBLISHER:
ACE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1969

WON IN 1970
AT HEICON '70,
THE 28TH WORLDCON,
IN HEIDELBERG, BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG,
WEST GERMANY

Times they were a-changin' in the sixties. The first sixteen winners of the Hugo for Best Novel were all written by white American men, and only eleven of them, because Leiber, Zelazny and Heinlein were repeat winners. In 1969, the first foreigner won, but even though John Brunner was British, he was a white man too. It took until 1970 for a woman to win and the writer to break that particular glass ceiling was Ursula K. Le Guin.

Now, I've read Le Guin before, but only the *Earthsea* trilogy, books she wrote for children, even though they contain substantial depths. They make sense to us as kids, but they grow in meaning as we become adults and realise that the world is much bigger than we ever thought possible. I've wanted to read her adult work for a long time and I'm happy that this project has given me that opportunity.

The *Earthsea* books are fantasy and so is this in many ways, even though it's given a strong science fiction context that I now realise runs a lot broader than this one novel. It functions admirably as a standalone, but it's also a part of something bigger, what's become known, with serious misgivings by Le Guin herself, as *The Hainish Cycle*, a wider body of work that provides answers to at least some of the many questions I asked here without reply.

On the fantasy side, we follow an outsider on a quest within a society that reminds us of the mediaeval era. There are mystic elements and eventually a long and dangerous adventure across a volcano-ridden ice sheet, the sort

of approach that goes at least as far back as Jules Verne. I wonder if *Lord of Light*, a Hugo winner only the previous year at the time Le Guin was writing, had any impact on her taking this direction.

On the science fiction side, this is a "bring them into the fold" story, the next step after first contact when a interstellar civilisation does what it can to bring a newly discovered planet into its expansive community, an act that would introduce technological advances. However, it doesn't take the Alan Dean Foster approach, Le Guin less interested in flora or fauna and much more interested in how she can explore a society with major differences to our own.

And those differences are the key reason for this to be seen as special. Let me backtrack and ground you. Our interstellar civilisation is the Ekumen and it encompasses 83 different planets. The 84th may be Gethen, to which Genly Ai, a human envoy, is sent to explain the situation and attempt to obtain an agreement from the locals to join the Ekumen. He does so on his own, because a key goal is to not be perceived as an invasion.

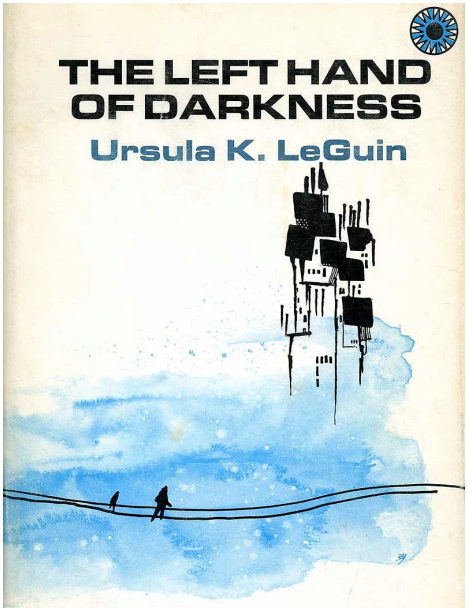
So, while Ai is not the first human to visit Gethen, he's the first to identify himself and he's the first to spend a great deal of time on the planet. We join him maybe a year into his mission, spent in the monarchistic realm of Karhide, at a point when it appears doomed to failure. When he finally gets the opportunity to present his case to the king, he finds that his major supporter, the prime minister, has been exiled and the king rejects him outright. So off he goes to the neighbouring country of Orgoreyn, to start all over again.

Much of what makes this book work is to be found in the curious relationship between Ai

and Estraven, the exiled prime minister. More specifically, it's in the way that Ai doesn't trust Estraven, though he gradually comes to realise he has been helping him all along. And here's where those differences come into play, because they're fundamental but often subtle. Even a year into what is a dedicated mission, Ai has failed to grasp how much differences in biology and culture have affected everything.

You see, while I used the pronoun "he" for Estraven, as Le Guin does all through the book, the people of Gethen are of no fixed gender. They are both male and female and they spend much of their time an androgynous mixture of the two. However, they enter kemmer each month, at which point they become sexually active, their biology taking on one or other of the genders at that point without any personal choice in the matter.

This is a fascinating concept and Le Guin has

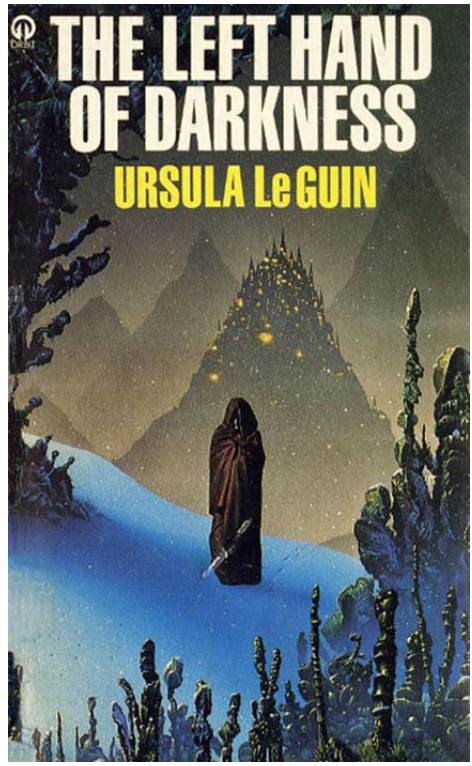


fun exploring it in many different directions, some of them obvious but some surprisingly subtle. For instance, it's hard to have prejudice between genders when everyone has the same bits. The king of Karhide becomes pregnant at one point here and loses the child, which experience kind of destroys the possibility of a patriarchy. However, Le Guin suggests that war is impossible in such a world and that's enticing to ponder, as is the author's original position: she "eliminated gender, to find out what was left".

Perhaps just as important, though partly stemming from the same gender scenario, is the concept of "shifgrethor", with which I was often as lost as Genly Ai. As I understand it, it's a set of social rules of behaviour that govern interaction on Gethen, similar to but deeper than we might associate with, say, "etiquette". Because Ai doesn't grasp it either, he fails to understand the level of support that he's got from Estraven and it takes most of the book, including that months long journey on the ice, to truly figure that out.

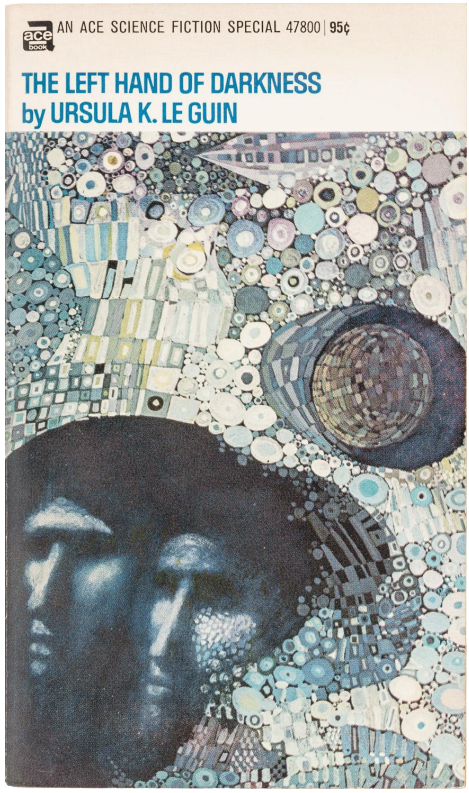
Neatly, Ai changes over the course of the novel by going native in ways that again he doesn't understand. Of course, his biology isn't changable—and the locals call him a "pervert" because they don't understand how someone can be continuously in kemmer—but he shifts gradually from a traditionally male viewpoint based on rationality to a traditionally female one based on emotion. Only after he's shed his preconceptions of men and women can he truly begin to understand Estraven and the people of Gethen, who are neither and both.

There's a lot more here than merely two themes. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not a particularly long novel, my Ace paperback over at three hundred pages, but it's a notably

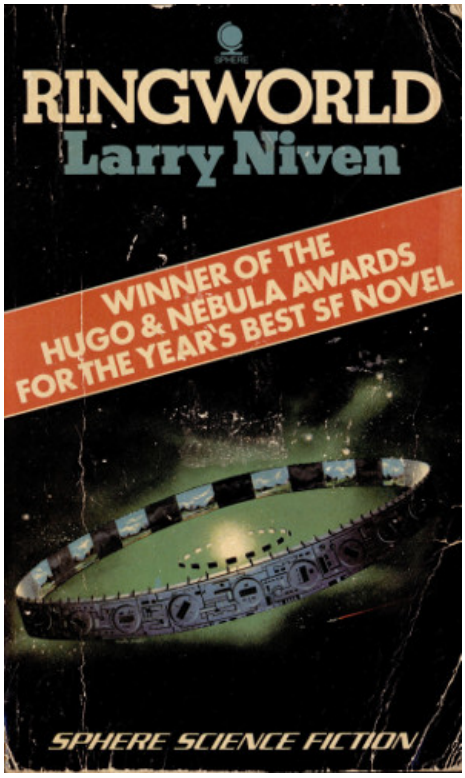


rich book in themes and ideas. There are some neat ideas tied to interstellar expansion that I hadn't seen before. The old faithfuls of politics and religion are explored, of course, both of them flavoured by gender and shifgrethor. There's a strong focus on loyalty and betrayal, especially when either can be misconstrued because of lack of cultural knowledge. Any attempt to explore all of those in detail would warrant a thesis and I'd be very surprised if a number haven't been written on this book.

I enjoyed this a lot more than the last couple of Hugo winners, though both *Lord of Light* and *Stand on Zanzibar* have stayed with me. This is likely to stay much longer and prompt a lot more thought. Unlike those two novels, it reads easily, even when it takes a sidestep, as it does reasonably often. We get



chapters told from Estraven's perspective and others that simply recount old myths or tales that, with thought, gain relevance and deepen understanding. However, even though it reads easily, it's deep and rich and quite obviously worthy.



LARRY NIVEN

RINGWORLD

PUBLISHER:
BALLANTINE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1970

WON IN 1971
AT NOREASCON I,
THE 29TH WORLDCON,
IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
U.S.A.

Ringworld may well be the book to win the Hugo for Best Novel in between *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* in 1967 and *The Forever War* in 1976 that I'd previously read. The only other is possibly *The Gods Themselves*, back in the days when I was working my way through Asimov's science fiction. If I did read that one, I don't remember it but I definitely remember this.

Ringworld is probably one of the most read Hugo winners, partly because it's been widely available ever since it was released in 1970 and partly because it's just so readable.

I've read a lot of Niven's books, mostly his solo work plus a couple of the bigger ones that he wrote with Jerry Pournelle, and all of them long ago. I've only recently gone back to him, because I'm doing a runthrough of the books of Steven Barnes, who collaborated with him and Pournelle often, and it's refreshing me in just how readable Niven is. *Ringworld* is a little dated now but it's still thoroughly readable and it contains many accessible extrapolations of big science fiction ideas. It wasn't my first science fiction novel, but it would be a superb choice for anyone starting out.

And that thought nails itself to my forehead now, because the last few Hugo winners have been, well, emphatically less accessible. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a great book but it's an unusual and sometimes awkward one. *Stand on Zanzibar* and *Lord of Light* are experiments in style that served to frustrate me as much as entertain. Even *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* is told in the hybrid language of a multicultural

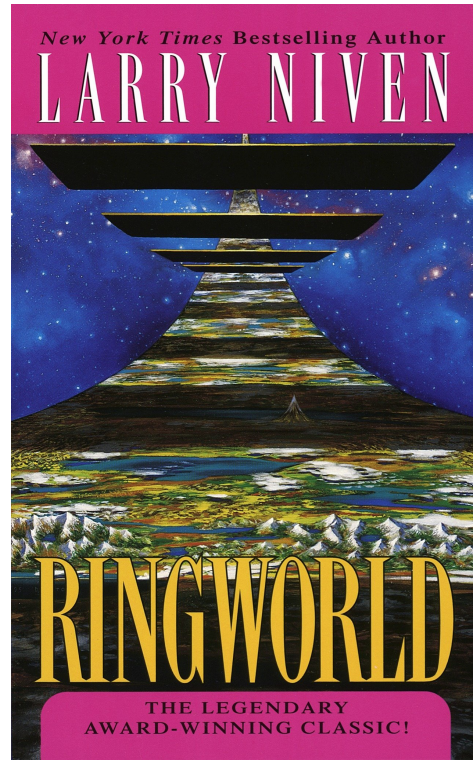
Lunar colony. This is easily the most accessible Hugo winning novel since Simak's *Way Station* eight years earlier.

It also grows magnificently, because Niven knows absolutely how to set us up to be hit by a sudden discovery and hit hard. Remember that moment in *Jurassic Park* when our paleontologist leads first see living dinosaurs? That is precisely how I felt with *Ringworld* on more than one occasion.

Initially it's just fun. Louis Wu, a character firmly in the Heinlein tradition, is extending his 200th birthday by moving from time zone to time zone backwards around the globe, when he meets a Pierson's puppeteer, an alien species that hasn't been seen in a long time. Who has a job for him and a couple of other characters we'll soon meet. The party will be Nessus, the puppeteer; Wu, who's notable as the only living human to have instituted first contact with a different species; Speaker-to-Animals, a Kzin; and Teela Brown, a young and apparently vapid young lady who shows up for Wu's party.

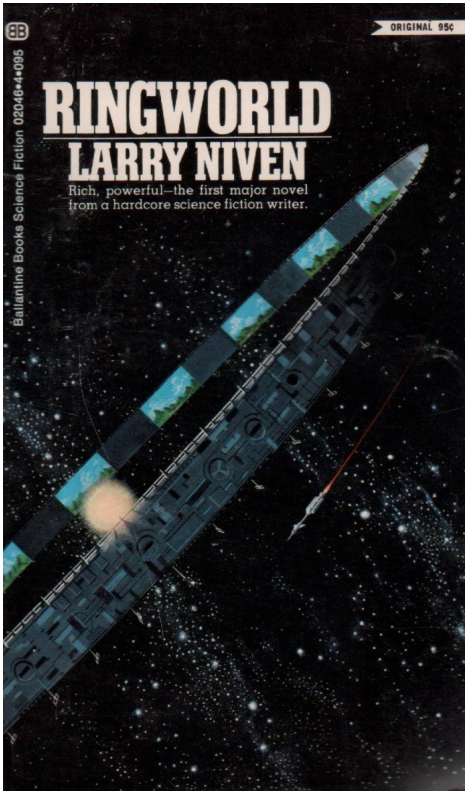
Let me pause to explain that the species in Niven's *Known Space* universe, into which this novel fits in addition to beginning a series of its own, are unique. Pierson's puppeteers are inherent cowards, but also massive achievers who plan on the grandest scales but with firm redundancy. The Kzinti are large catlike creatures who are strong on honour and always speedy to battle. Mankind, at the point it encountered the Kzin, was more pacifist than it is today and starting a strong expansion into the galactic neighbourhood, but it won each of its wars with the Kzin because the latter have a tendency to leap in before they're ready.

In other words, they're a strange set of companions but there are reasons to come as to



why, even Teela who doesn't seem to remotely have a logical place among them. That comes with one of Niven's grand revelations, which is epic in scale and acutely humbling for the non-puppeteer members of the crew. I won't spoil it because you deserve to be rooked between the eyes by it just like I was once more. I probably last read this in the eighties and I'd somehow forgotten.

In its way, that revelation is as much a *Jurassic Park* moment as the first glimpse of the Ringworld, a more obvious comparison, and that's the primary reason why Nessus has brought them together. You see, there's been a massive explosion at the galactic core and the puppeteers are fleeing it. Sure, the radiation that will wipe out life in its path won't reach our sector of the galaxy for another



twenty thousand years, but it will arrive and the puppeteers want to be elsewhere by that point. And, as they journey elsewhere, they've discovered the Ringworld.

It's an artificial creation of unimaginably epic stature, a gigantic ring revolving around a star. My favourite line in the book is one that, in notably simple language, shifts us up a whole host of levels of magnitude. "From the edge of the system, the Ringworld was a naked eye object." It's a million miles wide and the habitable inner surface has an area equivalent to three million Earths. To maintain days and nights, the unknown creators of this structure set up a string of gigantic rectangles in a much closer orbit and at a different rate of rotation.

Those creators are apparently gone, by the way, and we don't get into their identity here, but there is plenty of life on the Ringworld, albeit devolved somewhat after the collapse of a higher civilisation. Many of the inhabitants, who are humanoid, believe that the ring is just an arch and they worship its creators as gods. When our protagonists arrive, in the company of overt aliens, clearly they must be gods too.

This is far from the first Big Dumb Object to appear in science fiction but it is a quintessential one that spawned no end of imitators. It's also the first megastructure in the form of a ring, preceding those in *Halo* and others. Even now, half a century on, it remains among only a handful of creations that are truly outrageous in scale and implication but acutely simple to grasp.

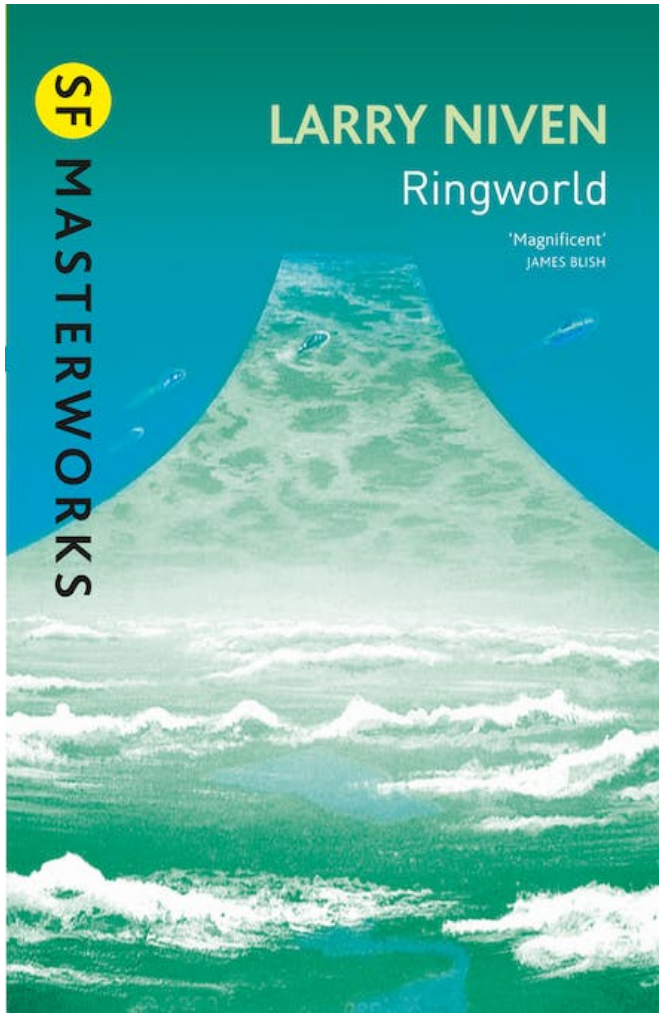
In fact, the ideas here are so vast in scale that the greatest success Niven achieved here may be to make us focus on individual characters and even care about them, against such an insanely massive backdrop. Each of the four has a story arc and each of them is changed by Nessus's revelations, including Nessus himself. Teela especially grows a lot, though inevitably given her part in those revelations. I still don't want to spoil that but it's hard not to talk about it because it's that wild an idea.

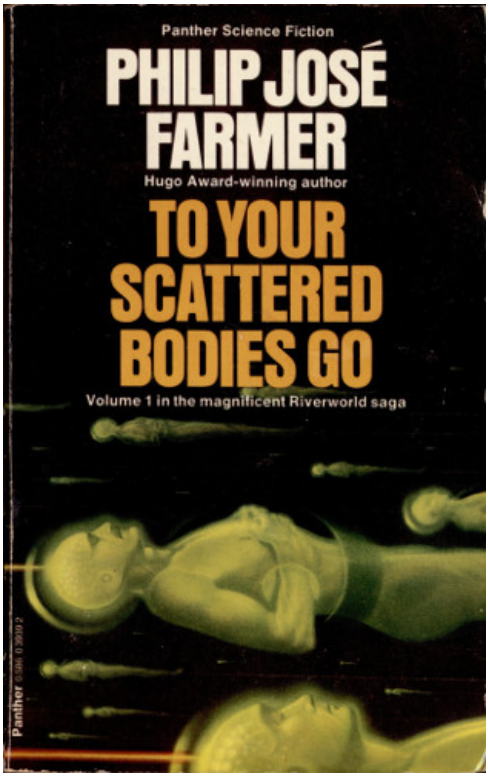
I also won't delve into all the many other technological marvels in play in this book and the wider setting of Known Space that now encompasses fourteen novels and a slew of short stories, plus a whole bunch more set in the same universe by other hands. Suffice it to say that there are many of these technological marvels and, while they're as out of our reach today as the tech needed to build a Ringworld, there's an internal consistency to them that makes them vibrant.

For instance, having this one piece of tech-

nology would change society in these ways but having that one would mean this and that and the other and so on. A half dozen being in place at the beginning of a novel like this allows Niven a lot of leeway to extrapolate a very different universe than the one we're in right now and that's what science fiction is all about. *Ringworld* is as packed with these extrapolations as any sub-three hundred page book I'm able to name and any discussion of it could veer off into a whole slew of directions.

And that, in tandem with being so damn readable, is why it won both the Hugo and the Locus in 1971 and the Nebula a year earlier. Niven hadn't initially intended to write any sequels, but he returned to the Ringworld a decade later for *The Ringworld Engineers*. There are now three sequels, a further four book series written with Edward M. Lerner and a final book that finished off all the above.





PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO

PUBLISHER:
PUTNAM PUBLISHING GROUP

PUBLICATION DATE:
1971

WON IN 1972
AT L.A.CON I,
THE 30TH WORLDCON,
IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
U.S.A.

Given that I'm 57 books and counting into a runthrough of the *Doc Savage* novels, I really ought to have got round to reading something by his unofficial biographer, one Philip José Farmer. However, even though I have a shelf of his books, I've never got round to reading any of them and I'm glad that I started with this one, the first winner of the Hugo for Best Novel to be published within my lifetime.

It's the first novel in a series known as *Riverworld*, to be swiftly followed by a second, *The Fabulous Riverboat*, which I should clearly read next because I have unanswered questions.

The setup is magnificent. Richard Burton, not the actor who married Liz Taylor twice but the 19th century polymath adventurer, dies in Trieste in 1890, as indeed he did in our reality, but then, after a brief interlude in an endless room of human bodies, he wakes up again on the shores of a river. He's far from alone but everyone there has changed, most obviously through rejuvenation and by being naked as jaybirds. There are devices dotted around the landscape that are soon dubbed grailstones, which provide food and other supplies on a daily basis.

The ever-inquisitive Burton soon pulls a core group together, including Alice Liddell, the real life inspiration for Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*; a neanderthal who goes by Kazz (the short form of Kazzintuitruaabemss); and an alien from Tau Ceti who arrived on Earth in 2002 and whose ship wiped out much of our planet's population by accident. Other real life

people from the past show up throughout the novel as well.

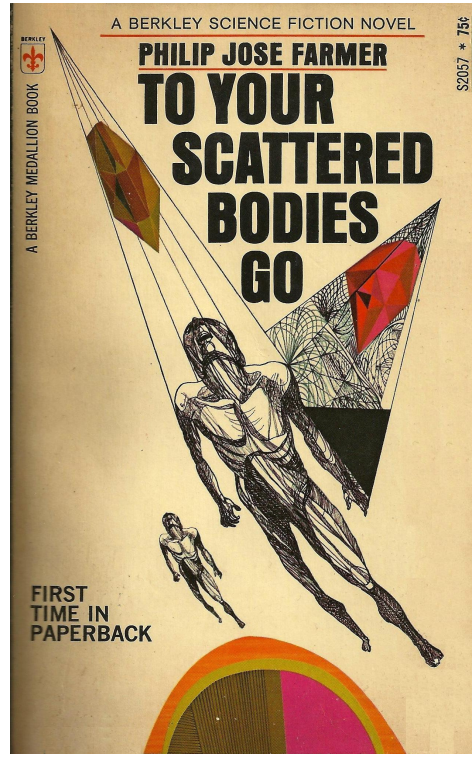
They soon figure out their commonalities. Everyone had died, so they've clearly all been born again. Whatever age they were when it happened, they're all now twenty-five. All the men are circumcised and all the women are virgins. Everyone is also sterilised. Later on, as Burton leads the group up the river in search of its source, as he did the Nile in our reality, they discover deeper commonalities, such as a rough breakdown of populations on either side of the river by nationality, era and other factors. They also discover that if you die in Riverworld, you merely get resurrected again somewhere else along the river.

What nobody knows is why. Initial thoughts of Heaven or Hell are relatively quickly discarded, but nobody has a better answer. What's more, most people don't seem to care, simply content to start all over again in whatever fashion they deem fit.

Burton is special, perhaps because only he seems to have woken to glimpse the interlude before waking up by the river, and he's eager to figure out every aspect of this new baffling puzzle. He doesn't quote Zaphod Beeblebrox's "who, what, when and where... and one big side order of why?" but he could have done.

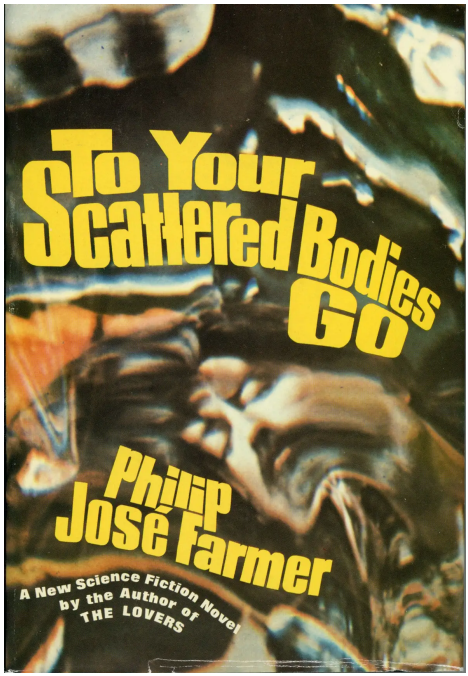
I liked how Farmer touches on so many different questions, but wish he would have been more willing to explore most of them deeper. I don't mean the relatively standard seventies sf nods towards nudity taboos and the unifying power of Esperanto, but how the defaults in this new land might be awkward to some of the newly resurrected because of historically varied taboos and norms, whether religious or cultural.

For instance, the grailstones issue food and



other substances in sufficient quantities and at sufficiently frequent times to keep people sustained, but no more and no more often. Tobacco and other drugs are a perennial, but not everyone wants to partake. Knowing how meat was killed is important to many people and what particular meat it is to others. Beef or pork are prohibited foods to vast swathes of the population. However, the unknown forces behind the Riverworld do not seem to care at all about such things.

Another substance that's periodically issued from the grailstones is a chewing gum which has hallucinogenic properties, releasing base urges. The first night it shows up prompts, let me suggest, utter chaos. I'll let you draw your own images as to how. For a novel written in 1971 and from some older material, there's a



lot of focus on the environment, mostly but not entirely tied to pollution. There's some exploration of how faith might survive in an afterlife that isn't what most were promised.

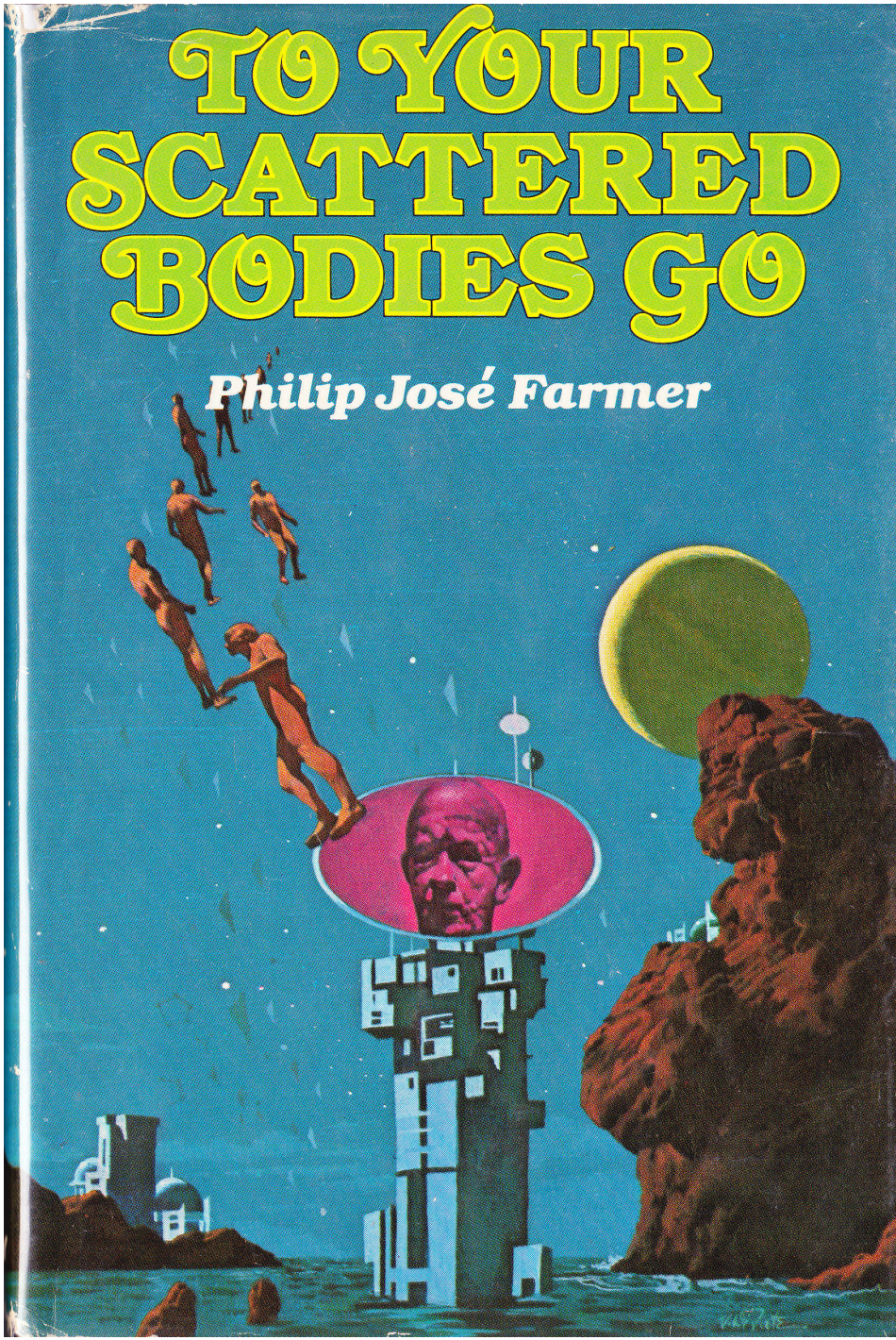
While it wouldn't have helped the plot any, I'd have enjoyed more conflicts from a purely cultural standpoint. What's appropriate to one generation may not be to another. And I don't just mean views on race, sex or slavery. At one point, Burton has to defend a book he wrote against a charge of anti-Semitism. A running joke for a while revolves about how to explain to Burton, a man of the world, about Hitler. Later, he finds himself in an area that's being run jointly by Tullius Hostilius and Herman Göring.

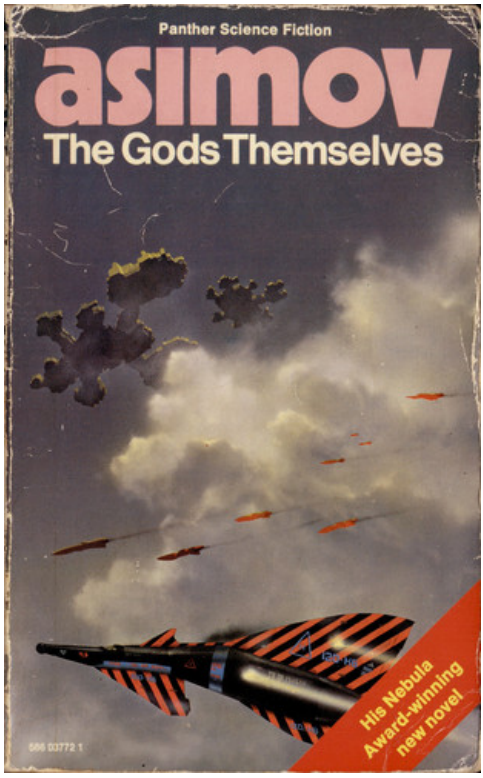
Farmer raises these issues and many others, but mostly attempts to keep a firm focus on Burton's quest to find the end of the river and so discover what's on the other side. And we do learn a lot on that front, but we never find an answer, not a true answer, as to why. I wonder if that will show up in the next book, *The Fabulous Riverboat*, which unfolds twenty years later with a new lead: Samuel Clemens, whom we know better as Mark Twain.

I have to praise the originality here. Farmer was an established author and he had already demonstrated his penchant for mashing up historical people, fictional creations by other authors and his own creations into new works. He'd already published three books about Lord Grandrith (a Tarzan knockoff) and Doc Caliban (a thinly veiled Doc Savage). His biographies of both those characters would come in the next couple of years, with a series set in Edgar Rice Burrough's Opar not too much later. His Wold Newton concept which ties a vast collection of fictional characters together in new ways is a groundbreaking achievement. We may be used to such mashups today, even having a word for them, but this was wildly original in 1971.

However, as much as this originality clearly deserves praise, the Hugo Award being its sf pinnacle, this does feel rather incomplete. It asks a whole barrage of questions but doesn't answer them all and Farmer leaves the largest hanging. The book club discussions after this came out must have been vehement! It's much more of a glimpse at what might be contained within a novel than that novel itself and it would seem that Hugo voters of the day didn't care about that.

It's fair to say that I wanted more but I do have the benefit of reading in 2020 with four more sequels published, plus a string of short stories and a broader career of sixty or so novels. Clearly I should start dipping into it.


TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO
Philip José Farmer



ISAAC ASIMOV

THE GODS THEMSELVES

PUBLISHER:
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1972

WON IN 1973
AT TORCON II,
THE 31ST WORLDCON,
IN TORONTO, ONTARIO
CANADA

The 1973 winner of the Hugo for Best Novel has not been not well remembered as one of the Worldcon-going community's more astute votes. Many have suggested that Asimov won because he was notably loved and admired but hadn't written science fiction for a long while, marking this a welcome return.

All the sf works for which he's best known—the original *Foundation* trilogy, three *Galactic Empire* novels, the first two *Lije Baley* stories, even the *Lucky Starr* books for kids—had been published in the fifties. A decade and a half on from the most recent of all of those, Asimov had only given us a single new science fiction novel: *Fantastic Voyage*, in 1966. This was thus seen as a welcome return and it won all three major science fiction awards: the Hugo, the Nebula and the Locus.

It's also an unusual Asimov novel, one I was surprised to find that I hadn't read. Asimov was one of the first sf authors whose careers I devoured, along with Heinlein, and I'd worked through all the books I mentioned above, and more. However, I'd somehow let this one slip by, so I was rather happy to remedy that for this project.

Dr. Asimov himself considered it his finest novel, perhaps because of the reasons why it's unusual. It features aliens, for a start, an alien set of aliens too, in a way he hadn't ever done before. John Campbell, the influential editor of *Astounding*, had rejected one of Asimov's short stories early in his career, because the aliens had been portrayed as being superior to the

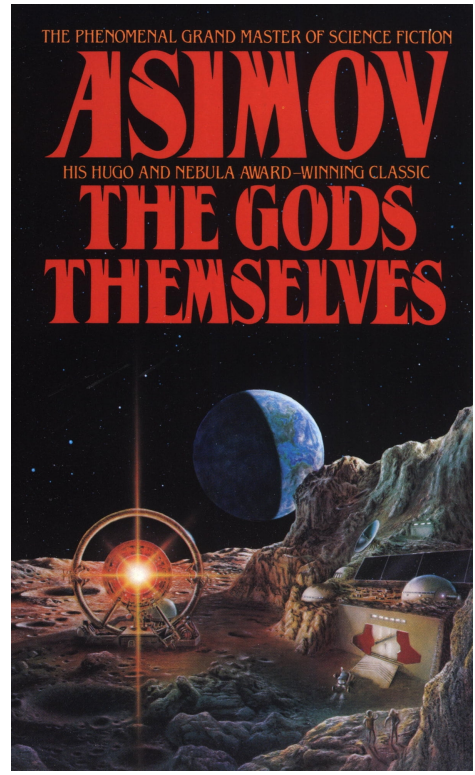
humans in the story. Not wanting to write stories in which aliens were always weaker to humans, he avoided the subject entirely.

These aliens are fascinating and the middle section reads unlike anything I have read from either Asimov or any member of sf's old guard. It's clearly a more interesting read than the two sections that bookend it and maybe that's another reason why Asimov won the Hugo and other awards for this.

They're examples of amoeboid life and they live in a parallel universe to us in social structures built on triads. Two members of the triad are male and the third female, if we can adopt those terms in this context, given that it would be more appropriate to name three new genders to represent the roles that each third of the triad holds within its relationship. So, one male is Rational, the female is Emotional and the second male is Parental. Sex between them is literal merging, as these creatures can even merge with rock, while food is energy. While not all members of this species are intelligent (Parentals are particularly unintelligent), the species as a whole is highly advanced.

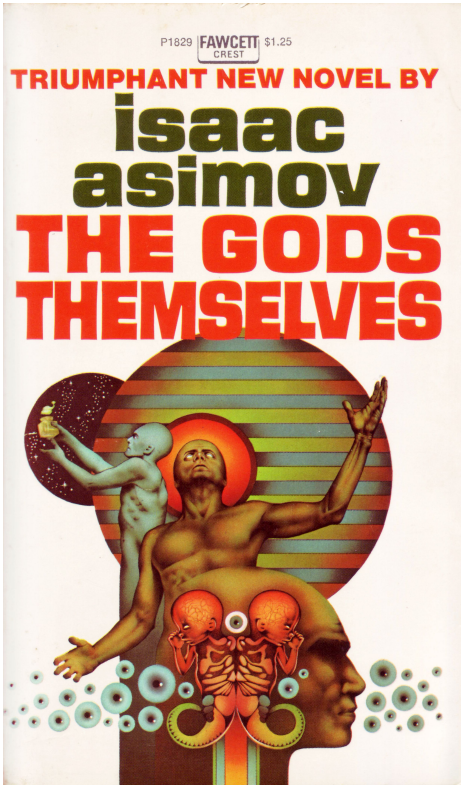
And, as unseen "para-men", they find a way to interact with our universe in the opening third of the book. A sample of tungsten in a laboratory is found to have been changed into plutonium 186, an isotope that cannot exist in our universe naturally. Investigation leads to the understanding that it was put there deliberately by the denizens of a universe in which the laws of nature are different to ours. This leads to the development of the Electron Pump, through which matter is transferred between universes, thus generating cheap and endless energy for both.

As you might imagine, this first section is about scientific discovery and the joy at the



sheer potential of the new. However, it's also fundamentally concerned with consciousness of reputation. It's not just the work, it's how you'll be remembered for that work by your society. Perception of reality is as important as reality itself, if not more so. This makes for very uncomfortable reading, because the good stuff, as it were, is constantly cheapened. It reads like a triumph of science but a thinly veiled attack on scientists, epitomised in a man named Hallam, who gets all the credit for doing some of the work.

The best bits of the first section to my mind are the way in which one man, Lamont by name, questions this. He believes that there's a big catch to all that cheap energy, namely that it'll lead to the explosion of our sun, but he has to know more about the process and



the laws of the other universe to prove it. This leads to a barrage of interdisciplinary cross-pollination, mixing chemistry with sciences as varied as linguistics, history, physics and even politics. Asimov was a polymath and there's genuine delight in the voice he writes with, even if not all of it remotely holds up.

The second section runs parallel to the first in more ways than simply being an equivalent in a parallel universe. A particularly unusual triad is coming to the very same realisation that our rogue scientist is, but from the opposite direction. It leads to norms being challenged even in a universe where the norms are very different to ours and that's notably fascinating. Dua, an Emotional, is often more like a Rational, and the conflict that generates highlights that her Rational, Odeen, and her Parental, Tritt, are unusual themselves.

The third section, back in our universe, takes Denison, a scientist who was involved in the early development of the Electronic Pump but long forgotten, to the Moon and a Lunar society that's wildly different to the Earth's. He's taken up Lamont's mindset and plans to find a proof for it outside Hallam's realm of influence. He does too, but not in the way he expects and it's rather deus ex machina for my tastes.

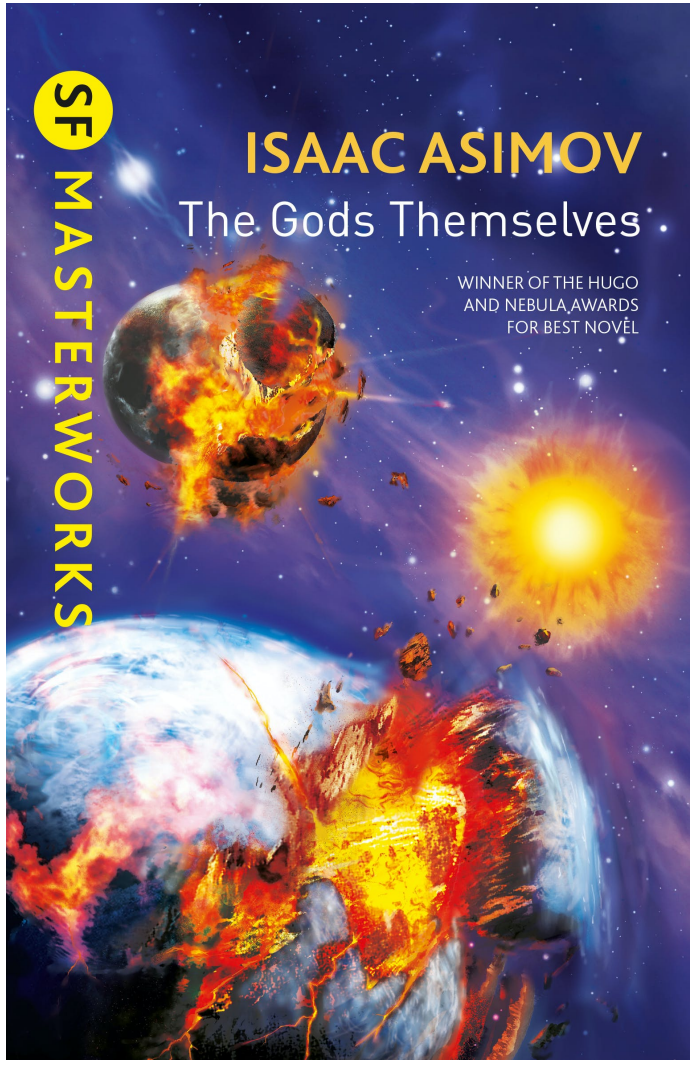
Also, the cultural differences don't hold up much at all to modern eyes. The most overt difference, which seems to be completely overdone, is the lack of a nudity taboo, something that was omnipresent in science fiction during the sixties and seventies. It all seems quaint nowadays. I'm no nudist, though I do understand the appeal in a non-sexual way. However, having been a member of science fiction fandom for some time, I'm pretty sure most of my fellow fans are the last people I'd care to see naked and the feeling may well be mutual.

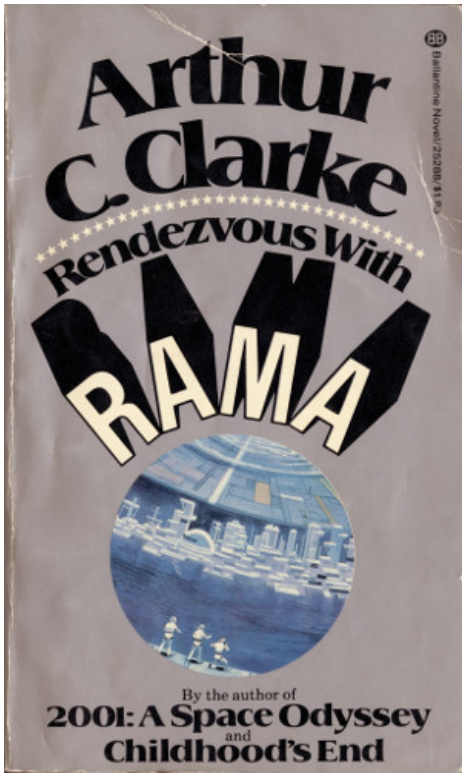
So, as a social study this fails and, as a scientific extrapolation with big stakes, it doesn't do particularly well. Only in its middle third does it really succeed, as a depiction of a truly alien society, the last thing that I ever expected to read in a novel with Asimov's name on the cover. It's an appealingly weird section that's closer to what was coming out of the New Wave at the time. Any way we cut it, it's an interesting but also a notably flawed Hugo winner.

As I've worked through these winners, I've also worked my way through Jo Walton's *An Informal History of the Hugos*, and her chapter on 1973 and the comments from others that

follow it highlight how it wasn't a particularly great year for science fiction novels. Sure, it was greater in other Hugo categories but the novel category was weak. While most fans are currently accepting of the consensus that *The Gods Themselves* shouldn't have won, few agree on what should, with a Robert Silverberg deep cut, *Dying Inside*, the only suggestion with any real consistency.

It's notable to me that, not only had I not read the winner in 1973 but none of the five other nominees either, with a single possible exception in Poul Anderson's *There Will Be Time*. What's more, I only have half of them on my shelves right now, which is rather telling. Compare that to one year earlier, where I own all five and had read two (now three), or one year later, where I own four of the five and had read three (soon to be four).





ARTHUR C. CLARKE

RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMA

PUBLISHER:
GOLLANCZ

PUBLICATION DATE:
1973

WON IN 1974
AT DISCON II,
THE 32ND WORLDCON,
IN WASHINGTON, D. C.
U.S.A.

I've read most of the great names of classic science fiction pretty deeply: every Heinlein, almost every Asimov, back to everything by E. E. "Doc" Smith, but I've not read much Arthur C. Clarke, one of the Big Three with Heinlein and Asimov, and what I have read of his isn't his most famous work. My Clarkes are things like *The Sands of Mars*, *Dolphin Island* and *The Nine Billion Names of God*, all of which, I now realise, predate this novel.

All of that means that *Rendezvous with Rama*, which won pretty much every science fiction award there was in 1974, is entirely new to me and I had a real blast with it, even though it doesn't do a lot of what we expect novels to do. For instance, the characters are so shallow that it's not unfair to say that I simply forgot who some of them were even while reading the novel. Even a mere couple of days later, I couldn't have named any of them. However, it works in this book's favour, oddly enough, as this is all about humanity being dwarfed by such superior power that we're frankly hardly worth mentioning.

In fact, Clarke does that more than once here. For a start, in the opening chapter, he kills off 600,000 people and leaves a million more with hearing damage, destroys most of northern Italy and racks up a trillion dollars in costs. The cause? Just a lump of space rock that wandered into our vicinity and landed in the wrong place. However, it prompts Project Spaceguard. And peace. Which is a good thing going forward, but what a reminder of how

puny and insignificant we are as a species!

That happened in 2077 and, just over half a century later in 2131, we might believe we're a lot more ready for the next surprising visitor to our solar system. However, when we realise than an asteroid heading in past Jupiter is not really an asteroid, we soon realise once again that we're merely ants on Sagan's famous pale blue dot.

Now, before I talk about Rama, which you will not be surprised this object is promptly named, I should add that we've achieved a heck of a lot in the half century since that huge wake up call. We're still at peace, pretty much. We've expanded into space; the United Planets is now based on the Moon. There are human beings on Mars and Mercury and a few other places over the solar system. Genetically designed superchimps work the menial jobs on board spaceships. We've moved on socially, developing family units beyond the traditional and we've even drained the Mediterranean, a feat that made archeologists intensely happy.

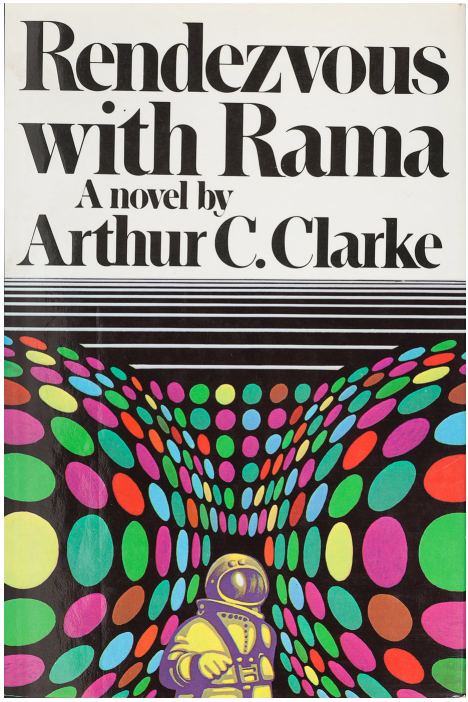
Compared to Rama, however, we're still in the Stone Age. Rama is a ship rather than an asteroid, even though it's a cylinder 50km long and 16km in diameter. We don't know exactly how far it's come and how long it's travelled, but we're very aware that it's both further and longer than our technology deems possible, especially given that it still appears to be in perfect condition and, as the book runs on, is apparently still functioning.

Beyond the characters being forgettable in the extreme, what's clear from the very first moment is that Clarke handled the scientific angle here very carefully indeed and that's the major reason that this novel works so well. Sure, there are human beings exploring Rama, albeit only the crew of one solar survey vessel

that's close enough to make contact, but the only character we care about is Rama itself, a Big Dumb Object that's full of hidden depth.

Of course, at this size, we'd hope it's full of hidden depth, but it's large enough to be its own world. The crew of the Endeavour land at one end. Going inside, they see that it contains what they call two plains, a northern and a southern, with a sea in between them. Because Rama is a cylinder and spins at an appropriate speed, both land and sea extend around the cylinder, which is a gorgeous concept. There are what look like cities on the plains and the cities are connected by roads. The opposite end, once three gigantic lights switch on to illuminate the landscape, turns out to be a giant spike that the explorers assume must be part of Rama's space drive.

Initially, entering through a combination of



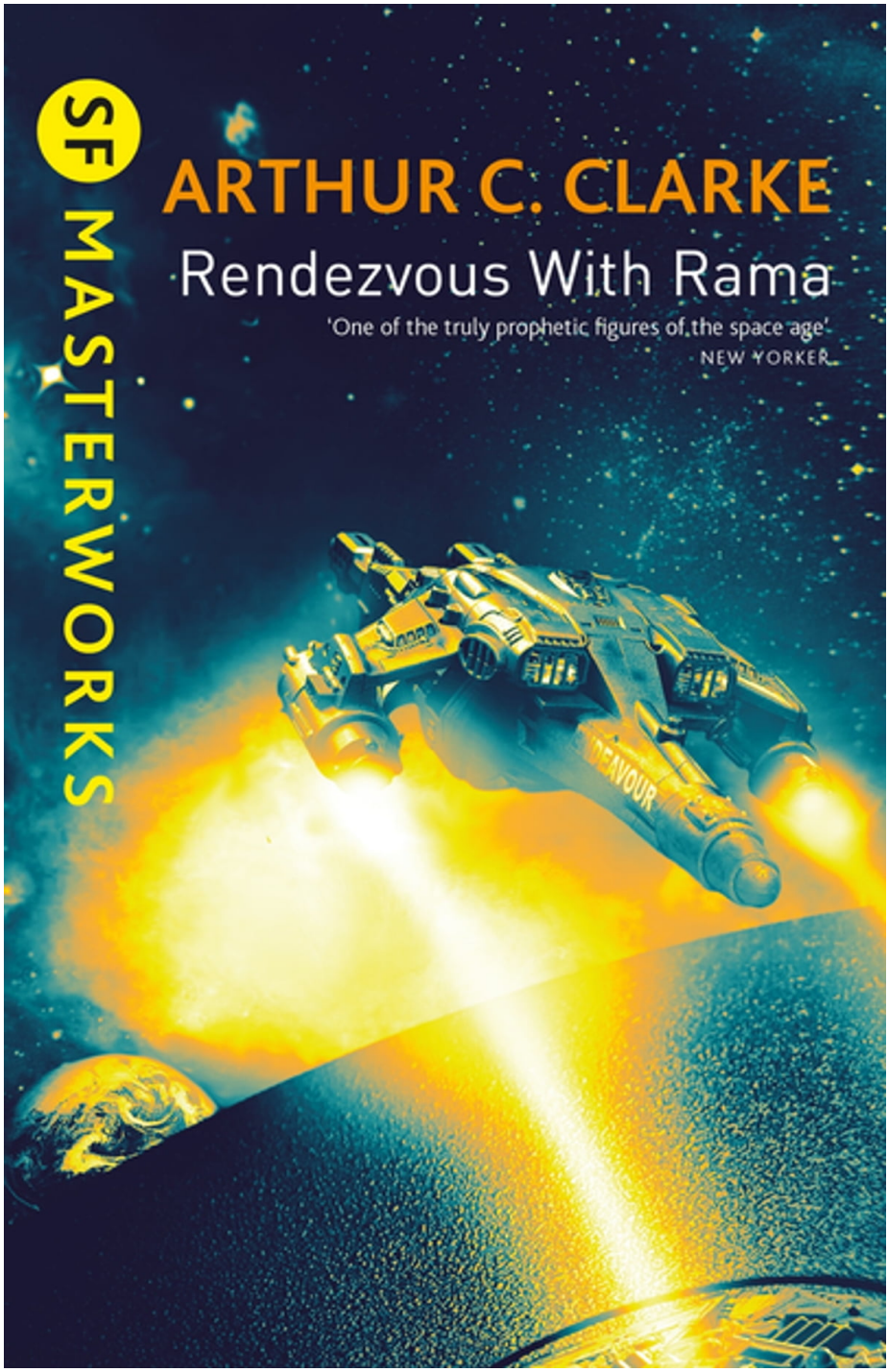
three airlocks situated on Rama's North Pole, these explorers can't see much at all, so we learn about Rama as they do, working as best they can on a limited timeframe to discover all they can. Rama is on its way towards the Sun, at which point it will probably just continue onwards at such a speed that would prohibit any attempt at rescue. And they (and we) do find out a great deal in what time they have, especially after Rama comes alive in a manner of speaking.

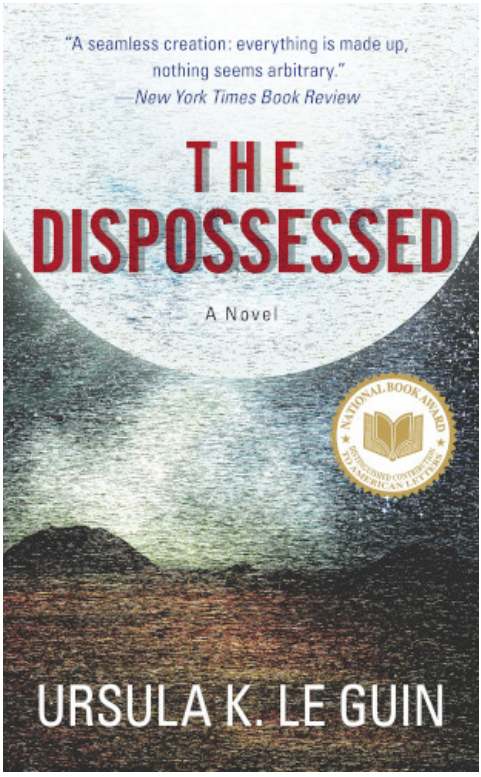
This is definitely a thinking man's science fiction novel. t's an adventure, for sure, the grandest the human race has embarked upon in its history. There's action and discovery and all the things we expect from adventure, but the underlying emotions are awe at something so far beyond us as a race and passion to learn everything we can about it. That makes for a different sort of action adventure to usual and I really appreciated that.

I also appreciated some of what this didn't do. I don't think it counts as a spoiler to say that Rama does indeed continue on out of our solar system, from parts unknown and going to parts unknown, using the gravitational field of our Sun as a slingshot. It literally is just travelling through our celestial neck of the woods. While it does come alive in a sense, we never meet any of what we might call Ramans, or whatever term they might use to describe themselves. What we might expect to be a new instance of first contact turns out to be a very different experience indeed and I adored that.

And, while we learn much, we're left mostly in the dark as Rama continues on its journey. There are sequels, three of them written by Clarke with Gentry Lee that appear to follow more traditional lines and eventually reveal the purpose of all this, with two further novels by Lee that are set in the same universe. Frankly, while I want to delve further into both Larry Niven's *Ringworld* series and Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* books, I find that I have no yearning to know what goes on in the wider Rama series. This does the job it needs to do and I'm happy with it being done.

Even if I forgot every human character the moment after I was introduced, I don't expect to forget Rama itself and the sense of awe that Clarke generates as we human beings explore it. To know absolutely that we're not alone in a vast universe is huge and to encounter such a pristine microcosm of it as Rama, which has precisely zero interest in us, is even bigger.


SF MASTERWORKS
ARTHUR C. CLARKE
Rendezvous With Rama
'One of the truly prophetic figures of the space age'
NEW YORKER



URSULA K. LE GUIN

THE DISPOSSESSED

PUBLISHER:
HARPER & ROW

PUBLICATION DATE:
1974

WON IN 1975
AT AUSSIECON ONE,
THE 33RD WORLDCON,
IN MELBOURNE, VICTORIA,
AUSTRALIA

In 1970, Ursula K. Le Guin became the first woman to win the Hugo for Best Novel when *The Left Hand of Darkness* allowed her to break seventeen years of glass ceiling. Half a decade later, in 1975, she became the second woman to win that Hugo as well, with *The Dispossessed*, which, like the previous book, is a part of her series generally known as *The Hainish Cycle*.

I appreciated *The Left Hand of Darkness* more than I enjoyed it. I liked it and its core ideas but it broke down into very different sections and it felt a little disjointed. This novel plays far more consistently and I liked it more, even though it's a slow and patient read, talky and philosophical with a host of deeply fleshed out characters, some of which are societies, and very little happens for the majority of almost four hundred pages.

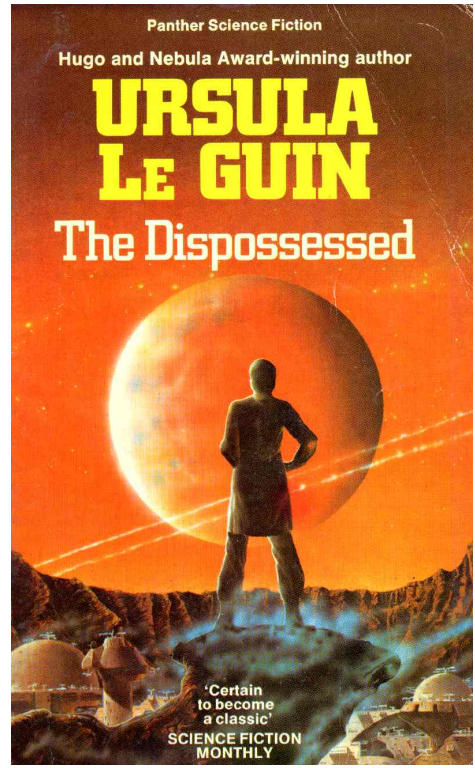
We're at a point in the not too distant future, maybe a few hundred years from now, and in the Tau Ceti system, where an interesting social experiment has been underway for a couple of hundred years. A good chunk of the population of Urras, a vaguely Earthlike world, associated not by nationalities but by anarchist philosophies, chose to simply leave their planet entirely and colonise the "moon", Anarres instead. I put moon in quotes here as planet vs. moon does suggest a dominant vs. subservient relationship, but, at the point we join this scenario, the people of Anarres see Urras as a moon of their own, suggesting two different but equivalent worlds in a strange balance, which is a better way to see it.

We see both worlds through the eyes of Shevet, a physicist of great renown on Anarres who is also widely read on Urras. He finds himself stifled by the status quo, so travels to Urras, the first to take that journey in 160 years, so stirring the pot in a way not entirely dissimilar to how Michael Valentine Smith did on Earth in *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

This is more than a decade newer than that book, but it holds up far better to my mind. Far more consistent, far less objectionable and far more focused, this book seems to have a point, even if we sometimes wonder exactly where it's all going to go, especially when it becomes clear that the core differences in philosophy are not going to find a resolution within these pages.

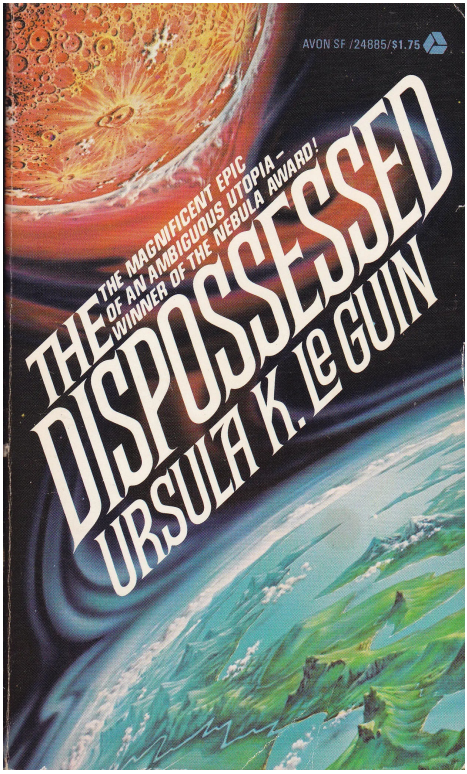
I guess *The Dispossessed* counts as a utopian novel, though it's hardly an assured one, as this anarchist commune-like society has flaws and perhaps deep ones. The chapters alternate between Shevet's present on Urras, learning first hand how society there works (or, in a few instances, doesn't), and his past back on Anarres, a set of flashbacks exploring at least a decade of his life, if not more. However, they are all told from Shevet's perspective so we're conditioned to be on his side from the outset. Even if he finds friction with his own society, he still believes that it's the way to go and that it can be fixed.

It's a fascinating society and it's well drawn, through good times and bad, the latter being especially evident during a famine that lasts four years. Anarres is a tough world. There are no animals except for fish in the oceans. There are precious few plants either, so a particular tree is a critical source for food and material. Even a couple of hundred years in, it's very much a frontier sort of society.



However, it's anarchist in nature, following the teachings of a lady named Odo. Nobody owns anything and that's changed not just society but language because the possessive is not used on Anarres. If you need something, you check it out and take it back when you're done. There are zero laws, society finding a balance where undesirable behaviour prompts treatment. The government isn't really a government, merely an organising tool to allocate people to work. However, those people do the work they want to do, without being forced to do so.

Le Guin explores this society deeply but not blindly and it's easily the biggest success of this book. I'm used to writers building utopian or dystopian societies to reflect their personal belief systems, but reality isn't as accepting of



such extremes. Anarres is clearly an experiment that has mostly succeeded, but it's not perfect and it's not a utopia. If it was, Shevet wouldn't have had to leave to see Urras and, by exploring another society, better see the value of his own.

One of the most telling scenes in the book comes late on when Shevet has realised why the people of A-Io, one of the states of Urras, allowed him to come and why they welcomed him with such generosity. Escaping the metaphorical walls they had built around him to discover the darker side of A-Io society, he's caught up in a revolution and, after its brutal suppression, escapes to the Terran embassy. Here, he chats with the Terran ambassador, who responds to his suggestion that Urras is Hell by suggesting that, to her, it's a paradise.

This scene makes it clear that there's good and bad on both Urras and Anarres, but their fundamentally different takes on society prompt wildly different perspectives. That these two philosophies can be so opposed, while carrying both good and bad, shockingly reminds of the America I live in today, even though this book was published in 1974 when I was a three year old Englishman.

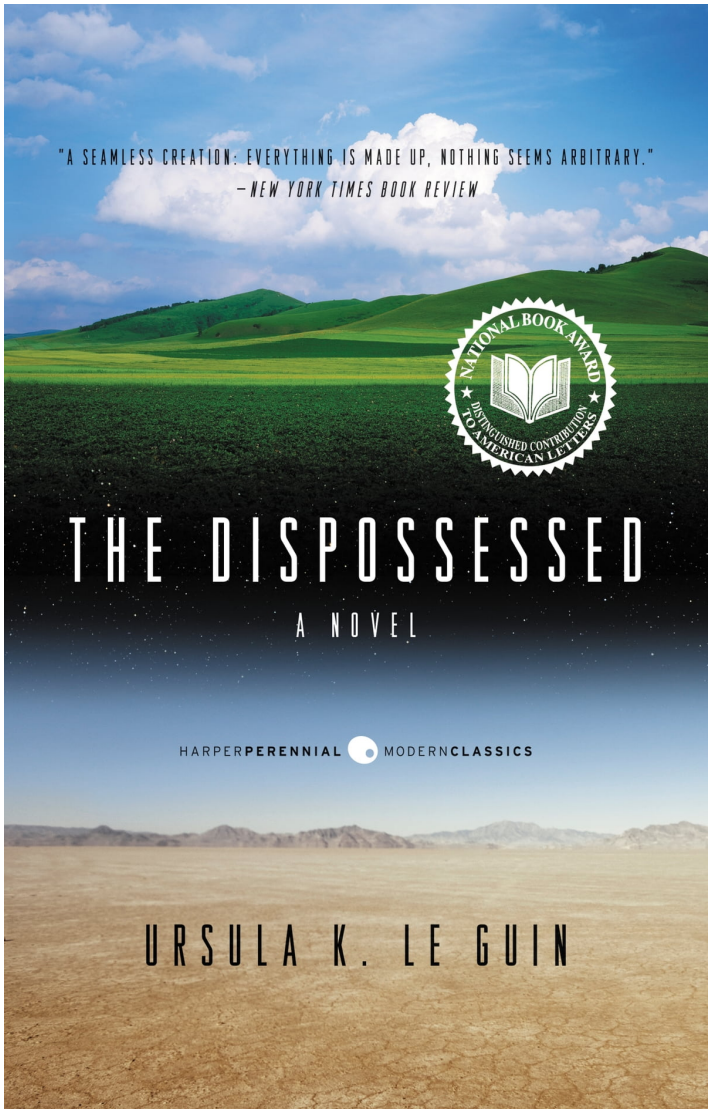
Another example of this in microcosm is the way that Anarres treats names. Whenever a child is born, they're automatically assigned a name by computer. A character is horrified at this because it's so unemotional and unrepresentative, but another points out that names are sourced from a central pool which ensures that every name in use is unique. Only after someone dies is that name made available again. Thus, Shevet isn't the first Shevet on Anarres but, while he lives, Shevet is him and him alone, making the name special. It's all about perspective.

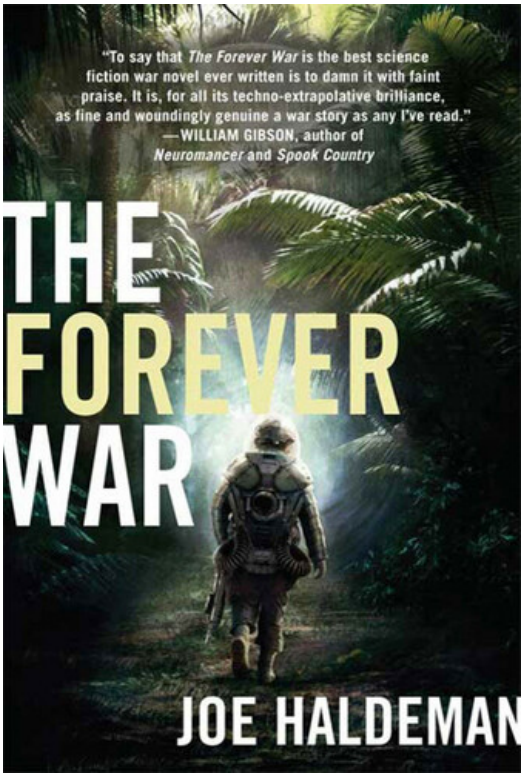
This is my first time reading *The Dispossessed*, but already it's clear to me that there's a heck of a lot in this book in which nothing much seems to happen. I'm sure that it's going to stay with me and I can see myself coming back to it in the future to see how it feels on a return trip, an appropriate choice of phrase because everything here is cyclical, tied up in Shevet's theories of time. The book itself feels like it's written according to those theories, even though we're never entirely sure what they are, catching them only in simplified form where time is a circle rather than a straight line.

Talking of cycles, readers of Le Guin's whole *Hainish Cycle* will find that it's the first in the series chronologically, albeit far from the first written. It's here that Shevet's theories find

the practical application that his sponsors in A-Io want, even if it's not the instantaneous travel they hope for. Instead it's the ansible, used in other books but soon to be created here after Shevet's physics makes it possible.

The Dispossessed, a title which has multiple meanings here, didn't just win the Hugo in 1975 but most of the rest of the awards that the genre had to offer at the time, including the Nebula and the Locus. It's clearly a great work, but I think it'll take a couple of returns to quantify just how great. At this point, after my first time through, it feels like it may be the best Hugo winner since *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.





JOE HALDEMAN

THE FOREVER WAR

PUBLISHER:

ANALOG
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1974

WON IN 1976
AT MIDAMERICICON,
THE 34TH WORLDCON,
IN KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI,
U.S.A.

So I thought I'd read *The Forever War* before. I hadn't, so this turns out to be a new one on me. I wonder if I got it confused with John Scalzi's *Old Man's War*, which I have read and which has been compared to this on many occasions, enough that Scalzi felt the need to point out in his foreword to my edition of *The Forever War* that he hadn't actually read it until recently.

Sure, there are similarities, but I found the two books very different, not least because, while *The Forever War* is certainly a war novel, it doesn't do any of sort of things that war novels tend to do, because its message is very different. It's not just an anti-war novel in the sense that it carries an anti-war message but also in the way that it deliberately subverts the template of the war novel in a whole slew of ways.

For one, we don't get the big picture at any point in the novel. This is the future, 1997, and we future Earthlings are joining a war against Taurans. Why? We have no idea. All we know is that the Taurans have apparently destroyed some colony ships that are taking us to the stars. The United Nations sends an Exploratory Force out on a mission with the twin aims of reconnaissance and revenge and what follows is a interstellar war that lasts for over a millennium.

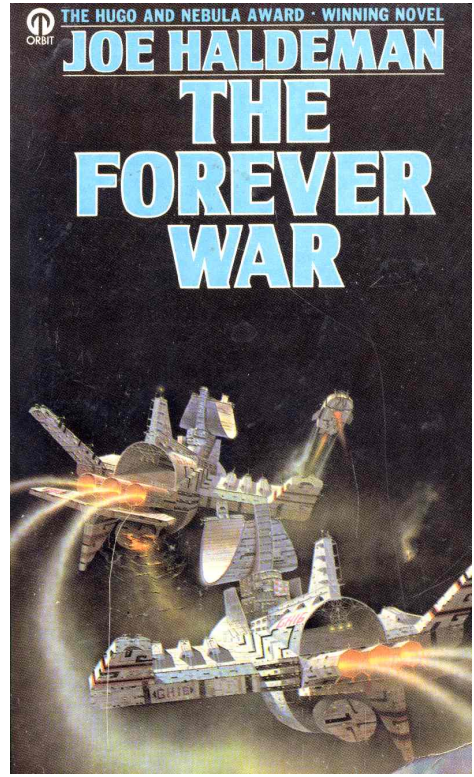
For two, the soldiers are intelligent but the intelligence they work from is not. Every member of this elite squad is as fit and strong as you expect, but also has an IQ over 150. Our

lead character, William Mandella, for example, is a physicist in regular life. But by the time they've survived the typical intensive training regimen on Charon, a planet beyond Pluto, and they've reached a distant planet orbiting Epsilon Aurigae to embark on their very first mission, they still have no idea what Taurans actually look like. Is that a Tauran? Let's kill it, just in case. Is that a Tauran base? Destroy it, just in case.

For three, the ethics are seriously off. That potential base is in some sort of city, which is populated by intelligent creatures who may or may not be Taurans. But they're not armed or fighting, even when our Exploratory Force chases in with guns blazing. And we promptly massacre them all anyway, because those in charge use post-hypnotic commands as a way to trigger an impulse to hate in our soldiers. Once the assault is over, these soldiers are powerfully traumatised by what they've done.

For four, there's nothing particularly special about Mandella, except the simple fact that he doesn't die. As the war runs on, he survives the encounters he's thrown into, which so many others don't, and so he gets promoted. The suggestion is that, while he's clearly a capable soldier, the single reason he's our lead is that he didn't die. By the time the war ends, there aren't more than a handful of soldiers left who were there at the beginning.

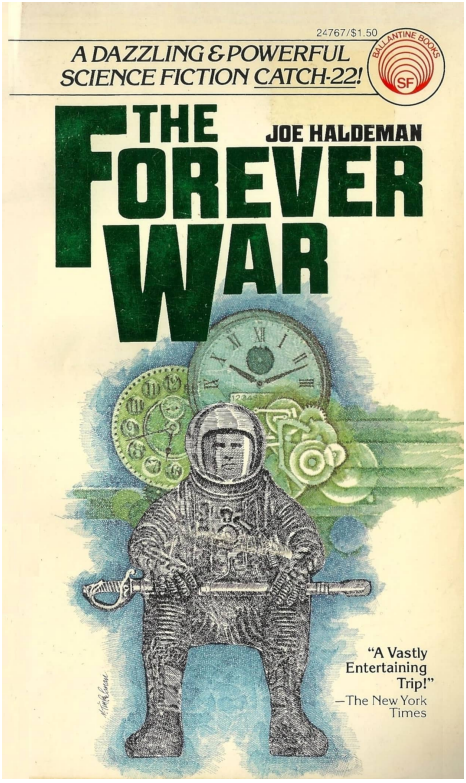
I should point out here that he doesn't end this novel at a thousand plus years of age because of some future medical advance. It's the result of a lot of travel at insanely fast speeds. That first mission took eight months for the soldiers involved, but time dilation means that it's nine years on when they get back to base. The longer these soldiers spend at ludicrous speed, the faster the world back



home moves forward. Mandella hasn't even reached my age by the time the Forever War is ended.

Which means that, for five, their return to Earth is a very clear culture shock for them and that's much of the point of the book. Joe Haldeman served in Vietnam and this tends to be seen as a fictional take on his service. While a major section in the early middle of the book was removed from its run in *Analog* magazine, it's the most telling section of the book, in which a soldier survives his first mission on an alien planet only to find that home is now just as alien. This novel is about soldiers coming home from war far more than it's ever about soldiers going to war.

And, for six, while this is obviously about Vietnam, there's frankly not a heck of a lot of



what we would think of as war in it. We might assume that the soldiers we send to war spend their entire military service on the field of battle, killing the enemy and saving their compatriots, but that's really not what goes down here. War in this book is mostly spent sitting around waiting, whether it's to get through training, to get to wherever they're supposed to go or for the action to actually start. Even when it does, the soldiers aren't always involved. Whenever there's conflict in space, they suit up and get into special tanks, so that their ship's computer can fight the battle for them, whipping through Gs that humans couldn't survive. Hopefully it wins and they can come out of those suits and tanks to wait some more. War to these soldiers is mostly Callisthenics and paperwork. I was reminded of the famous First World War quote that described war as "months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror."

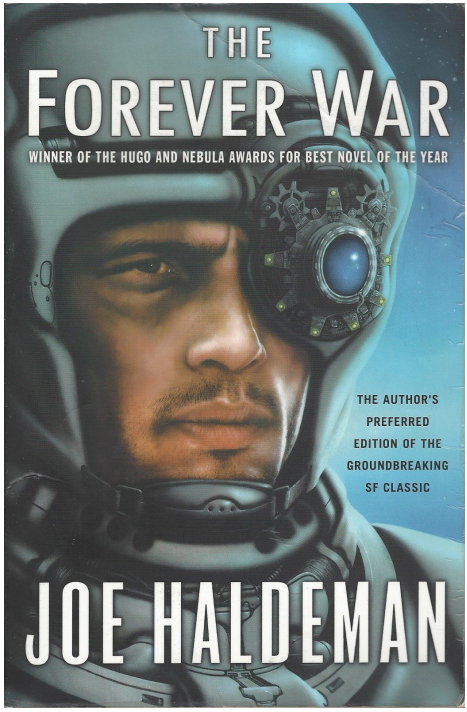
For seven... nah, I can't go there because that would be spoiler territory. Let's just say that there's a very powerful, if not particularly unexpected twist, at the end of this book that serves as a serious commentary on the entire millennium that's preceded it. It's a gut punch of a twist and it isn't what war novels are supposed to do.

Even though this book was published very early in Haldeman's career as a science fiction writer, it's very cleverly written, not just as a war novel to follow his non-fiction memoirs of Vietnam, but as science fiction. This takes a lot of sci-fi war novel tropes and plays with them.

For instance, it's well known that war needs spur technological advance. There's plenty of that here, but what's invented five minutes after a ship leaves for a journey of light years doesn't help them until they get back, which could well be decades later. That means that vessels could be wildly out of current spec in no time flat, even when facing an enemy who might be decades newer in tech. As the book runs on, centuries apply just as well.

What that means, for eight, is that every grunt on the ground could be as great at their job as any grunt has ever been, and they could be doomed to inevitable loss simply because they were sent a long way to find themselves in the path of an enemy who weren't. That's a brutal truth in a universe like this.

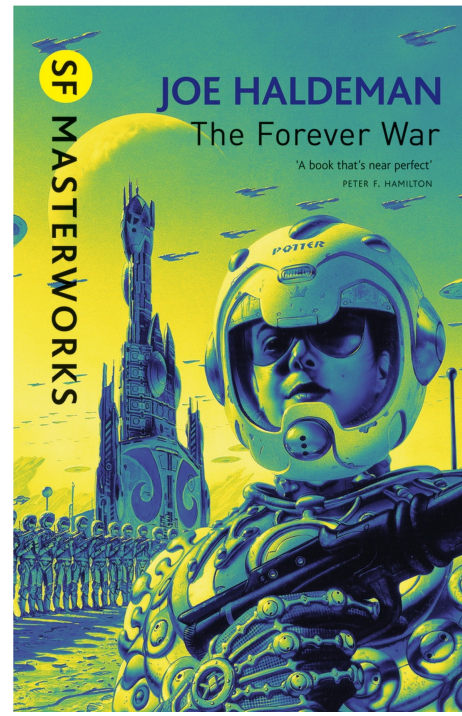
While characters aren't the point here, we do get to know Mandella, not so much through what he does as how he reacts to the changes that surround him. One of the most crucial points of the book has nothing to do with war,

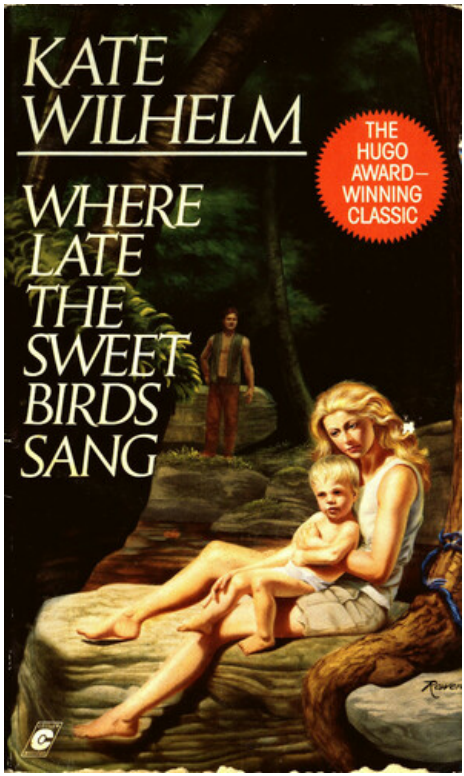


really, and that's when he and Marygay Potter, his girlfriend and fellow soldier, are split up. He finds himself sent on a mission in this direction and she's sent on one in that, which in this time dilated setup means that they're never going to see each other again. It's a fantastic personification of the sheer damage that war can do to the people tasked with conducting it. That goes double when we find just how much society has changed after one more extra-long journey. It's hard to imagine anyone more alone in a crowd than the next situation that Mandella finds himself in.

I don't know if I can honestly say that I like this novel, but I certainly didn't dislike it. It's a pessimistic book, especially in that initially excised section, something that works well for a commentary on an era as much as a war. It's extremely honest, though, and very powerful. I may not like it but I'm not sure I'm supposed to. It's a book I can honestly say that I admire and appreciate and will likely come back to at some point. It would make an outstanding sci-fi movie, should one ever get made (it's been announced often but not happened thus far).

It's a worthy winner, not only of the Hugo in 1976 but the Locus and the Nebula as well. For a commentary on its time, it stands up remarkably well to over four decades of time passed, which, as I've found, is not the case with all Hugo winners. This may speak to the Vietnam War, but it's just as applicable to the Iraq War and probably every other war there's ever been. It's timeless in its message and that's as appropriate as any comment I can make on this novel. Bravo.





KATE WILHELM

WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRDS SING

PUBLISHER:
HARPER & ROW

PUBLICATION DATE:
1976

WON IN 1977
AT SUNCON,
THE 35TH WORLDCON,
IN MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA,
U.S.A.

In 1977, before Kate Wilhelm won the Hugo Award (and both the Locus and the Jupiter) for her novel, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, a title borrowed from a Shakespeare sonnet, only two women had won that award and both of them were Ursula K. Le Guin. If Le Guin opened a door, then Wilhelm walked through it and Vonda N. McIntyre, Joan D. Vinge and C. J. Cherryh followed in her footsteps. Suddenly, women would win in five out of eight years.

Only the first part of this book had been previously published, in an annual anthology called *Orbit*, and I wasn't sold on that at all. It's dystopian fiction, a pessimistic look at our future which will surely and inevitably involve complete societal collapse. Only one very large family sees this coming and their response is to build a hospital and research cloning. This turns out to be particularly prescient thinking, because, a blink later, there's a flu epidemic, the fertility rate collapses to zero and infant mortality becomes the norm. So, cloning it is.

There were things I liked about Part I but things I didn't like too. It seemed too pat, too foreseen and too pessimistic. Wilhelm didn't neglect her primary characters, but she didn't place them above the situation they were stuck in. Sure, David finds a breakthrough that enables the clones to return, after only a few generations of cloning, to regular reproduction with a healthy fertility rate. But we care about the science a lot more than we care about David. And everything firmly revolves around the direction that this family believes

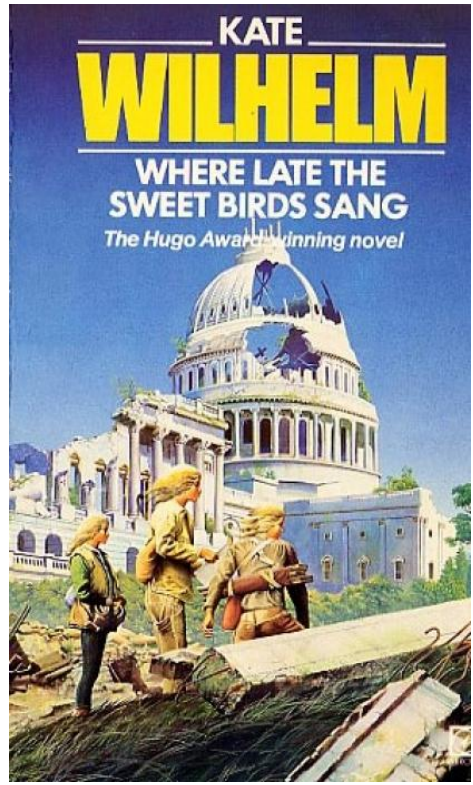
is right. Screw anything else.

But things don't go as planned and that's when the book starts to become interesting. David may well have been right about the strain that repairs and remembers, but the clones don't function the way that humans do. In fact, while they appreciate his contribution to preserving the species, they end up exiling him because he's different.

How different we learn during Part II, which is absolutely wonderful. We've already figured out that multiple clones of the same person either form a sort of hive mind or just have an enhanced empathy towards each other. It turns out to be a bad thing when a group of clones mount an expedition to the destroyed Washington, DC to salvage what they can from the vaults of the city. The longer they spend away from home and thus the others of the same genetic source, the more traumatised they become.

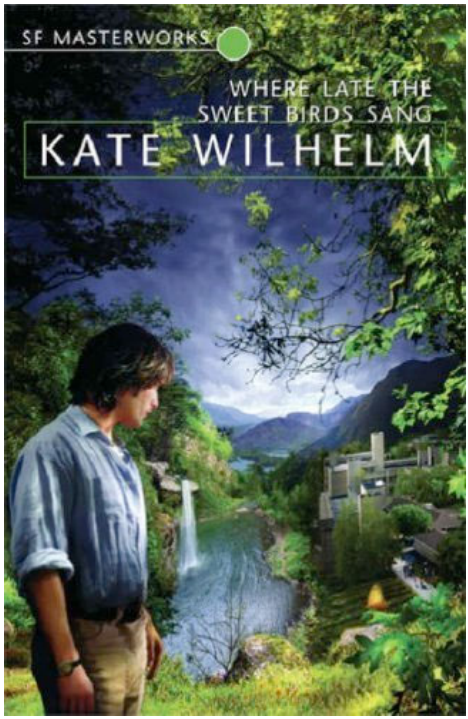
This is glorious stuff, far beyond the basic idea which is fundamental to the rest of the book and, by extension, the survival of the human race. I found the journey through this post-apocalyptic landscape atmospheric and ever fascinating. It played to me somewhat like *Heart of Darkness* laid over a framework set out in M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*. Sure, the clones are questing through a physical space, a massively changed version of one we know, but they're also on another journey into their own minds, which are a little more complex than ours.

Given how this novel moves forward considerably over time, spanning a requisite number of generations, and each of its three parts unfolds at an important point in that span, it's easy to reach spoiler territory, so I'll stop here. Let's just say that the assumptions of the first



part are broken in the second but, as we gradually realise... nah, you'll have to read it for yourself and figure out where it's going too. The overriding logic makes sense and I firmly appreciate the way in which Wilhelm orchestrates this journey.

I will mention one of the key discoveries, because it's one of the aspects to resonate with me. The clones tend to be very bright and very able, so they pick up what they need to pick up very quickly. However, it gradually dawns that, while they're incredibly good at replicating what's gone before, the power to adapt and create gradually vanishes. There's a magic point when a character builds a snowman and realises that the clones only see the snow; they simply can't interpret his creation as an artistic rendering of a man. I was deeply

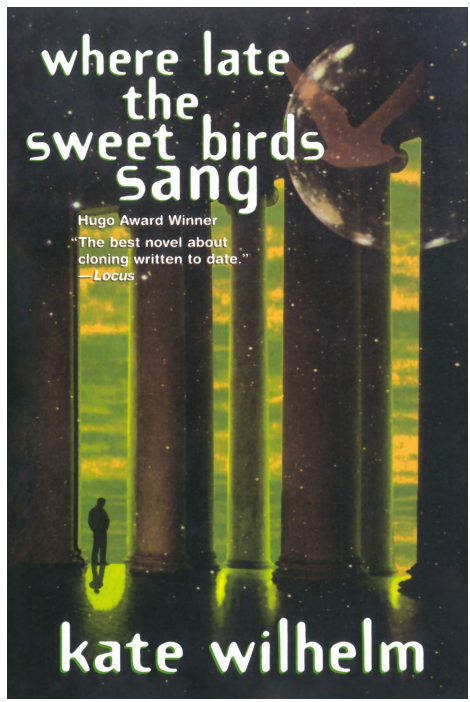


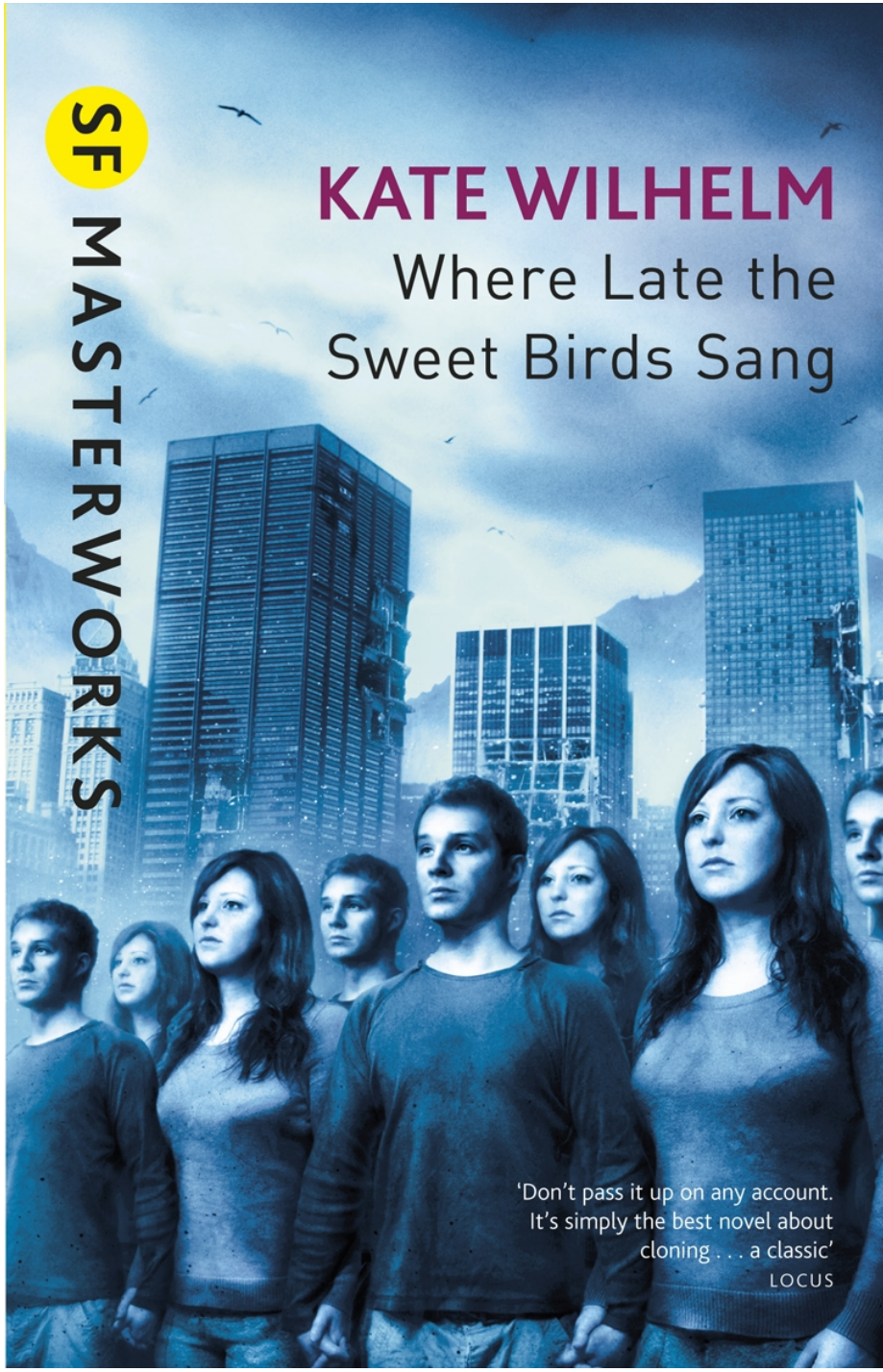
affected by that, both the idea and the way it comes up.

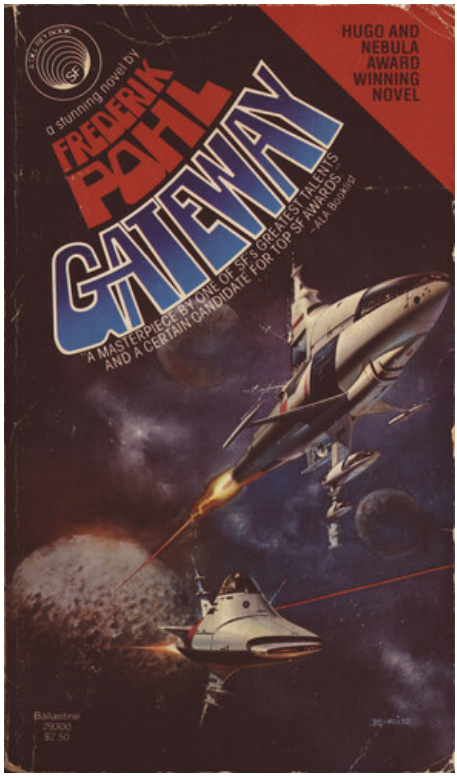
This particular character, who you'll need to discover yourself, is easily my favourite here, not least because he's different. I empathised with him in many ways, though he's not much like me. The earlier characters failed to resonate and I couldn't buy into any of their situations. The clones are interesting and I'm sure prompted much discussion back in 1977, but in many ways the whole lot of them are offputting. That's deliberate, of course, but it doesn't help us love the book, only appreciate it. Love comes back in later when things get more human again.

This seems to have been a problem in the seventies, that the ideas proved bigger than the characters tasked with exploring them. The biggest culprit thus far for me was *Rendezvous with Rama* in which the idea was literally huge and the people forgettable. This novel sits alongside its predecessor as Hugo winner, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* in which both the ideas and the characters are enjoyable, but the ideas much more so.

I don't believe I've read any of the remaining winners from the seventies, so I'm eager to see if this trend continues through them. I have read quite a few of the eighties winners, though, and I think they play differently. One title in particular is getting closer in terms of release date but still feels a few decades away in style. I'm also interested to see if that changes over a few years or whether it's going to be the paradigm shift that it's starting to seem.




SF MASTERWORKS
KATE WILHELM
Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang
'Don't pass it up on any account. It's simply the best novel about cloning . . . a classic'
LOCUS



FREDERIK POHL

GATEWAY

PUBLISHER:
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1976

WON IN 1978
AT IGUANACON II,
THE 36TH WORLDCON,
IN PHOENIX, ARIZONA,
U.S.A.

My runthrough of Hugo winners for Best Novel reaches 1978 with *Gateway* by one of the old guard of science fiction, Frederik Pohl. He's one of the biggest names in the genre, not only as an author but as a literary agent—the only one Isaac Asimov ever had—and as a magazine editor, most obviously of *Galaxy* in the sixties. It's a fascinating novel, but one that made me think back four years to 1974, when Arthur C. Clarke won the same award with *Rendezvous with Rama*.

Rama is a high concept science fiction novel that sees the human race in a sort of first contact that isn't quite because we find alien technology but no actual aliens. Rama is first thought to be an asteroid, but it turns out to be a gigantic spacecraft travelling through our solar system and we're stuck with an overly brief window of opportunity to explore it and learn what we can before it's gone again. As a high science fiction concept, it's magnificent, but as a novel, it was too involved with its concept to care to ground it in humanity. With *Gateway*, Pohl ably addresses that problem.

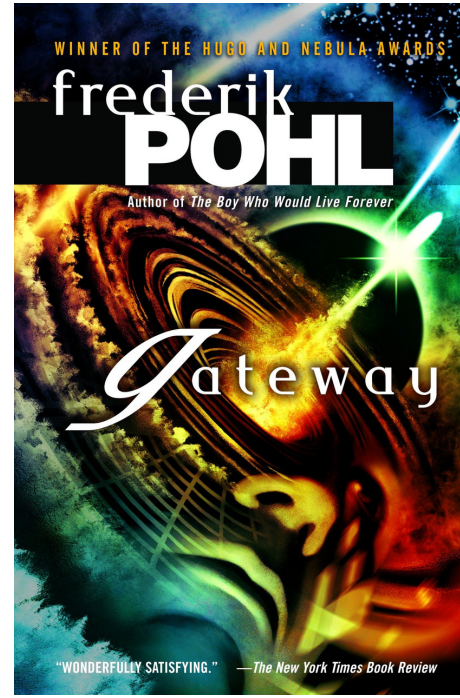
The central concept behind *Gateway* is just as magnificent as Rama and with even more possibility, but it's static, giving us the ability to explore it at our leisure. It's a space station, hidden within an asteroid by the mysterious and absent Heechee race at an unknown time aeons in the past. We're in a far future where we've gone to space and are exploring Venus when someone finds a spacecraft that, when activated, takes him to Gateway.

And Gateway is a glorious discovery. There are no Heechee there either, but there are a heck of a lot more ships there, all of which appear to be in as pristine a condition as they were when the Heechee left. There's a lot we don't understand about them, like how they work and how to control them, but we've learned how to get into them and trigger them to move. They all seem to be pre-programmed with directions, thus taking whoever's daring enough to stay inside when they press the metaphorical go button to a location that was presumably important to the Heechee.

As you might imagine, given the timeframes involved, this is a dangerous business. We're guessing that the Heechee liked to visit places of astronomical interest but such places could be observation points for suns about to go supernova and, in the incalculable time that's passed since, those suns are now gone and the radioactive debris makes them a deadly place for a human being to visit. Many people die on these journeys. Others seem to go nowhere in particular, making worthless journeys, but a few take us to habitable planets containing the remnants of civilisations and technology that makes any such visitors incredibly rich.

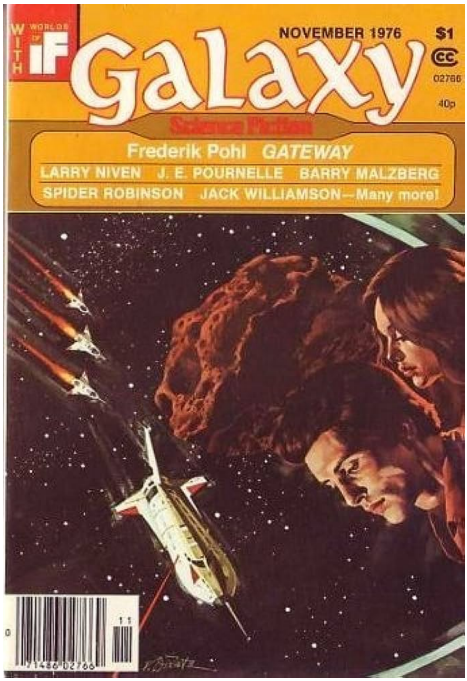
So enter the human angle. Earth may have progressed massively in some ways, but it's an overcrowded planet where many are poor and starving. The possibility inherent in taking a ride in a Heechee ship is enough to ensure a long line of willing participants, however dangerous a gamble with their lives it might be. And we focus on one of those, Robinette Broadhead, who's initially working to farm edible slime out of shale, but wins enough money in a lottery to get him to Gateway and into that line.

As if to provide a very human parallel to the



mysteries of Gateway, the Heechee and what technology we have gradually found of theirs, Pohl makes Broadhead a mystery as well. We know from the outset that he goes out on a Heechee ship, finds something amazing and becomes an insanely rich man, because that's what he is in the therapy sessions he has with a robot psychiatrist that he dubs Sigfrid von Shrink. Those sessions begin with the book and alternate in the narrative with Broadhead's life on Gateway, where he finds himself frozen with fear at what might happen if he gets into a Heechee ship.

I didn't like the therapy sessions very much, especially early on, because they seem to get in the way of the story at hand and slow it down. In every chapter on *Gateway*, Pohl progresses our knowledge firmly forward, not only of Broadhead but of the culture growing up on the space station and the universe that we're



starting to glimpse. It's amazing frontier stuff and I was hooked, but my exploration of it was continually interrupted by the narrative going back to a rich man doing everything he can to avoid solving his deep-seated problems that we don't know about yet.

Pohl also throws in ephemera, just single page stuff, like want ads on Gateway or other snippets of background, but they do at least overtly build our knowledge. We don't think that the therapy sessions do that, until a point, somewhere late in the novel, where they do take over as the primary narrative, explaining what we've learned in the Gateway sections. Yes, Broadhead goes out and he comes back alone, though we don't know why. And there, Sigfrid von Shrink serves his purpose and we finally get a big picture, not of the Heechee, because most of our questions about them remain unanswered, but about Broadhead and his part in that wider story.

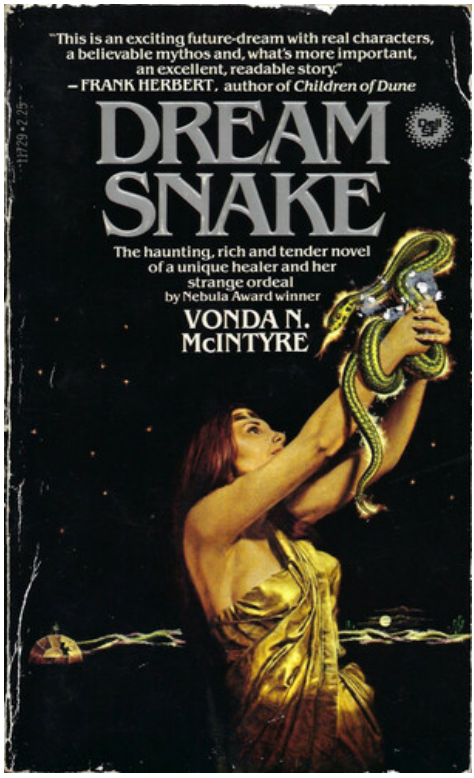
There are some other characters that have meaning within the story but much of their purpose is to keep everything human. It would not surprise me if Pohl, already a renowned author and editor, was acutely aware of the problems *Rendezvous with Rama* had and set out to fix them. If so, many of the little sub-plots and individual stories that intersect with Broadhead's are there to humanise it and keep it grounded in humanity even as we literally explore the stars in these dangerous journeys in a fleet of Heechee ships that hold one, three or five people on trips that average 45 days each way. As much as I adore the high concept in play here, it's always about people.

Another key factor is that, while we continually learn, both we the readers and we the human race in this particular future, we're not given all the answers. We're used to finding stuff, figuring out how it works and bending it to our will. Here, Pohl answers some of these questions, but he leaves even more open. We know these ships have incredible faster than light drives, but we haven't even figured out a way to open them without blowing them up. We've learned how to make them go, but we remain unable to choose where. We can't even tell what the Heechee looked like. While there is a well defined story that Pohl ably starts and ends, this is also an amazing beginning ready to be expanded.

With the caveats I mentioned above, I liked this a great deal. Partly, it's a fresh take on *Rendezvous with Rama* with all its fundamental problems addressed, which is refreshing for me and this project, as I get to see a year's progression every month. Had I read these books a year apart, as the Hugo voters did, I think I'd still have seen that, but it was pretty

obvious with that timeframe slimmed down to four months. Partly, though, it's just a grand science fiction story, a futuristic take on the good old frontier tales of the American west or the Yukon, with mere gold replaced by alien artifacts and the mysteries of an alien race who reached a stage far beyond our technology but who are nonetheless long gone for unknown reasons. Phrasing it like that, I was always going to love this one.

Pohl had introduced the Heechee before this novel, in a novella called *The Merchants of Venus*, but I haven't read that. I probably have it on the shelf, so I'll dig it out. However, this marks the first novel in the *Heechee Saga*, to be followed by four more: *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*, *Heechee Rendezvous*, *The Annals of the Heechee* and *The Boy Who Would Live Forever*, a fixup novel from at least three short stories.



VONDA N. MCINTYRE

DREAMSNAKE

PUBLISHER:
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

PUBLICATION DATE:
1978

WON IN 1979
AT SEACON '79,
THE 37TH WORLDCON,
IN BRIGHTON, ENGLAND,
UNITED KINGDOM

Here's a special book! Reading *Dreamsnake* for the first time in 2021, I realise that this was something groundbreaking in 1978. Some of what made it so has faded somewhat because it helped to trigger a change in how science fiction was written and the last forty years have demonstrated that the seed it planted has grown fruit. However it remains unusual and it feels all the more so in my journey through all the Hugo winners for Best Novel.

For instance, I enjoyed the previous winner a great deal too, but *Gateway* feels like it was written twenty years before *Dreamsnake*. Even recent winners by female authors, like the pair of Ursula K. Le Guins or Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, which won only two years earlier, sometimes feel dated, while this one just doesn't. It feels just like it could have been written last week, which speaks volumes about how influential it really was. And, while it's notably feminist in its outlook, that doesn't affect our ability to enjoy it in the slightest; it's far from a polemic, although it achieves more than polemics tend to.

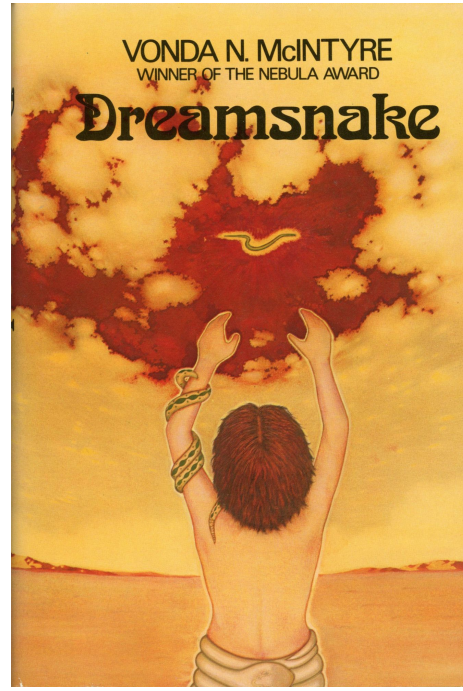
Initially, it feels like a fantasy novel. We're following a young healer named Snake, as she travels into the desert in order to vaccinate the nomads and treat anyone who needs. She does this using traditional means, so plenty of medicines, but also a trio of snakes: a rattlesnake, a cobra and a dreamsnake. The first two are used to diagnose and to deliver treatment, while the third is crucial in taking away pain. And, as she's formulating medicine needed to

healing a boy's tumour, she leaves Grass, her dreamsnake, to aid him in sleep only to return to find that his family have killed it, fearing that it would hurt the boy.

There's a lot going on here that we don't quite realise at the time. For one, we have a female lead, far from unprecedented but still unusual in 1978 in a science fiction novel. That the book promptly becomes a quest tale with a female hero makes it even more unusual, but McIntyre never draws attention to that. Snake is a hero because it's who she is and it's all the more powerful when we realise it because it wasn't slapped in our faces. What's more, she achieves her goals through helping people, not only through healing. I don't believe that anyone wields a sword or a gun here. Heroic fantasy doesn't have to involve violence.

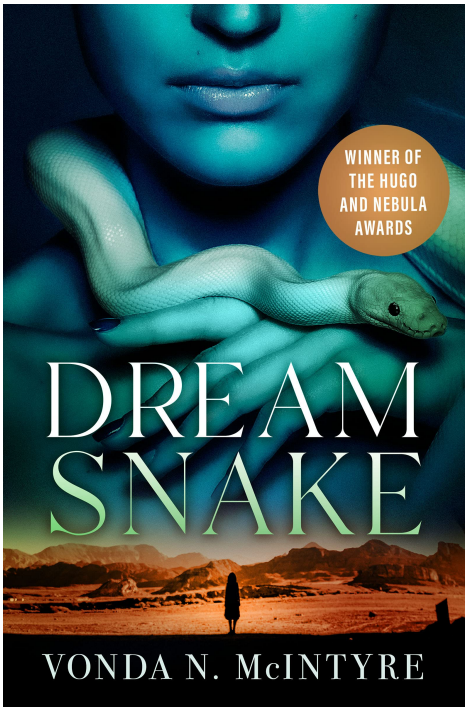
For another, she's tested quickly and often and how she reacts is notable. In a different novel, the healer who discovers her dreamsnake killed might stomp off in a huff or lash out in revenge, but Snake simply does her job, helping the boy even as her heart must have been breaking. After leaving the tribe, she finds a woman who has fallen off her horse and crushed her spine. She knows she can't heal or save her, but helps her anyway, in a traumatic set of scenes. And, returning to her camp, she finds that her property has been rifled through and destroyed and stolen. Her journal is gone, as are her records and maps. For a while, this is not a happy story at all, but nevertheless, Snake persists and endures.

And, she does so without any confidence that things will end well. After Grass is killed, she's initially driven towards home. She feels she should return there, explain her loss and hope that there will be a replacement dreamsnake waiting for her and that it'll be given to



her. She isn't particularly confident though. As a new healer who has lost her dreamsnake so quickly, she fears that she'll lose her other snakes, Sand and Mist, and so be unable to continue her work. Circumstances change her plans, of course, but she's never able to lose that fear, until scenes late in the book change everything.

I liked this immediately and substantially. I may be male but I've always enjoyed reading strong female characters, especially ones with depth that aren't male characters given lady parts. Snake is a fantastic lead, a strong female character in very different ways to what that might conjure up, and we gradually come to realise that all the other characters most in control of their own destinies are also female: Jesse, the lady with a broken spine, may die pretty quickly but on her own terms, as her companions and presumably lovers struggle;



Grum, an arthritis-ridden old lady, rules her caravan firmly and effectively; and Melissa, an abused burn victim of a child, has found many ways to live on her own terms, given what life has given her. The male characters aren't all weak and useless, but they generally tend to be constrained in some way, by themselves, by others or by the rules of their societies.

And, as if McIntyre was planning all along for this to break all the rules of the genre apparent at the time, we gradually realise that this is a science fiction novel all along. Sure, it's mostly told in the language of fantasy, our healer roaming a pre-industrial landscape on her horse to embark on a quest, but science fiction continues to inexorably creep in. This young healer talks about vaccinations and haploid cells and aneurisms, not to ignore a case of pituitary gigantism. This is a post-apocalyptic society, merely adrift far enough that little remains and what does is mostly not understood, except by certain groups, like healers. Jesse doesn't die because of her spinal injuries but because of radation poisoning, having fallen by a crater polluted from a long forgotten but still potent nuclear war.

I appreciated how so little was explained in this book, even as it frustrated me. We are never told that this is Earth, though anyone who had read McIntyre's debut and previous novel, *The Exile Waiting*, would know it as the setting is the same. I haven't read that book, so saw the one and only city in *Dreamsnake* as an enigma. It's called Center and it's maintained a level of technology far beyond anything outside—Arevin, one of the nomads, has never seen a book, while Center has videoscreens in its walls for communication—but it isolates itself, locking its gates for seasons and not allowing outsiders in. It also serves as a hub for contact with offworlders, none of whom appear in this novel.

For all that it starts out with such a parade of loss, torment and heartbreak, I left this novel feeling a little refreshed. Snake is no saint—she enjoys sex for its own sake, which must also have felt revolutionary in 1978—and she's not an all-knowing, all-powerful saviour—she makes mistakes and trusts far too easily—but she brings a real generosity of spirit to a genre sadly lacking in it. She's simply a good person, one who cares widely and well and makes a difference to the lives of others, but crucially without any of them defining her.

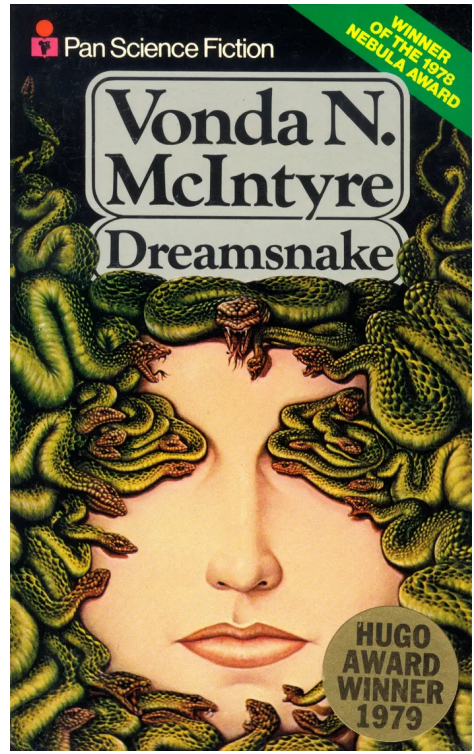
There's a lot more here that I didn't grasp at the time and only realised when reading up afterwards. For instance, Jesse's partners—in business and in bed—are Merideth and Alex, and, while we know that Jesse is female and Alex is male, McIntyre carefully avoids using

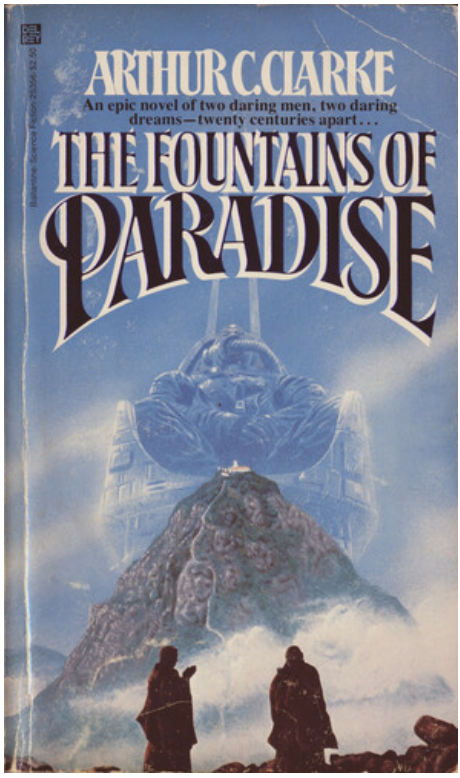
pronouns for Merideth, so we could read him as male or her as female, depending on our own perception. Interestingly, given I felt so strongly that Martha Wells's Murderbot, who is similarly never given a gender, is female, I'd assumed Merideth was male.

I grasped many of the feminist underpinnings of the book, even if not always quickly, but I was drawn so deeply into the story that I hadn't thought about the symbology of the snakes. I'd even felt that these names were a little too basic, but Snake isn't the first healer to be given that name and she's meant to be an archetypal character, epitomising all the aspects of the healer. The primary symbol of the healer is the cadeceus, two snakes wound around a staff. We can even go back to the book of *Genesis* to show how McIntyre subverted norms here, but I didn't see all of that richness while reading.

I've found that I've appreciated the Hugo winners from the seventies far more than I've enjoyed them. I enjoyed the ideas in *To Your Scattered Bodies Go* but wanted more from it than Philip José Farmer was willing to give. *The Gods Themselves* has a magnificent midsection but otherwise felt like weaker Asimov. *Rendezvous with Rama* was fantastic with ideas and awful with characters. *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War* were great novels that I doubt I'll go back to, even though I tell myself I should. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* often felt dated in ways that earlier winners didn't. While *Gateway* was the most enjoyable winner since *Ringworld*, I still found it a little awkward at points.

Dreamsnake I just plain enjoyed, while gradually realising how much I also appreciated it. I wasn't as expectant going in, but this is up there with *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and *Way Station* for me. And I'll definitely come back to it, after I read some more Vonda N. McIntyre, starting with *The Exile Waiting*. I want to know a lot more about Center.





ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE

PUBLISHER:
VICTOR GOLLANCZ

PUBLICATION DATE:
1979

WON IN 1980
AT NOREASCON TWO,
THE 38TH WORLDCON,
IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS,
U.S.A.

Last time I read an Arthur C. Clarke novel, it was *Rendezvous with Rama*, which won him the Hugo Award in 1974. This time, we're six years on and he won again with a novel that does what *Rama* did but does a much better job of writing characters to hook all the grand ideas on, especially when he throws them into life or death action scenes.

And there is no shortage of grand ideas. The most obvious is the space elevator that has become the magnum opus of superstar engineer Vannevar Morgan, now that a bridge he designed to link Europe and Africa across the Gibraltar Straits is complete. He hasn't got a heck of a lot of chance of achieving this goal, given the obstacles in his way, from technological advancements to the fact that he'll need to build it on a mountainside in the fictional country of Taprobane and a Buddhist temple has occupied the site continually for a couple of millennia.

However, if this book has a message, it's that we'll achieve immense things if only we can dream immensely enough, and Morgan certainly does that. There are smaller ideas here as well, so many that I'm sure I didn't note them all down. Weather control has quite a big role to play, but heat monitors, limb regenerations and even automated birthday reminders come into play too.

What's more, while this isn't set in the same universe as Rama, a visit from a similar interstellar vessel, dubbed Starglider, has already happened when the novel begins and it's

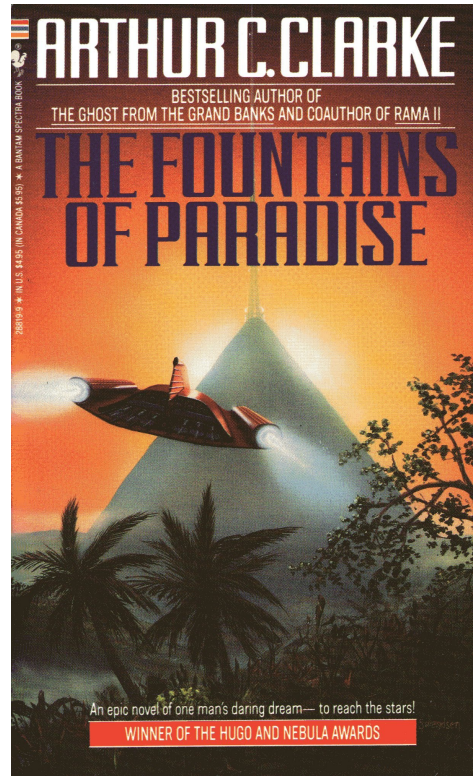
changed a lot of things, most obviously our gravitation towards religion. This time we were able to communicate with Starglider before it left and we never once forget that, whatever else we do in the meantime, we're not alone in the universe and first contact is on its way.

It's well known that Clarke, who was born in England, one of the standard countries for great science fiction authors, lived for over half his life in Sri Lanka, his adopted home, and that certainly flavoured much of his fiction, including this book. Taprobane isn't on any of our maps because it's a fictionalisation of Sri Lanka a little further south than it ought to be to meet the technical requirements of the space elevator.

Clarke stated it was "about ninety percent congruent" and, while I've never visited it, I certainly got a feel for the place and some of its history and culture by reading this. It mostly unfolds as a future story with Morgan (or others) finding ways around obstacles so that his dream can happen, but there's a consistent alternation and connection to an ancient king, known as Kalidasa, who built the fountains of the title two thousand years into the past, another immense achievement.

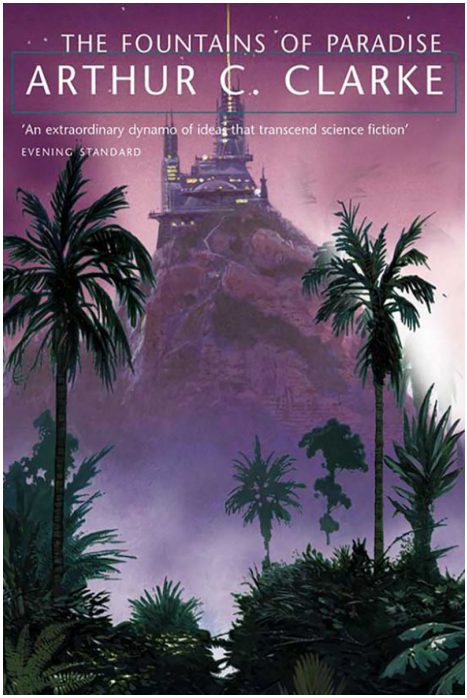
I should point out that both Kalidasa and Yakkagala are historical, in the sense that they're a fictionalisation of Kashyapa I and the ambitious city he built at Sigiriya. These two eras are connected thematically in this novel, as well as through the presence of the temple on the sacred mountain of Sri Kanda nearby, with Kalidasa dealing with the Mahanayake Thero of his era, just as Morgan has to deal with the 85th Mahanayake Thero in his.

I liked *Rendezvous with Rama* but only for its big ideas. Rama itself dominated, to the point



that I found that I forgot who some of the puny humans who visited it were even while they were there. It wasn't a human story; it was an alien story and the human race paled in comparison, whether individually or as a whole. The revelation that this visitor from another star system wasn't even here for us at all but was merely using our sun to slingshot towards its real destination was hard to take.

I like *The Fountains of Paradise* much more, because its big ideas are mostly human in origin and demonstrate what we can achieve when we put our minds to it, whether the individual minds of key people like Vannevar Morgan or the collective minds of a species. We're big and growing in this book, because this space elevator is a gateway to orbit, a necessary step for us to expand beyond our

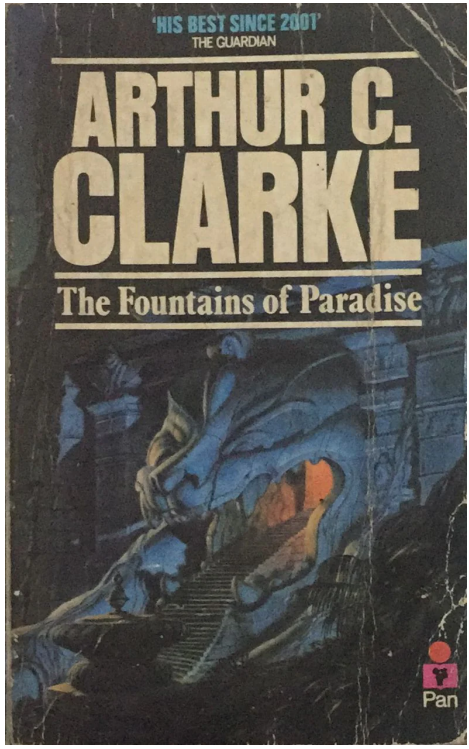


planet. In *Rama*, we were merely the sentient equivalent of Carl Sagan's pale blue dot.

What's more, Morgan, as driven and often alone as he is, is a fleshed out human being whose existence and actions we acknowledge and appreciate and will remember. *Rama* was blissfully shy of any of those. There are other, much less prominent, characters here that I'll remember too, such as the 85th Mahanayake Thero's secretary, formerly a physicist named Dr. Choam Goldberg, who retreated to the monastery on Sri Kanda, telling the world, "Now that Starglider has effectively destroyed all traditional religions, we can at last pay serious attention to the concept of God."

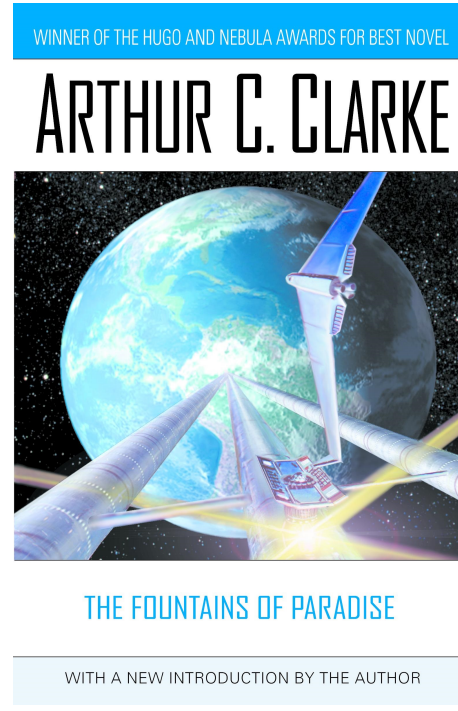
I haven't read as many of Clarke's works as I should, but I've read enough to see that it's this book that should be the first port of call for those interested in exploring his work, rather than his more famous works, not just *Rendezvous with Rama* but the short story *The Sentinel* which was adapted to film as *2001: A Space Odyssey*. While, unlike those other works, it has no sequel, it certainly connects to much more of Clarke's other writing. It's appropriate too, as that the space elevator is his gateway to space and his book about it is his gateway to his work.

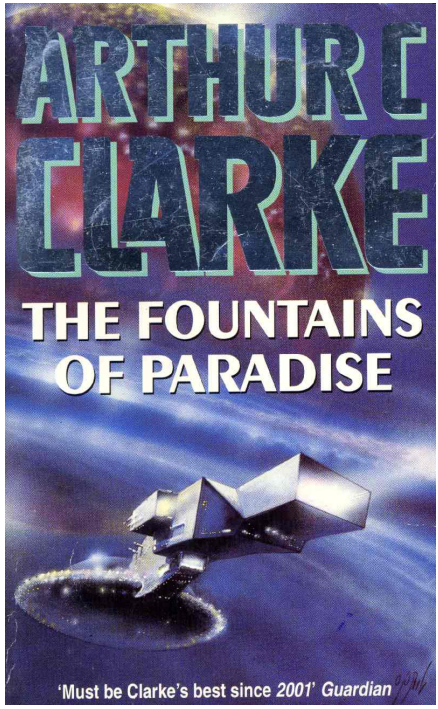
There are flaws here but they're somewhat forgiveable. Yet again, there are precious few women with a role to play in this future, though that gender isn't excluded entirely. The high concept nature of much of the book jars somewhat with the old fashioned rescue storyline which is Morgan's coda. Neither of those issues spoil the book, but they both serve to highlight just how much is going on within its pages. It's almost a shock to realise

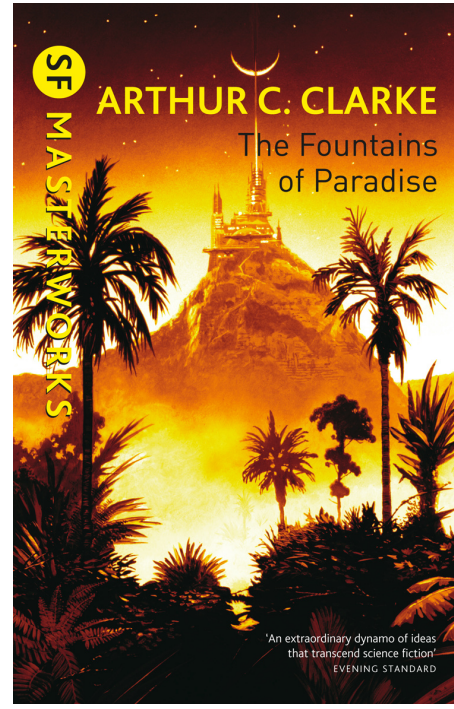


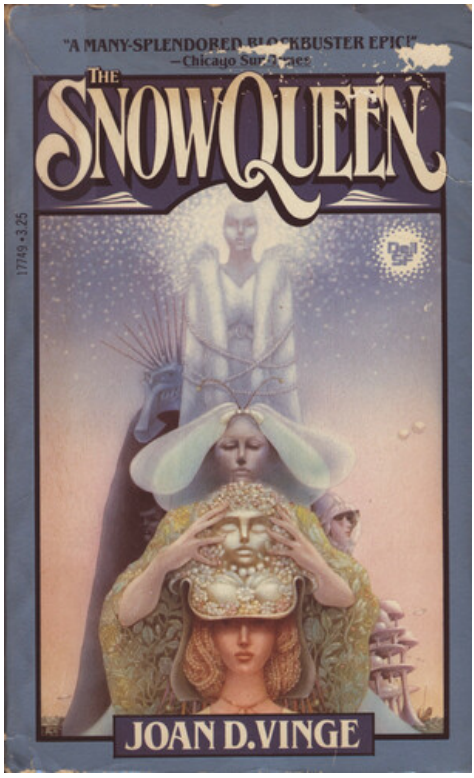
that it ends in fewer than three hundred of them. Nowadays, a novel like this would sprawl over more than a thousand, if not a whole series.

And with this book now done, I'm into another decade. *The Fountains of Paradise* was published in 1979 and won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1980. Looked at together, the winners during the seventies were a wildly varied bunch with very different goals, a change from the wildly varied bunch in the sixties which mostly questioned society. It's hard to find common ground between *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Forever War*. *The Fountains of Paradise* at least has some obvious company in other high concept sf novels as *Ringworld* and *Rendezvous with Rama*.









JOAN D. VINGE

THE SNOW QUEEN

PUBLISHER:
DIAL PRESS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1980

WON IN 1981
AT DENVENTION TWO,
THE 39TH WORLDCON,
IN DENVER, COLORADO,
U.S.A.

Oh wow, where to start with this one? I guess I'll start with the facts. *The Snow Queen* was published in 1980 and won both the Hugo and the Locus for Best Novel in 1981. For the Hugo, it won over four books by major authors which aren't their best known works. Oddly, that list excludes Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, which was the other big winner of the year, as it landed the Nebula and the Campbell, as well as the British Science Fiction Award.

So far, so good. Now, what do I think about it? That's not so easy to answer.

Half of me believes that it's a magnificent achievement, exploring a deeply imagined universe with dreamlike prose and effortless detail. It reminded me of *Dune* in the way that told its story on such a grand scale. Sure, we're focused on very particular people in a very particular place at a very particular time, primarily a young sibyl named Moon Dawn-treader on an ocean planet called Tiamat as it prepares to toggle from a 150 year cycle of connection to the outside to another where the outside can't get in at all and anyone from the outside who was already there has left. However, the story that we're really reading is far broader than that, in terms of both space and time.

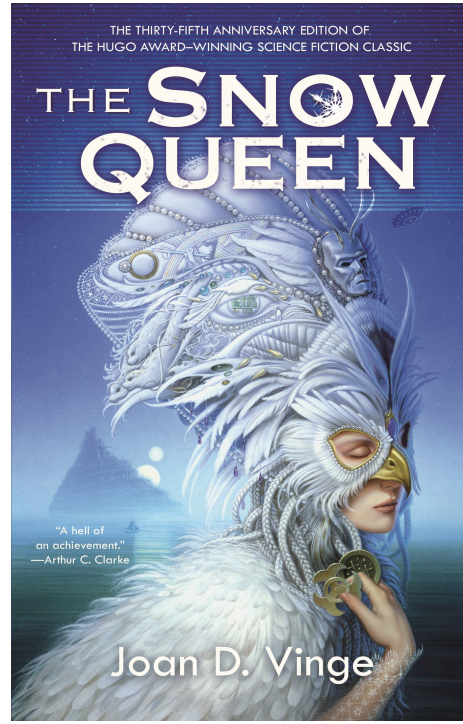
There are things you need to know coming in. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away... there was an empire that wandered the stars and did amazing things, but it's long gone and the Hegemony, which has replaced it to a cretain degree, hasn't yet recovered its level

of technology, even though it's spread over seven planets and has interstellar travel. It's reliant on a wormhole called the Black Gate to get to Tiamat and that is only open for one of those 150 year cycles because of the way it's affected by the movement of Tiamat's twin suns.

That's a big deal, because Tiamat has a key product, an immortality drug that's harvested from sea creatures called mers, and in order to maintain their access to it, the Hegemony is suppressing the planet's technology. When a 150 year cycle ends, at a time known as the Change, all offworlders leave and they destroy whatever advanced tech is left behind. What's more, a cultural shift happens, at their instigation, which moves control of Tiamat out of the realm of the Winter Queen, leader of the Winters, city dwellers who engage with offworlders and buy and use their technology, to that of the Summer Queen, who instead leads the Summers, much more simple minded and superstitious rural folk.

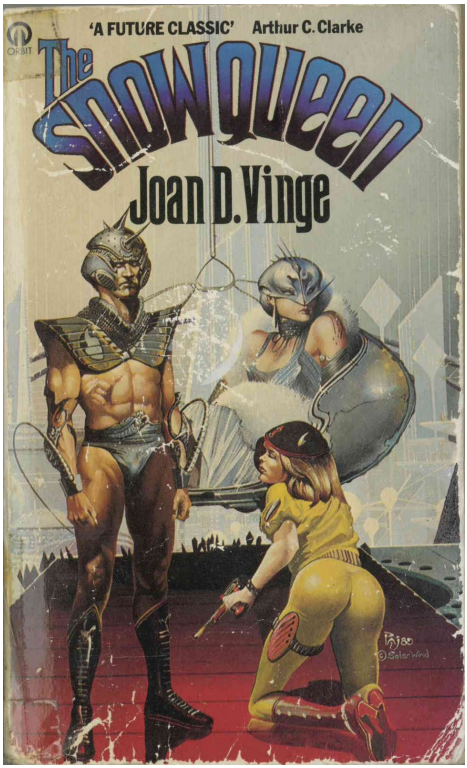
This is rich worldbuilding and it's enticing. However, the other half of me has a lot of questions, as much of it made no sense to me. I get how astronomical phenomena can prompt changes like this, but this suddenly? I got the impression that it toggles a wormhole in space rendering a city entirely uninhabitable on one particular day that's marked in the calendars 150 years in advance. I get why the Hegemony wants to maintain two notably different clans, but how do they manage it? The Hegemony run police force just isn't that effective. How can they avoid overlap? Cultural tradition on its own doesn't cut it for me, given that we're dealing in long cycles. 150 years isn't many generations. Genocide seems more likely.

My questions extend to the transition of



power too. I get why the Winter Queen has no wish to leave office after 150 years, especially as she'll be ritually killed during the Change so the Summer Queen can emphatically take the reins. However, I didn't grasp the logic of any of the plans she spawned to stay in power. If the Summers can just take over, maybe with superior numbers, why don't they just do that? After all, they kind of worship the mers and the sibyls, who they believe have a divine connection to the Lady, a goddess of the sea. Why do they put up with this ongoing mass slaughter by the Winters and their offworlder buddies? We're back to genocide again.

And, if it's only offworlder tech that's stopping them, then why would the Winters allow all their shiny toys to be destroyed and all their power along with it? Surely, they'd be heavily into stockpiling tech and secreting it



away, so they can survive after the change. The police are busy watching the Summers and for any techrunners who might want to help them. They're ignoring the Winters, who can get away with pretty much anything. And we're supposed to buy into them being OK with losing that power?

I constantly struggled with where this went and why it went there. It felt like it should be immersive, the sort of book that's so deep and vivid that you just can't put it down, except that it took me three and a half weeks to read it; I kept putting it down and I kept re-reading the last few pages every time I picked it back up, often not getting much further in. It felt like like a neatly original vision, but it kept on reminding me of *Star Wars* too and other well-known pop culture standards.

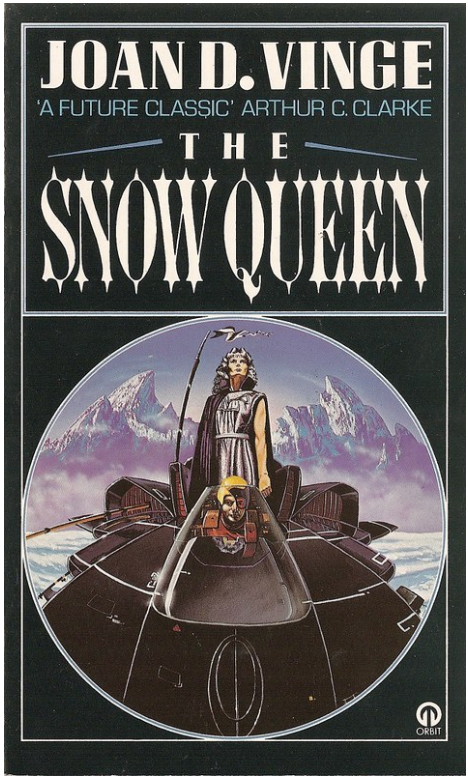
When it was just the Techrunners swooping in feeling rather like the Millennium Falcon but with Chewy as an octopoid alien, I could forgive it, but it didn't stop there. We spent most of our time on Tiamat in a Winter city called Carbuncle and it often had a Mos Eisley feel to me. When we take our only trip off planet, visiting one of the Hegemony worlds called Kharemough, the local speech features a recognisable sentence structure: "Shall we our evening stroll take?" Now I know where Yoda came from. Most overtly, as if Vinge is just giving it away, there's a character called Tor Starhiker. Could that old Empire be the one that Luke and his friends took down and she's about to break out a lightsaber to demonstrate that she can use the force a couple of millennia on?

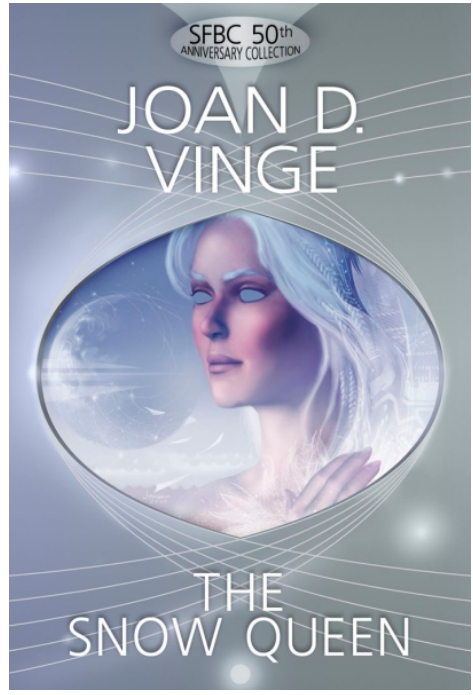
It isn't just *Star Wars* but it's mostly *Star Wars*. Beyond the ties to Hans Christian Andersen, which are quite obviously deliberate, the other reminiscent scene was the weird duel between the Winter Queen's current Starbuck (oh yes, *Battlestar Galactica* predates this too) and his challenger. It takes place on some sort of vast duct in the Queen's palace that's full of air currents that can be controlled with sound. It's pretty cool but it played to me very much like something out of *Flash Gordon*. Of course, Starbuck wears a mask and is really kind of like the Queen's chosen bad guy, so I read him as Dirk Benedict playing Darth Vader.

In other words, I'm so far into two minds that I can't even figure out if I like it or not. I certainly felt that I did, even though it never stole me away from the world, but I kept on struggling with it anyway. It kept impressing me but it never really surprised me, at least as far as the characters and their relationships. I knew where all of them would end up and

pretty much how they would get there. The only surprises I found were in the much bigger picture, what the sibyls really are and how the Empire, however long gone, is still present in this detail and that. Not all of that surprised me but much of it did and it kept the mystery alive that wouldn't be present in the primary thrust of the story.

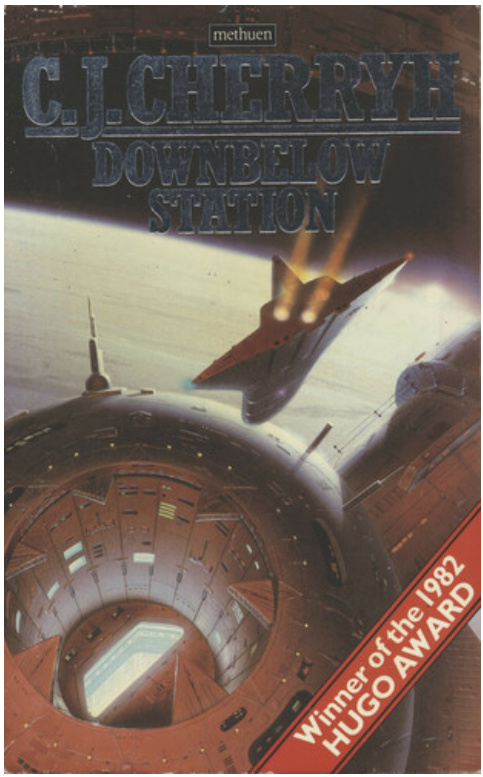
It's probably telling that my favourite character isn't anyone I've mentioned thus far. Moon is cool, but she's a long way into being messianic and I couldn't buy into some of her blind belief. I didn't her like her lover/cousin, Sparks, but then I'm not supposed to. Sadly I didn't like how I didn't like him. Arienrhod, the Winter Queen, was icily villainous, but also transparent at it. My favourite characters are





all further down the tree, like Tor Starhiker and especially Jerusha PalaThion. The former is a Winter caught up in a number of schemes that she doesn't control, and the latter is an offworlder cop who the Winter Queen forces into becoming Commander of the police force, in charge but with the expectation of failure, done as a punishment. I really liked her and felt for her situation.

But did I like this book? I really can't say. I felt like I admire a lot of what it did but I expect it to slide into a growing category of Hugo winners I've read or re-read during this runthrough, like *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Lord of Light* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which have all stayed with me because of their ideas but which I doubt I'll ever go back to read again for pleasure.



C. J. CHERRYH

DOWNBELOW STATION

PUBLISHER:
DAW BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1981

WON IN 1982
AT CHICON IV,
THE 40TH WORLDCON,
IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS,
U.S.A.

Downbelow Station won the Hugo for Best Novel in 1982 and I had a similar reaction to it as I did to its predecessor, Joan D. Vinge's *The Snow Queen*, the winner in 1981, and, to a lesser degree, to Arthur C. Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise*, which won in 1980. That reaction was to enjoy the book, but at a sort of distance. None of these books was able to truly grab me and keep me turning its pages, so I read each of them in dribs and drabs over a far longer period of time than I'm used to. It took me three weeks to work through *The Snow Queen* and I'm happy I persevered, but I seriously doubt that I'll ever read it again. And that holds true for *Downbelow Station*.

There's plenty of good here, as you'd hope there would be for a novel that won the Hugo, starting with worldbuilding and its choice of setting. There are a lot of books in Cherryh's *Alliance-Union* universe and there were a few when she wrote this one too: the first three books in *The Morgaine Cycle*, a couple of *Hanan Rebellion* books and the *Faded Sun Trilogy*, as well as *Serpent's Reach*, so this appears to be book nine but it's accessible to new readers like me, in part because of a brief history that opens the book in stripped but conversational tone.

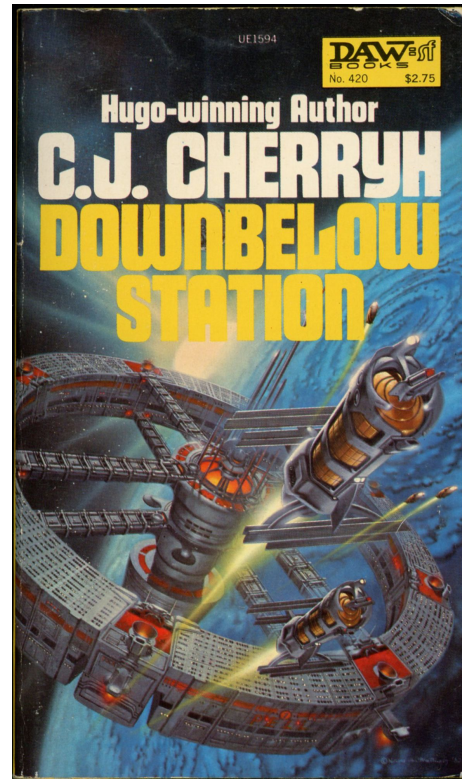
The human race was born on Earth but it's expanded beyond it. Ships went out and built stations in other solar systems. Pell was the ninth of them, the first to be created around a living world with a local population. Eventually Earth loses control; and the Company,

which did all this work, with it. A long way away from us is the Union, based at Cyteen, which has found new paths, severed ties and there's war in all but name. Stability comes and a sort of line forms to divide territories, but jump tech shows up to make interstellar travel much quicker and the distances shrink. Now it's the Union vs. the Company fleet, a real war, and Earth becomes insular. The focus inevitably shifts to Pell, which has a neutral status. Earth owns what's nearer, Union owns what's farther and Pell sits in an increasingly dangerous position in between them.

And I really like this, because, while this is absolutely a space war novel, we don't spend much time in the company of either side and, when we do, it's generally not conducting space battles. There is a little of that, but we spend most of our time on Pell station, trying to go about our business at an acutely difficult time. The people in charge have to find room for shiploads of refugees, whose own stations have been destroyed. They have to deal with spies and activists from both sides. They even have to deal with occupation of their station followed by the withdrawal of the occupying force.

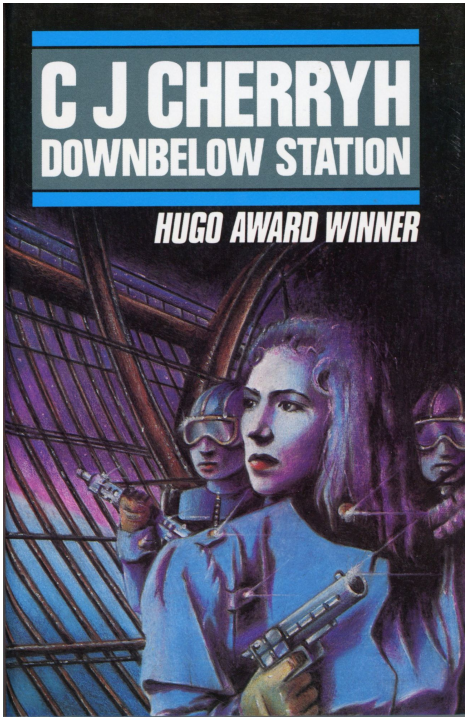
What's more, they have to deal with how this affects Downbelow Station, which isn't a station but the planet below it, which is habitable but not entirely Earthlike and the home of the Hisa, its indigenous population. With no room left on Pell, refugees are shuttled down to the surface and Downbelow quadruples in size by page 100. As you can imagine, this is a huge impact to both the station and the planet in almost every way: socially, logistically and culturally.

I also appreciate that the information flow is close to being a vacuum. Unlike so many



other novels and perhaps a majority of their screen adaptations, people just aren't kept in the know. The residents of Pell and Downbelow have little idea what's going on. What's Earth up to? What's the Union up to? Increasingly, what's the Company fleet up to, because it becomes a third side in this war? And how is any of this going to affect them? As I haven't read any of those earlier novels, which may not speak to this war anyway, it wasn't difficult to choose my side and my side wasn't any of those three. I was always on the side of the people of Pell and Downbelow, just as I was with the people of Luna in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

Where this got complicated was in the way that Cherryh chooses not to depict the station people as an entirely united force. She avoids



simplicity and appropriately so because, while Pell is a tiny speck in the grand picture of this interstellar conflict, it's a vast world to its residents, one large enough to generate its own sides for its own reasons. The most clear we see is between the Konstantins and the Lucases. The Konstantin family have run Pell for a long time but the Lucases, connected by marriage, don't like how they do so. Both sides think they're the good guys, though it doesn't take a lot of time for us to figure that dynamic out, and both sides want control.

As with *The Snow Queen* and earlier Hugo winning novels like *Lord of Light*, *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I liked this but I appreciated it more. I liked the ideas behind them and the willingness on the part of the authors to do something different. Like those books, I expect this one to stay with me for a long time, to haunt me with its ideas that sit percolating at the back of my brain, ready to pop up with an insight when I least expect it. These are all books that have potential to change me and the way that I think, the way I see the big picture.

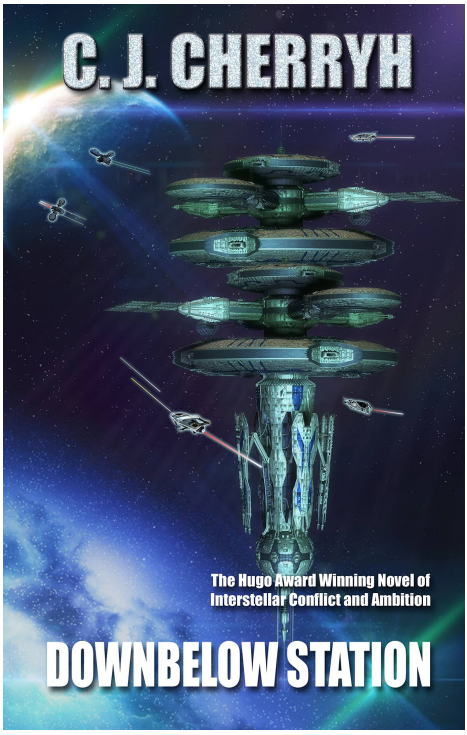
However, like them, I can't really say that I enjoyed this. None of these books are ones I'm going to sit down and read for pleasure, the way I'll happily go back to *Way Station* or *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and now *Dreamsnake*. I connected with some of the characters here, like Emilio Konstantin of the ruling family, who's tasked with managing Downbelow, and Vassily Kressich, who becomes the voice of the quarantined refugees on Pell, but most, even when they might be considered to be on the side of right, are rather unlikeable. I found that I cared more for Pell itself than I did for most of its inhabitants, as I found that I cared more for the Hisa population than I did for the humans who dominate their world.

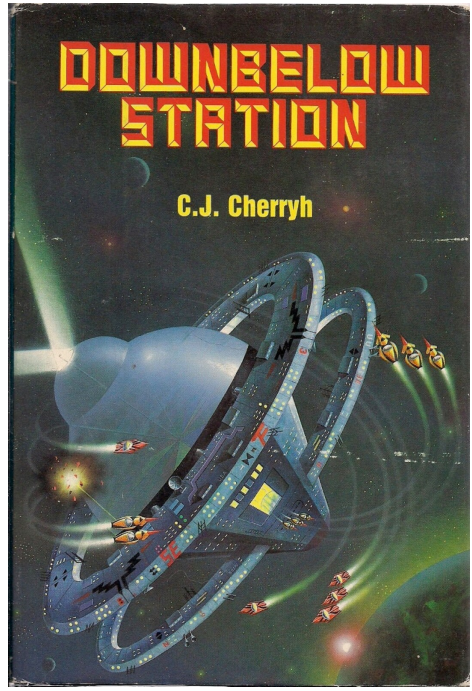
Part of this is a good thing, because Cherryh writes complex characters and I do appreciate that. This is never as simple as good guys vs. bad guys because the good guys have flaws and the bad guys have strengths. I felt for some of the bad guys when they ended up in untenable situations that they, quite frankly, deserved to end up in. My sympathy for them came through a realisation that they're pieces in a chess game so vast that they can't even see the board. Rarely have I seen written characters come to such a stark realisation that they're chess pieces and it's dehumanising. Again, I appreciate not necessarily enjoy.

Part of it is a bad thing though, because Cherryh also writes dry characters. Sure, this novel unfolds at a time of particular tension, but it does so in dry prose and dry dialogue

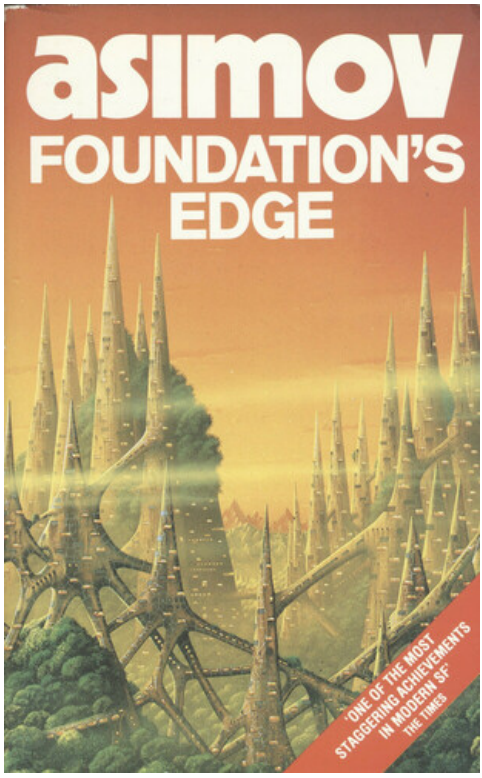
and dry reaction. There is no humour to be found here, except perhaps in the uncertainty of Joshua Talley. He arrives as a refugee but is clearly more than that, probably a Union spy. However, he chooses to be effectively brain-wiped, to have his history and motivations removed from his brain so that he can stay on as a free man. He's probably the most complex character here, especially given what he ends up discovering about himself, but he's also the only one with the remotest aspect of humour. By the end of this, I was aching for humour which, after all, often manifests itself in the direst of situations, just as the natural human response to adversity. Cherryh didn't want to go there.

And so this is a magnificent achievement. It doesn't surprise me that it won the Hugo and was also nominated for the Locus, though it





wasn't even nominated for the Nebula that year, which was won by Gene Wolfe's *The Claw of the Conciliator*. I admire it and I appreciate it and it may affect me in time, but it took me a long time to finish it and I can't say that I enjoyed the process. Let's see what I think of *Cyteen*, which won Cherryh a second Hugo for Best Novel in 1989 but again failed to even be nominated for the Nebula. I presume, given the name, that it's set on the Union side of this war and I look forward to that, because I'd like to learn more about them.



ISAAC ASIMOV

FOUNDATION'S EDGE

PUBLISHER:
DOUBLEDAY

PUBLICATION DATE:
1982

WON IN 1983
AT CONSTELLATION,
THE 41ST WORLDCON,
IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND,
U.S.A.

Wow, this one's been a long time coming! If you were wondering where my runthrough of books that won the Hugo Award for Best Novel went, I've been on a side trip. I noticed last June, after reviewing C. J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station*, that next up was this one, *Foundation's Edge*. It's the fourth in his *Foundation* series, a trilogy for almost three decades, and I wanted to reacquaint myself with it. If memory serves, I bought this when *Foundation and Earth* came out in 1986 and read all five books, then the prequel, *Prelude to Foundation*, a couple of years later. I don't think I ever got round to the last book, *Forward the Foundation*, which slots in between the prequel and the original.

So, given that this was longer ago than COVID, I re-read the original trilogy, thirty-five years old back then and seventy now, reviewing each book at the Nameless Zine. This fourth was a huge deal in 1982, becoming an unlikely bestseller to the mainstream press but an "About time, Isaac!" from sci-fi fans, who gave it the Best Novel Hugo and Locus. In hindsight, it surely won based on nostalgia—I remember well that it was seen as the best science fiction series of all time at that point—and as deep thanks that Asimov had finally returned to the series.

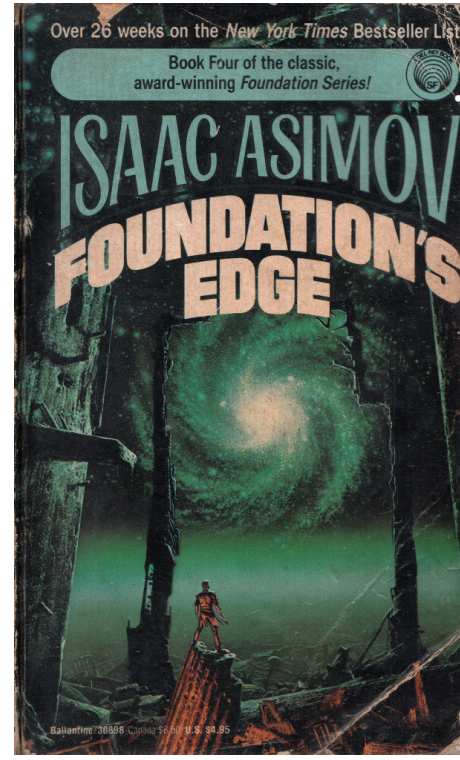
What I found in 2022 is that it's a long read that feels like it's equally as long as the entire preceding trilogy, even if it may not quite have been. The prose is really smooth, more so than in the original trilogy, because Asimov had written million of words in between them,

so it's easy to fall into the page count and find yourself immersed. However, there are very long scenes of dialogue and, while I was OK with them in early chapters, they got a little draining towards the end, when we're waiting for the revelations we expect from the finalé and have less patience for pages of dialogue.

The other note that has to be made here is that Asimov had clearly made a decision to combine quite a few series into one universe. Before this book, the *Foundation* trilogy, the *Galactic Empire* books and the *Robot* books were distinct series, but *Foundation's Edge* changed that, while *Foundation and Empire* cemented the new single universe mindset. Everything in each of these series became a component part of a bigger picture and I'm still not convinced that this approach was a good idea. It mostly appears in preparatory form here, setting the stage for *Foundation and Earth*, but it's still a little jarring.

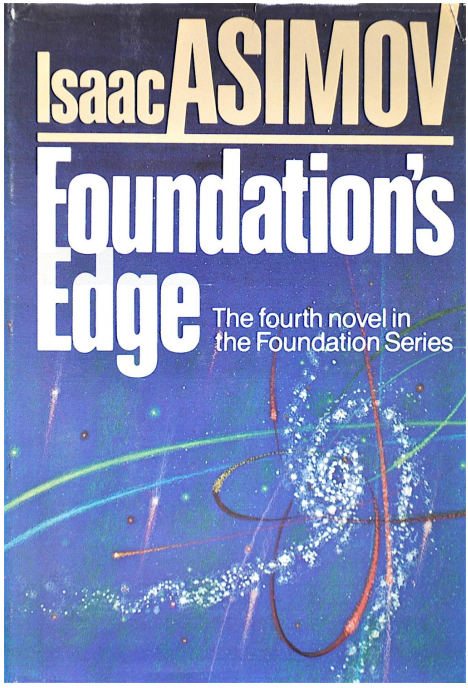
In fact, the more I think about it, the more I see *Foundation's Edge* as a combination of every genre that Asimov had explored in his fiction, along with a few new ones for good measure. Sure, it's science fiction and the very nature of the Foundation concept means that there's a lot of political intrigue going on, but that's not all. There's a murder mystery partway in that reminds us how fond Asimov was of writing mysteries, both inside and outside the science fiction genre. A couple of the primary characters follow quest narratives. One of them is driven by what could be considered today a conspiracy theory, albeit one that turns out to be true. Long sections of the book are basically a buddy movie in space.

And, above all of that, there's a palpable glee in how Asimov wraps everything up. For the most part, I wasn't put off much by long



scenes of dialogue, if only because the prose is so smooth and the novel flows in easy fashion. I may not agree with the new "one universe" approach but it's not too much of a deal at this point and I could accept it. However, Asimov gradually introduces a number of what appear to be plot holes that jar us and jab at our brain as we read on, only to explain them away late in the book, with a gleam in his eye as if he was only ever setting us up for a "Gotcha!" That was what annoyed me the most, the idea of an author playing a cleverly obscured game of chess with us, perhaps more than writing a story.

The core thrust of the narrative is to bring certain very different people together in the same place at the same time, which suddenly seems completely obvious, even though we



don't realise that for most of the book.

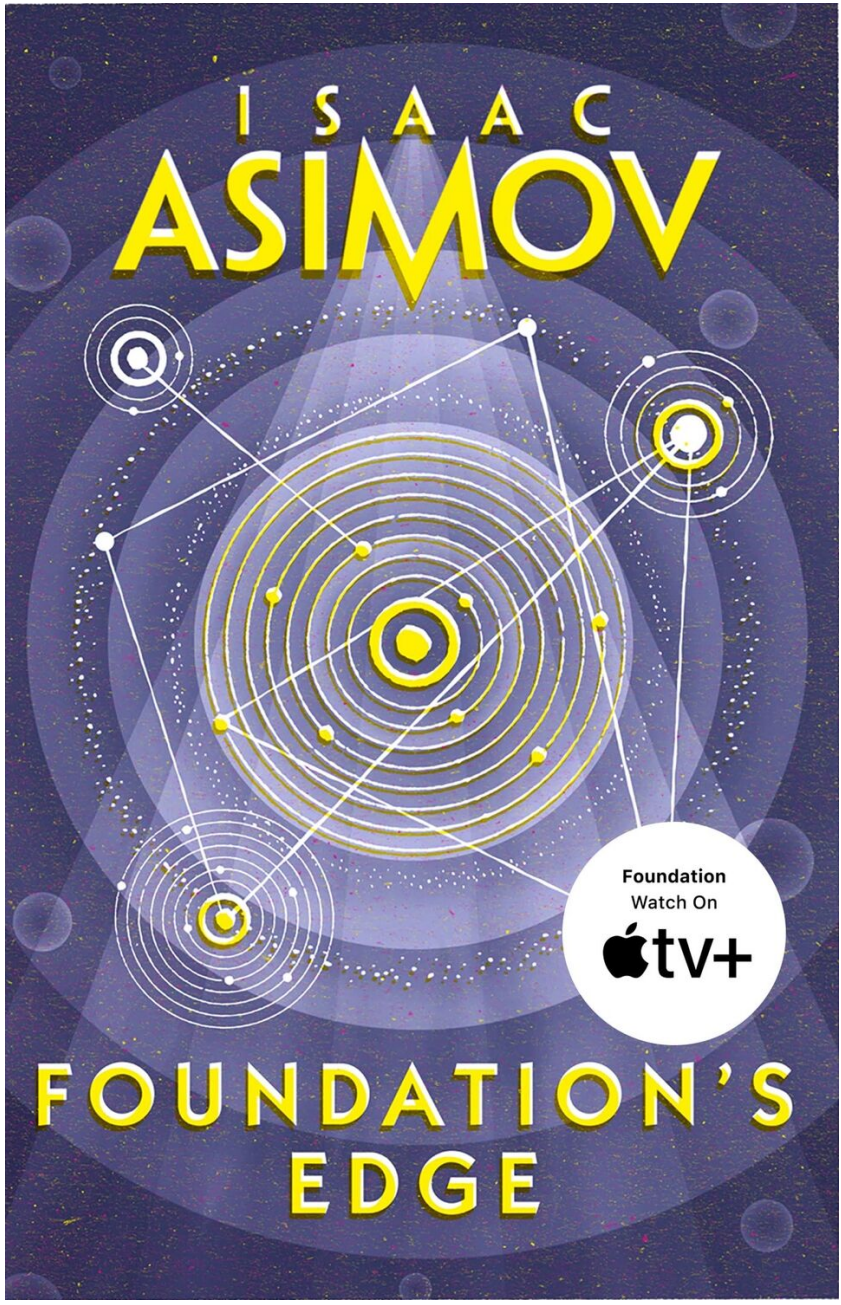
Some start out on Terminus, the home of the Foundation, which mostly believes itself to be the only one, given that the Second Foundation, had been destroyed decades earlier. The mayor, Harla Branno, is not one of these people so she sends one of her key Council members, Golan Trevize, into exile, tasking him with a quest to track down the Second Foundation. His travelling companion is Janov Pelorat, a mythologist and historian dedicated to locating Earth, the legendary source planet for humanity. She also sends Munn Li Compor to follow him and monitor his actions. All of these people have crucial parts to play in a story that Branno thinks she sees but doesn't.

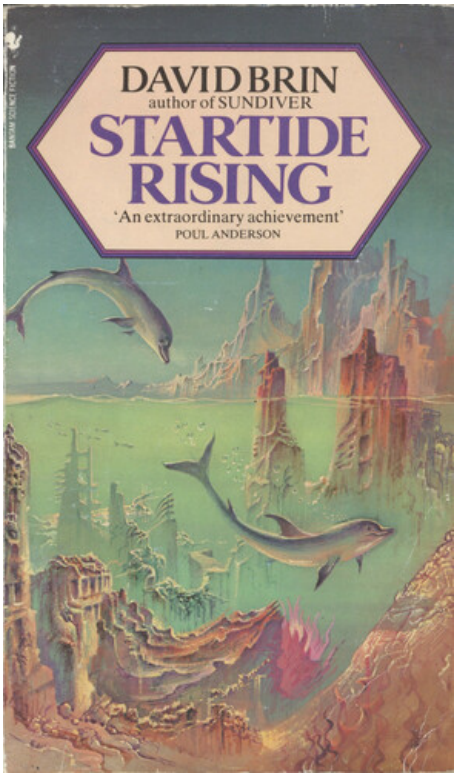
Some start out on Trantor, the home of the very much still active Second Foundation, as it continues its mission to monitor the progress of the Seldon Plan, an attempt to reduce the dark ages following the collapse of the Galactic Empire from thirty millennia to merely one, and to make subtle changes to the minds of primary players if such should ever be deemed necessary. Stor Gendibal is a Speaker on the rise who realises that the Seldon Plan has been adhered to so closely that there simply have to be other hands at work beyond their own. This prompts him to be sent on a mission to find who, why and especially how, with an anomalous Hamish girl, Sura Novi, who's a native of Trantor, as his companion. Both have crucial parts to play in a story that Gendibal thinks he sees but doesn't.

They all end up in the Sayshell Sector, where they hear stories of a world called Gaia, which is weirdly able to stand completely aside from the rest of the galaxy, to the degree that it may or may not exist. It does and... well, I'm not going to spoil everything that happens from that point on. You should dive into this series yourself, because the *Foundation* trilogy is essential science fiction, however dated it sometimes seems, with its computer printouts and lack of women doing pretty much anything of substance. I'd recommend this book too, even if it's a weak Hugo winner, because it does a surprising amount that's very effective, oddly so given how different the book is from its predecessors.

One way to look at its success is to think about the broader series. I'm very happy to have gone back to the original trilogy before continuing with this one, even though Asimov does a capable job of summing up the more crucial aspects of them for new readers, to ensure that they didn't get lost. Doing that gave me a fresh perspective into how different this fourth book really is, both for good and bad. Had Asimov written this in, say, 1955, it

would have been almost unrecognisable from this book. However, it carefully sets up *Foundation and Earth* and I should want to dive into that immediately, but I find that I may avoid doing that, because I suddenly don't believe I want to go where I know it goes.





DAVID BRIN

STARTIDE RISING

PUBLISHER:
BANTAM BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1983

WON IN 1984
AT L.A.CON II,
THE 42ND WORLDCON,
IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA,
U.S.A.

While the main reason for me to embark on a runthrough of Hugo Award-winning novels was to introduce me to a bunch of books that I had little excuse not to have read before (and to reacquaint me with a bunch that I had read), my secondary reason was to see how science fiction changed over the decades. I knew it did and I've read at some depth from all its eras, but I've never deliberately tried to see how it changed. It's been fascinating to see how it was affected by the counter-culture in the sixties and the rise of female authors who owned their gender in the seventies. With *Startide Rising*, I realise that acclaim was rising for sequels.

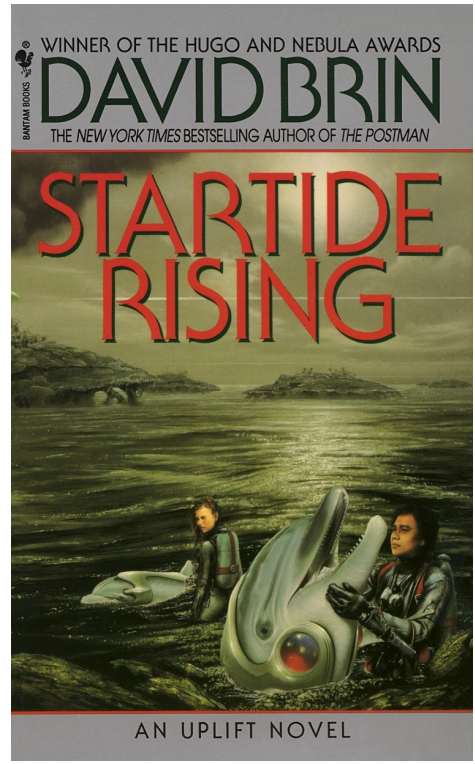
If I'm not very much mistaken, many of the winners of the Hugo for Best Novel thus far belong to series but only looking back at them, because winning titles like *Dune*, *Ringworld* and *Gateway* were all the first in their respective series. The first example of a sequel winning a Hugo appears to be C. J. Cherryh's *Downbelow Station* in 1982, followed immediately by Isaac Asimov's *Foundation's Edge* in 1983 and David Brin's *Startide Rising* in 1984. While the next two Hugo winners would be original works, the decade's roll of honour would end with three more sequels.

David Brin introduced his uplift concept in his debut novel, *Sundiver*, which was the first in a trilogy continued by this book and *The Uplift War*, which also won the Hugo for Best Novel in 1988. While I haven't read the other two books yet, they're both standalone novels

within a single universe rather than a continuation of story from one book to the next, so the characters and locations are different, but they all contribute to a broader story. So does a second trilogy, known as the *Uplift* or *Uplift Storm* trilogy, that also serves as the direct sequel to *Startide Rising*, continuing the story of its lead characters after this book ends.

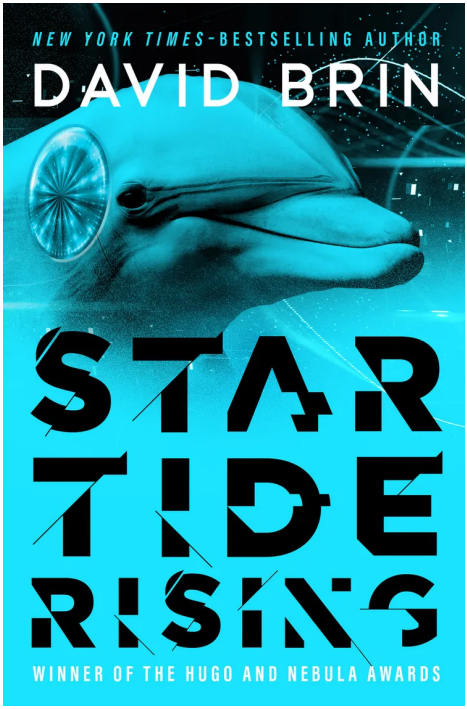
Those lead characters are the crew of the Streaker, an Earth spaceship mostly crewed by bottlenose dolphins, a handful of humans and a single chimp fleshing out the roster. It accidentally stumbles upon a graveyard of moon-sized spaceships that appear to be millions of years old. After retrieving some artifacts and a mummified body, at the cost of ten of their crew members, they let Earth know and are then advised to hide themselves with immediate effect. That's because these may well be ships of the Progenitors, the first space-faring species in the Five Galaxies, making this not just a big discovery but a massively important religious one to many of the insanely varied races of the present. Within a breath of the beginning of the novel, the *Streaker* is secreted underwater on Kithrup, as a massive battle unfolds in its skies over access to the artifacts.

And here's where I need to backtrack and explain the concept of uplift, which Brin named if not invented. It's an idea that goes all the way back to H. G. Wells in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, at least, but it is given a very different approach here, because it's generally seen as a Good Thing. Uplift is the process by which one species genetically alters a different species to raise them to their level intellectually. Beyond the various obvious ways this is a glorious pure science fiction concept, I appreciate it as a way out of the "every technological society is doomed to destroy itself" mindset. So every



spacefaring species in the galaxy was uplifted by another species, who indenture them for the next hundred thousand years, before they become patrons too and get to uplift their own species in turn. Mankind is an odd anomaly because, if we were ever uplifted, our patrons mysteriously vanished.

In Brin's universe, which spans five galaxies, humans are seen as what's called a wolfling species, one that evolved far enough to find its way into space on its own, and that's not seen as a positive. We don't think like the Galactics and that's a big negative in their various eyes. What's more, because we've already uplifted dolphins and chimps, we hold the status of patron to them, so preventing them and their millions of years of superior technology from just taking us over and making us one of their



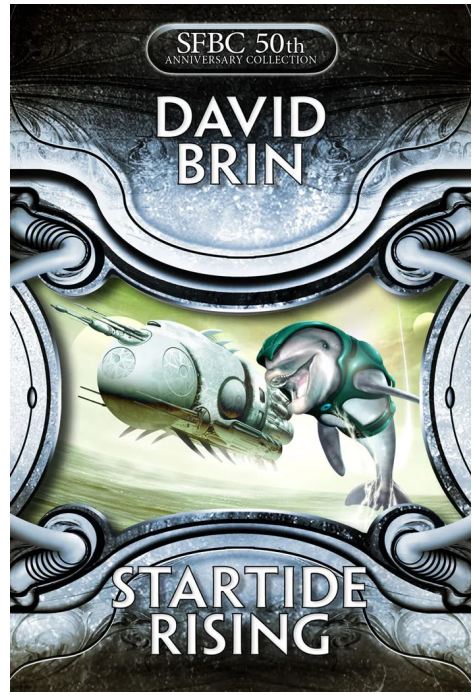
client species. There seems to be much play between the inflexibility of myriad advanced species and the innovation of a wolfling, all of which makes me eager to dive into *Sundiver* before I'll get to *The Uplift War* anyway in a few months for my Hugo runthrough.

Brin does a heck of a lot here for a man on his second novel. This runs for well over four hundred pages and it seems a busy read for a while. Chapter 1 covers a lot of ground and chapter 2 likewise. Frankly, the uplift concept is enough for an entire novel of this size, but Brin also plays with ecosystems, language and religion.

The ecosystems are handled mostly through Kithrup, the water world onto which the ship lands in search of metals to make repairs and a solid hiding place.

Language is mostly addressed through the dolphins, who speak three languages: Primal, as they do today; Trinary, which is a form of poetry; and Anglic, a middle ground language near enough to English to allow easy mutual communication. Of course, we're modified too, so some humans understand Trinary or even Primal.

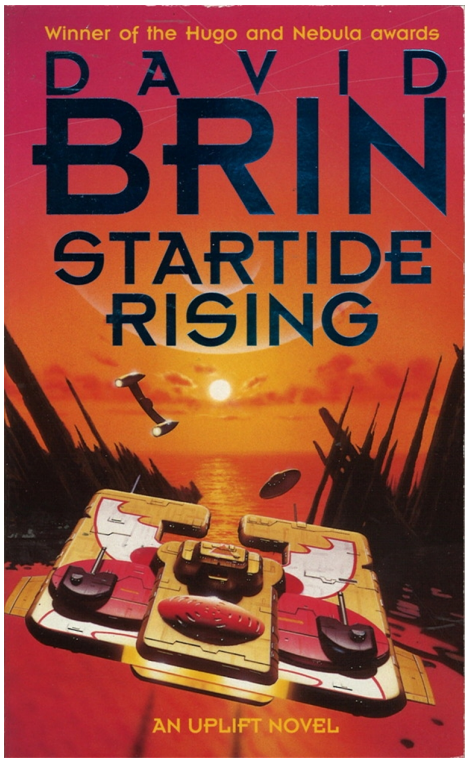
For religion, Brin introduces a stunning variety of alien species, all in their ships in battle in the skies of Kithrup. They're wild and wonderful, varied in every way, thoroughly and agreeably alien. Brin understands full well that it's not as simple as sticking a tentacle or a bug eye onto a creature; you have to make them unique and intellectually as much as any other aspect. These alien races don't look like us but they sure don't think like us either and that's more of the point. They subscribe to various religions that frame their responses to events, especially ones following the ramifications of the discovery of 50,000 potentially

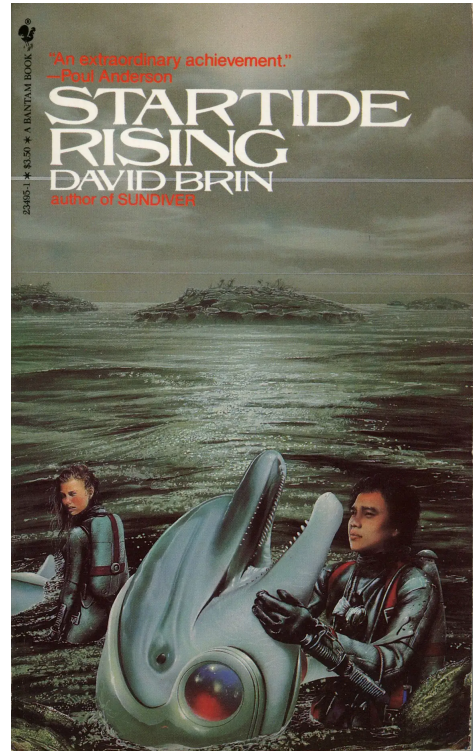


Progenitor vessels.

Oh, and there's some good old-fashioned adventure here. Brin gives us space battles, underwater chase scenes, an imaginatively framed escape attempt, first contact with a new race, even a well-handled mutiny. Add to that the mystery that seems to lurk under the waters of Kithrup and there simply isn't a dull moment to be found within an expansive page count. The *Streaker* may have gone out on a research mission as an experiment to see how the approach might work with a crew made up primarily of dolphins and an entirely dolphin command structure, but it found an emphatic McGuffin and much more.

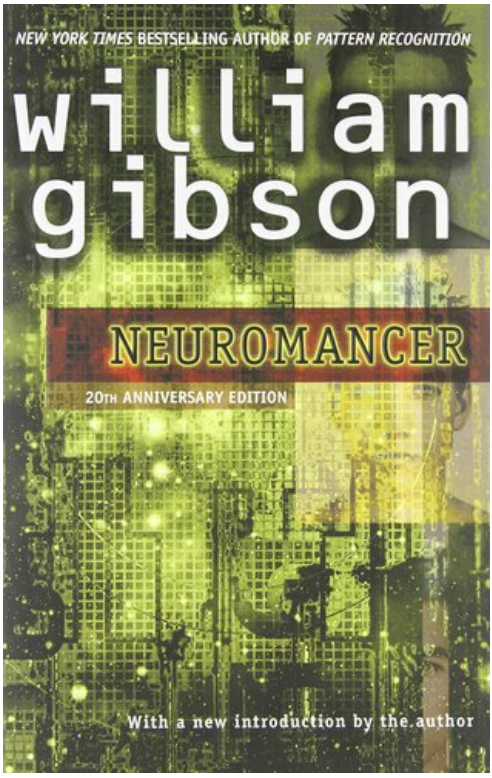
It's worth mentioning here that some of the other Hugo winners with more expansive page counts have been among my least favourite





thus far. I appreciated *Lord of Light* and *Stand on Zanzibar* but I didn't enjoy them. I found myself struggling through *The Snow Queen* and *Downbelow Station*. *Dune* was magnificent but overblown. Even *Foundation's Edge*, as smooth as it was, started to drag a little by the end. This, on the other hand, kept me enthralled from moment first to moment last and I devoured it in three days, not three weeks.

And, I ought to add, that bodes really well, given how many unread books by David Brin I have on my shelf right now.



WILLIAM GIBSON

NEUROMANCER

PUBLISHER:
ACE BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1984

WON IN 1985
AT AUSSIECON TWO,
THE 43RD WORLDCON,
IN MELBOURNE, VICTORIA,
AUSTRALIA

Before I dive into the winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1985, I should point out that this isn't the greatest novel ever written and there are a host of things wrong with it, some of which the author freely points out in his excellent introduction to the 20th anniversary edition. It's ironic, he notes, that a book that's so often credited as foreseeing the technological future doesn't just not include cellphones but even sets a particularly pivotal scene around a bank of payphones. No, folks, William Gibson didn't get everything right.

What he did do, though, is utterly change the face of the genre in which he was writing and that's not a simple thing to do. Cyberpunk didn't become the be-all and end-all of science fiction, of course. It went as quickly as it came, but it also represented a paradigm shift in the genre, one that ably recognised enough of our changing world to credibly enter a new era. Sorry, Mike, you may run the moon, but it's right here in this book that science fiction entered the computer age. Everything is on. Everything is connected. The future is here.

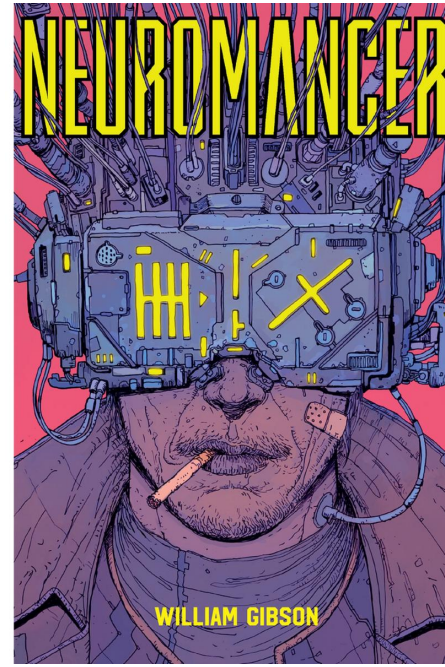
I've been reading through the Hugo winners in chronological order and this is my thirty-second from a list of books that are sometimes excellent, sometimes important and, at their best, both. It's fair to say at this point that not one of them felt as groundbreaking as this did, not *Stranger in a Strange Land*, not *Dune* and not *Stand on Zanzibar*, as groundbreaking as all of those books were. Part of its genius is to look backward as much as forward, unfolding like a

forties film noir, but from the perspective of fifteen minutes into the future. Even now, as I read almost forty years on, this still feels edgy and fresh, even if this isn't the future we got in so many ways. It's still the line in the sand between old and new.

There are a lot of reasons for that but I'm not going to turn this into a thesis. I'm sure that's been done and it doesn't need to be done again by me. Reading this again, perhaps for the fourth or fifth time, I'd like to call out a few things that stood out to me as a fifty-one-year-old grandfather.

One is that William Gibson, who's known as a science fiction author, wasn't really writing science fiction. Sure, *Neuromancer* is set in the future and it's all about computer networks and artificial intelligences and designer drugs. Sure, it's built on a constant set of speculations about societal change. Sure, it ends up in habitats in the clouds above our planet. Yeah, there's all sorts of science fiction here. But he wasn't writing a science fiction story in the way that all those other Hugo winners did. I don't mean that it's a mystery or a thriller or whatever other genre you might conjure up, fairly or otherwise. I mean that it's not really a novel in a number of ways.

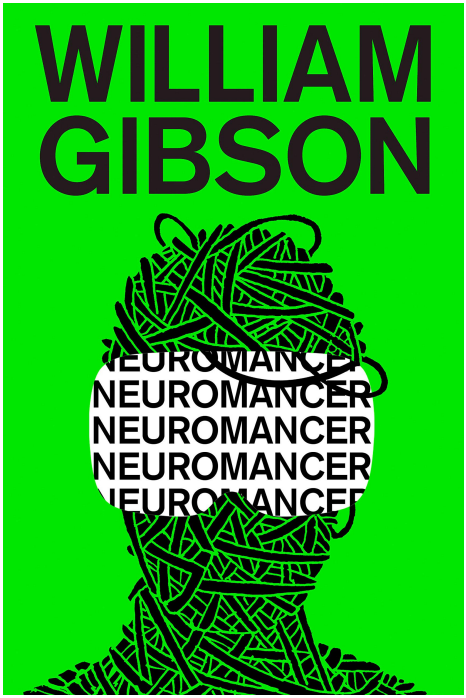
For one, it's poetry, even if it's written as prose. Gibson was and is clearly in love with language and not just a single language. He's Canadian and so he wrote it in English, but he plucked vocabulary from a whole slew of other languages to pepper his manuscript too. It's almost like he found a set of specific words and spun a paragraph or three out of each of them until those paragraphs became pages to connect together to form what's labelled a novel. But the book is arguably as much about "zaibatsu" and "cloisonné" and "djellaba" as it



was about whatever happens on their pages.

I could see an art project in condensing each page of this book down to the single word that serves as its fundamental essence, in a similar way to how a film can be condensed into a set of colours displayed as a sort of spectrum. This page might be "triptych", that one "enzyme" and the one over the flip "razorgirl". Many of them are "baroque", literally or figuratively. Some of them are proper nouns too, whether used in their intended way, such as "Chiba" or "Kandinsky" or "Bazaar", invented and brand new like "Wintermute" or simply turned into a name like "Riviera" or "Lupus Yonderboy".

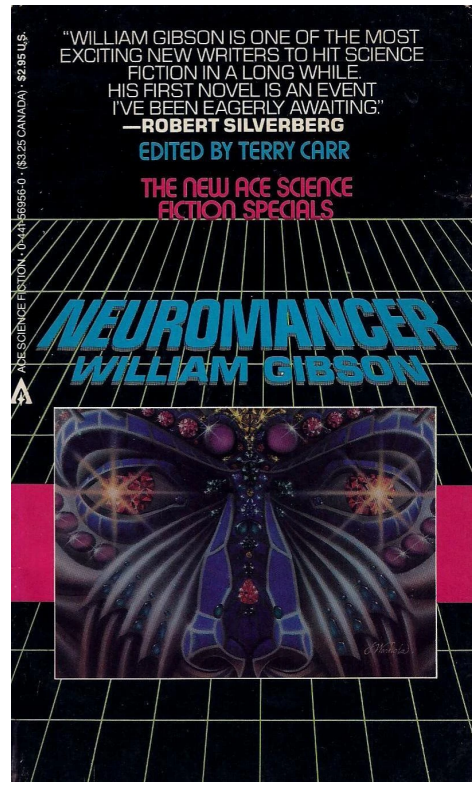
For another, it's a set of observations, an element that's typically present in fiction but not to the degree exhibited here. Gibson, like Tom Waits, is a master at looking at something trivial, commonplace or unworthy of note and seeing something in it that the rest of us are unable to see.



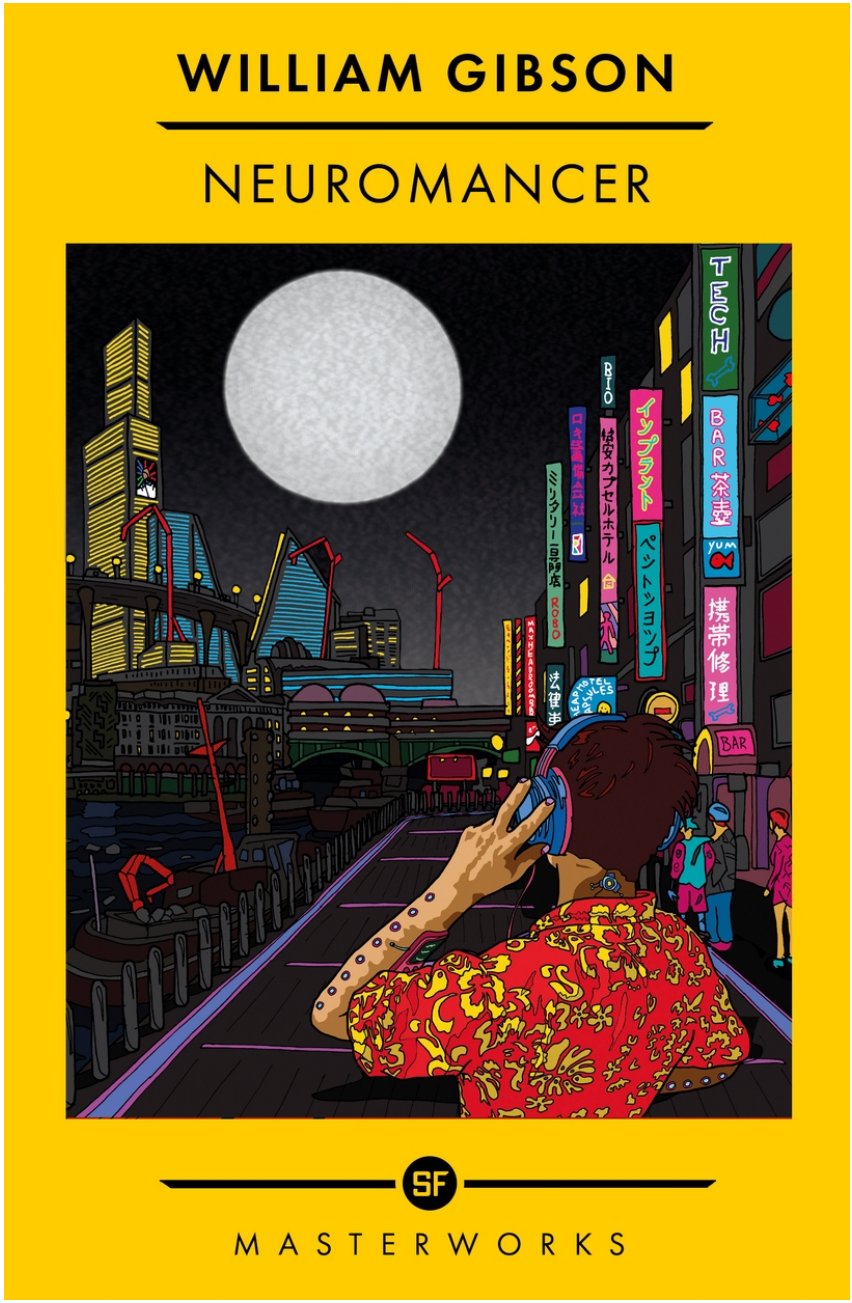
A lot of that boils down to component parts, because he sees the weight of a train, the tyre tread on a car, the pages in a library. He isn't just using visuals either, because sight is only one sense of many and they're all equally as important. One particular location reminds the protagonist, appropriately called Case, of a deserted shopping centre in the wee hours of the morning, but Gibson condenses it down to a "fitful stillness", a "kind of numb expectancy", a "tension that left you watching insects swarm around caged bulbs above the entrance of darkened shops".

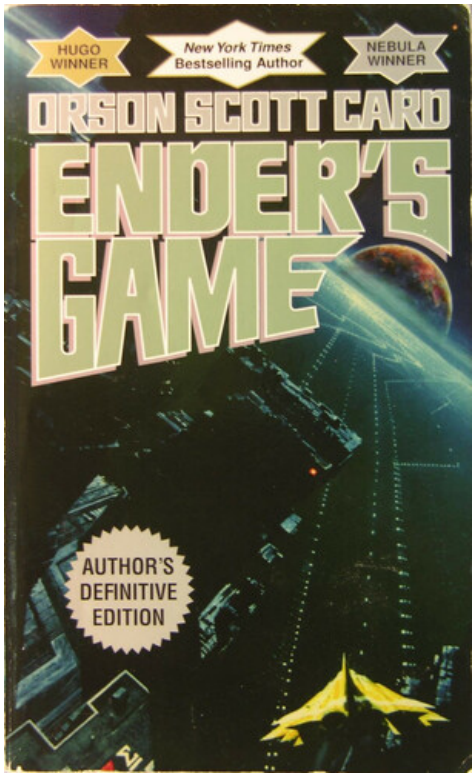
And, of course, that brings us back to poetry because that's the poet's job, to see what we don't. Gibson merely does that by disdaining the mainstream. He's not interested in Main Street; he's interested in the dark alley behind it. He prefers places after they're closed and the regular clientèle has gone home. He likes people before they put on their make-up and so their guards are down. He prefers accents to default pronunciation, whichever language. He prefers subcultures to cultures. He knows that the future has been designed for Japanese schoolgirls and everyone else jumps onto the bandwagon. He likes acronyms but he doesn't like to explain them.

I say all of this because it's what I see when I read *Neuromancer* nowadays. When I first read this, as a teenager—I was thirteen when this came out and I was enhancing programs that I'd typed into my BBC Model B from typoed listings in commercial magazines—it was all about technology. Later, as a young adult who was dipping his toes into classic film, it was a noir story about shadowy people in shadowy places. As I started to write, it became a story



about a man who's dying but is promised life in exchange for certain services rendered. Now, it's poetry, a dervish dance of vocabulary and hidden insight that turns everyday into the future. I wonder what it'll be next time I read it.





ORSON SCOTT CARD

ENDER'S GAME

PUBLISHER:
TOR BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1985

WON IN 1986
AT CONFEDERATION,
THE 44TH WORLDCON,
IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA,
U.S.A.

As with *Neuromancer*, which won the Hugo for Best Novel in 1985, I've read *Ender's Game* before and more than once. It won the year after, 1986, and its sequel, *Speaker for the Dead* won in 1987, marking the first time that any author had won for two years in a row. That's quite an achievement and it's perhaps more of an achievement here, because Card was still relatively unknown, on his debut novel, which he has said he mostly wrote to set up its lead character, Ender Wiggin, for *Speaker for the Dead*. That's almost like suggesting that this is an odd example of a prequel written before its original, but hey.

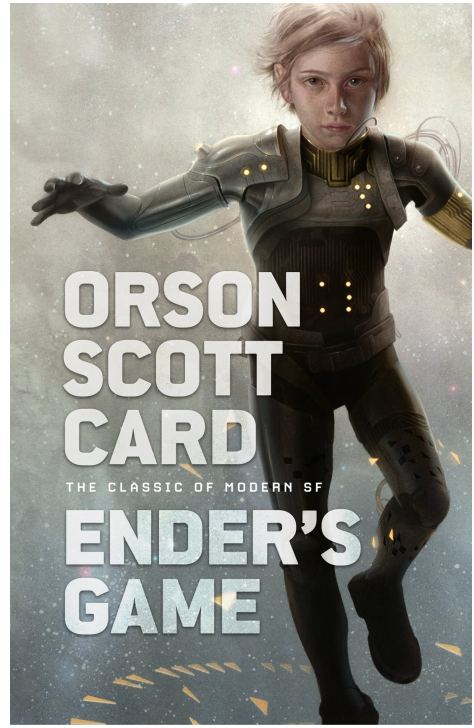
Part of that is in the fact that Ender is going to be the most important human being in his lifetime and quite a distance beyond, but he isn't when this book begins, at least not yet. He's a kid and a young one at that, only six years old when the International Fleet remove his monitor, so apparently ending his shot at going to Battle School and perhaps becoming the saviour of the human race by winning the ongoing interstellar war with the Formics, the insectoid aliens that Card unfortunately, given his history of speaking out against homosexuality, colloquially dubs "buggers".

Instead, it turns out to be a test, and Ender passes it by killing his similarly aged bully, not that he's at all aware at the time that Stilson dies. He simply did what he thought must be done in order to stop the bully's inappropriate behaviour. And so Colonel Graff whisks him up to Battle School. It must be stated here that

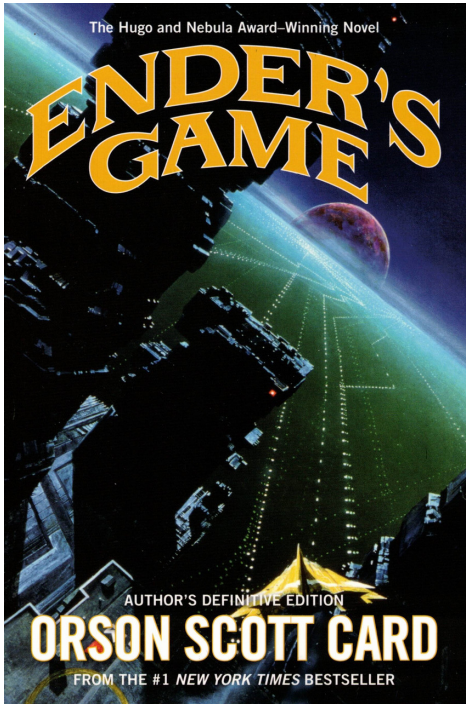
Ender is an unusual child in many ways, even before we learn about his strategic genius. For a start, he's a Third, meaning that he's a third child born to a couple in this overpopulated future Earth on which only two are allowed, in a nod to China's famous one-child policy. All three young Wiggins are clearly some sort of experiment conducted by the Battle School, whatever the science behind it happens to be.

And all three young Wiggins turn out to be massively important, though Ender's elder siblings initially seem to be there as failures that led the way to him. I thought of them rather like Goldilocks's three bears in that. The eldest is Peter, a budding psychopath who bullies his siblings and tortures little animals, but is seen as too brutal to become the planet's greatest military leader. The second is Valentine, who's almost Peter's exact emotional opposite, and was seen as too compassionate to serve in the same role. So to Ender, half of one and half of the other, so turns out to be just right, if only Colonel Graff can guide him well enough.

Ender's Game began as a short story, first published in *Analog* in 1977, but this full novel version expands on it in all directions, starting sooner and ending later. The meat of it, of course, was in the short story and that's all about Ender in Battle School. He's six when he goes there and he's ten when we reach the end of that section of the story, which is the heart of everything, so he's a highly unusual lead character for an adult publication. This is not YA whatsoever and it visits places, especially during its most crucial moments, that would be highly problematic in YA. Of course, Ender is also highly intelligent, notably so, and that's another of the book's most endearing aspects. Highly intelligent young readers would find much value in Ender and his story.



What surprised me on this read, and casting my mind back to previous readings, surprised me then too, is that I couldn't put this down. That's one of the routine clichés that literary reviewers trawl out to point out that a particular book is worthwhile and it's used so often that it's lost its impact. However, once I'd got a couple of chapters into *Ender's Game*, on what might be a fourth reading over what must be at least thirty years, I couldn't put this down. I wrapped it up at about five in the morning, knowing I had to be up in far too short a time, because, once I was back in Battle School with Ender, this novel became the most important thing in my life until it was done. I may have gone to the bathroom a couple of times in that period and I may have cleaned my glasses or paused to take my medication for the night, but, in an abidingly true sense, I couldn't put



this down.

Much of that is because there's a real sense of urgency to this. The human race is really up against it, because the Formics (sorry, I'm not going to think of them as "buggers") are more numerous than us and better equipped and far more advanced. We won our first encounter with them, through a legendary manoeuvre by a legendary leader, Mazer Rackham, but there is little trust in us being able to repeat that whenever the Formics come back, which they naturally will. What we need, and right now, is a new legendary leader, one whose genius can make up for our lack of numbers, knowledge and technology. And, while it's abundantly clear from moment one that we fully expect Ender Wiggin to fill this role, there's always the possibility that he won't be, that he'll flake out and fail or that he'll merely take too long to become who he's destined to be.

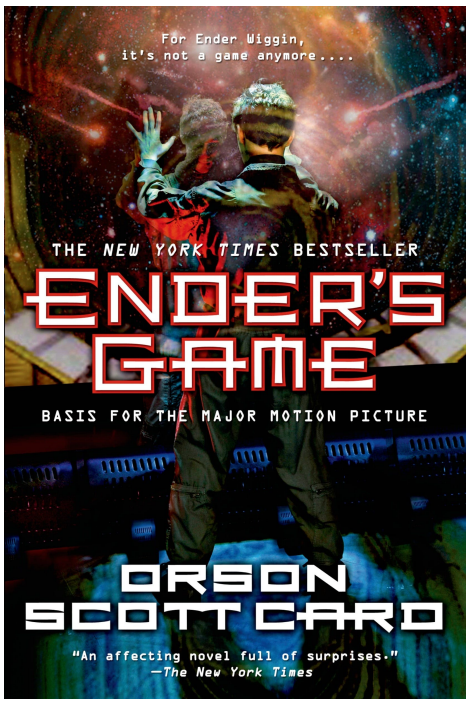
Another part of it is that he's sympathetic, massively so, especially to a reader who is or was a very bright kid. We always connect to his abilities, which we never seem to question, even though they're inherently more than ours, however bright we were as kids, because it's so good to be represented. Also, because of how bright we were as kids, we were generally bullied and ostracised. Colonel Graff enhances that by making sure from the very outset that Ender is isolated even from his fellow students at Battle School, all of whom are bright and many of whom are very bright, so that he gets bullied and ostracised too. He thus becomes a wish fulfilment version of ourselves, as we remember back to what happened to us and relish every applied instance of Ender's ability to stop what we couldn't.

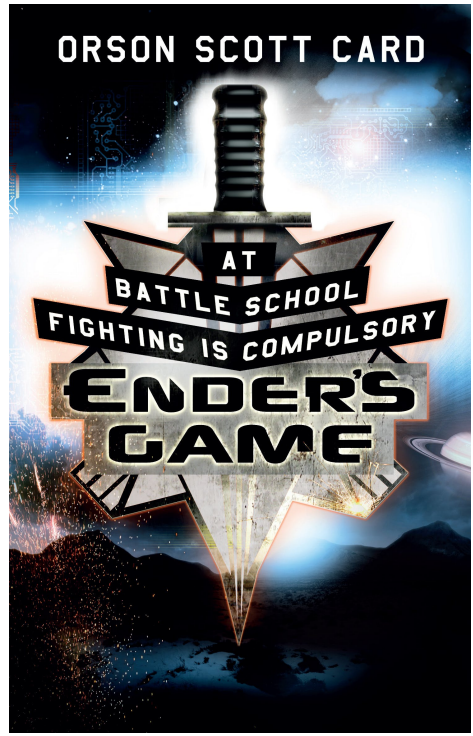
Also, while this is called *Ender's Game*, thus suggesting that there's only one, there are a lot of games here and they all resonate. The most obvious one is the one that the students play every day at Battle School in a zero gravity environment, a cross between wargaming and paintball. When Ender gets there, it's a sort of sport, with teams and scoreboards and glory. Over time, it becomes clear that it's all about him and the powers that be start to change the rules in order to test him and challenge him, eventually in a transparenty unfair way. So the sport that isn't is Ender's Game because he's so good at it, but there's a larger game in play that's him against the organisers and that's Ender's Game too.

We can't forget that there's also the biggest game, the war with the Formics. That's also Ender's Game and over everything else. And there's a personal game that he plays on his Battle School supplied computer, a seemingly open world adventure that gradually becomes

something else. This turns out to have just as much importance as any of the other games, though not in ways we expect, and again we're setting up for *Speaker for the Dead*, which I'll be tackling next month.

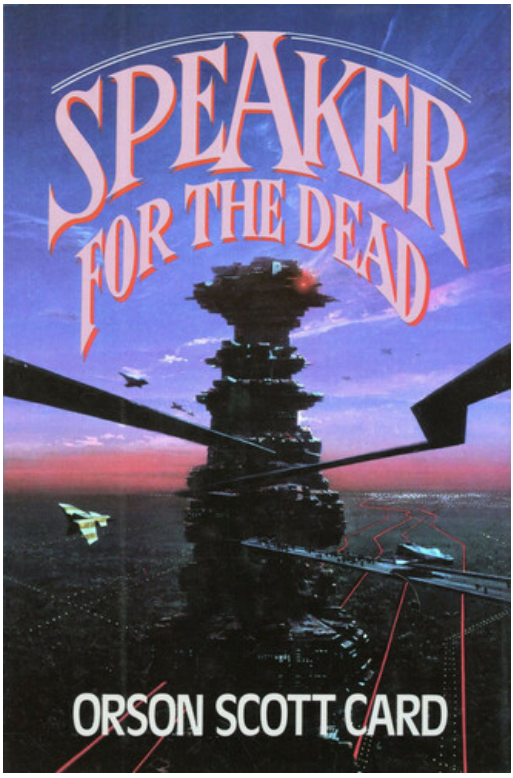
Looking back at the thirty-plus years of Hugo Award-winning novels that I've worked through before it, there are many thoroughly important books (such as *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Lord of Light* and *Stand on Zanzibar*) that I didn't particularly enjoy and many thoroughly enjoyable books (such as *The Big Time*, *Double Star* and *Gateway*) that don't seem as important to posterity. It's the ones that manage to be both of those things that resonate with me the most: *Way Station*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and *Dreamsnake*. And *Ender's Game*. This is as enjoyable as any previous winner and it does things that no previous winner did. That last part should be underlined by reminding you





that its predecessor as Hugo Award-winner for Best Novel was a novel as groundbreakingly different as *Neuromancer*. That's a pretty major achievement.

And, as I mentioned at the beginning of this review, it only exists as a sort of prequel to the story about Ender Wiggin that Card wanted to write all along, which became *Speaker for the Dead*.



ORSON SCOTT CARD

SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

PUBLISHER:
TOR BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1986

WON IN 1987
AT CONSPIRACY '87,
THE 45TH WORLDCON,
IN BRIGHTON, ENGLAND,
UNITED KINGDOM

I've looked forward to a lot of the novels I knew I'd be reading for my run-through of Best Novel winners at the Hugo Awards but perhaps none more than this one. I've read *Speaker for the Dead* once before but only once and I remembered the strange feeling of being blown away by it in a completely different way to how I was blown away by the novel that came before it, *Ender's Game*. I'm now happy to report that it did that all over again. *Ender's Game* is a very different novel in many ways, with this first sequel a far more thoughtful, mature and complex read.

If you'll recall, *Ender's Game* follows Ender Wiggin, a child prodigy as he graduates from Battle School as the leader the planet Earth needs to defeat the Formics (I'm still not going to call them Buggers) in a pivotal preemptive strike on an alien race who only just failed to wipe us out in their first attempt. It was a typical coming of age novel, updated to a neat science fiction setting, until, well, it wasn't, as the ending is utterly brutal: Ender wins the final game without realising that it isn't a game at all.

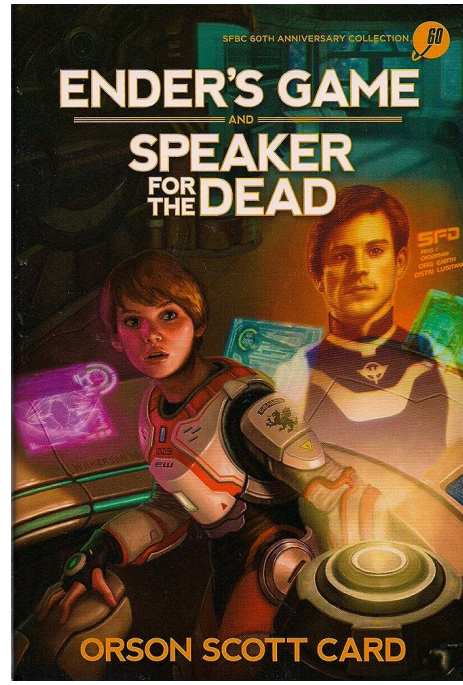
Speaker for the Dead promptly fast forwards three thousand years, during which time our hero, Ender Wiggin, has transformed from the saviour of mankind to the Xenocide, the boy who murdered an entire alien species. A big irony to this is that much of that shift was due to a book that he wrote himself called *The Hive Queen*, using the pseudonym of Speaker for the Dead. In doing so, he gave a voice to someone

who no longer had one, being dead, and, in doing that, he sparked a spiritual movement, in which a succession of other Speakers of the Dead continue to do likewise, given a strong remit to access what they need to investigate and eulogise lives, the request for such task being seen with religious importance.

The location is Lusitania, one of the Hundred Worlds ruled by the Starways Congress, and a colony called Milagre, which is predominantly Brazilian, which means that its people tend to speak Portuguese and practice Catholicism. The occasion is the discovery of a new sentient species, who live in the Lusitanian forests in a strange society, one in which the females are dominant but never seen and one in which they worship trees as their ancestors. The powers that be, after recognising that the Formic War was a brutal exercise in false assumptions and lack of communication, isolate the colony and strictly regulate interaction with this new species.

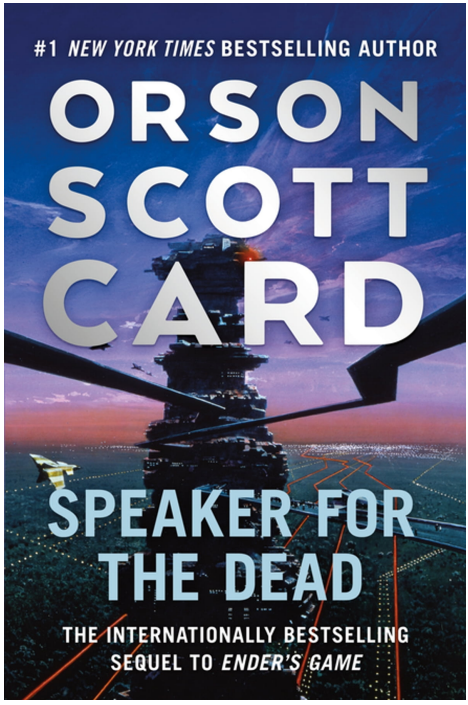
Xenologers across the Hundred Worlds call them Lusitanian Aborigines, but the locals use the term Pequeninos, for "Little Ones", a name they adopt for themselves, though they're also inevitably dubbed "piggies" as their snouts are highly reminiscent of swine. They're highly intelligent, able to speak at least two languages of their own, and also to quickly pick up both Portuguese and Stark, a late derivative of English that's become the default language of the Hundred Worlds. However, they're happy to exist in a non-technological state and they seem to practice brutal sacrificial rituals, eviscerating bodies and planting saplings within the remains.

The relativistic shenanigans prompted by light-speed travel means that Ender Wiggin, long considered dead, is actually still alive and



still appears to be in his mid-thirties. He's inevitably ditched his nickname to be known as simply Andrew Wiggin, a Speaker for the Dead, and he answers a call from the Milagre colony to speak for Pipo, a xenologer who was murdered by the pequeninos just like their own, but without the sapling. It takes twenty-two years for him to get there, only to find that Novinha, the young lady who made the call, quickly cancelled it, but that her eldest children, Ela and Miro, made separate calls of their own, for Pipo's son Libo, murdered by the pequeninos in the same fashion, and for Marcos, the brutal husband of Novinha and brutal father to her six children.

There are mysteries here, of course. Why did Novinha, so deeply in love with Libo as she was, marry Marcos? Why did the pequeninos murder both Pipo and Libo and how can the Milagre colony avoid that fate for their future



xenologers? Most of all, how does pequenino society work and how does it tie to the Descolada virus, a disease that appears to be lethal to humans until Novinha cures it, but also appears to be pivotal to the life of what few native species exist on Lusitania? It falls to Ender, of course, to solve all these mysteries, even though he's hardly welcomed by pretty much anyone.

I found this book absolutely fascinating and from a whole slew of perspectives. It works as a mystery, or as a number of mysteries, as the paragraph above suggests, though we do know whodunit immediately, so instead puzzle over why. It's fascinating as a character study, with an expansive cast of characters, some quickly dead but notably never less important for that detail. It's fascinating from both a cultural and linguistic standpoint, with a heavy focus given to the Brazilians who happen to populate the Milagre colony.

It's especially fascinating from a standpoint of worldbuilding, the science of anthropology at the heart of everything. And, when dealing with a sentient and intelligent but apparently primitive society, that boils down to asking all the right questions and understanding all the answers. That wouldn't be easy at the best of times but, under orders from the thoroughly panicked Starways Congress, these xenologers are actively barred from returning the favour whenever inquisitive pequeninos inevitably ask questions of their own. That's a heck of a balance to walk and a nigh on impossible one. And that's why it makes a lot of sense to bring in a genius of the level of Ender Wiggin to stir things up.

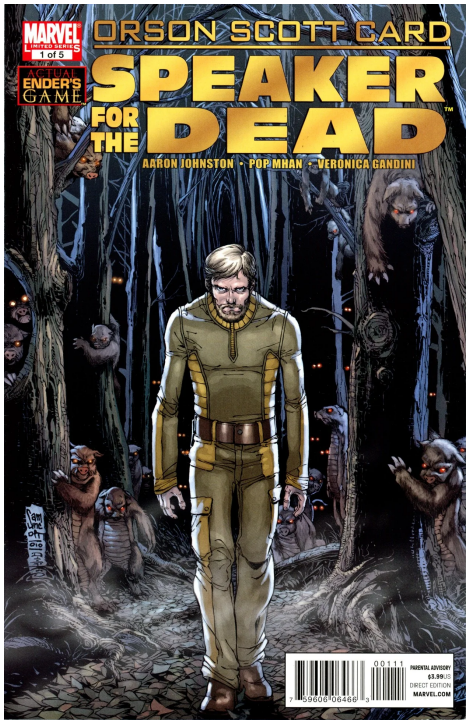
Orson Scott Card doesn't leave us adrift on the path to understanding, though he takes a long and patient time to get to his various points. One principal key that he gifts to us early on is the four orders of foreignness, a Nordic concept introduced by Ender's sister Valentine using her Demosthenes pseudonym, on Trondheim, the Nordic world on which she settled. The utlanning is a human stranger of our world. The framling is a human stranger of another world. The raman is a human but of another species. And the varelse is truly alien. The question of course is where the pequeninos fit into this model and where we fit to them. That one key pequenino calls himself Human is an answer in itself.

I found myself caught up in *Ender's Game*, but following one character. There were other worthies but they play supporting roles and either never become much of a focus or are there for a single purpose and don't develop beyond it. If there's another character we find ourselves caring about, it's the Hive Queen,

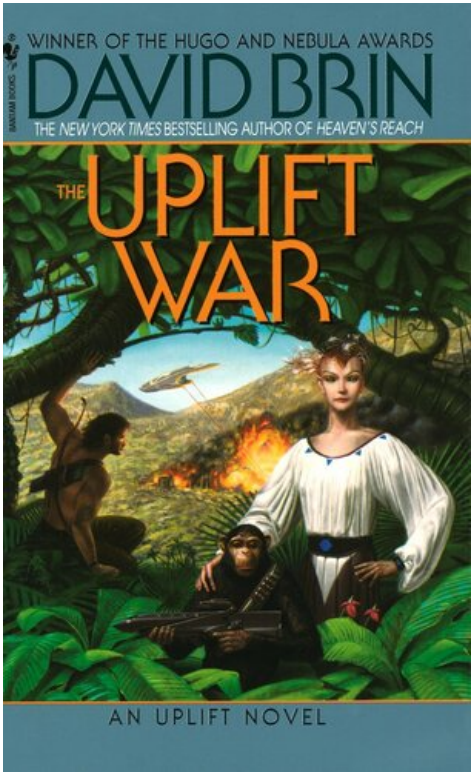
who doesn't really appear much at all until this book. Here, there are a host of characters we care about, an abundance of whom aren't even human. The Hive Queen plays a role, as she communicates telepathically with Ender about where she wants to be planted. Various colonists and pequeninos are important too, not merely Novinha, the obvious candidate for our sympathy. We even care about characters who don't appear to be sympathetic at all, a particularly impressive achievement for Card.

Perhaps most impressive is the way that he handles our emotions in the final chapters. While we don't necessarily see each and every development coming and certainly don't see the details of those developments, we surely know where we're going to end up, at least roughly. Yet Card hits us so powerfully in the feels when we get there that he outstrips the emotions we felt at the end of *Ender's Game*. Another major part of this emotion is the inclusion of a third sentient species, merely one that nobody else knows has been discovered. She's Jane, an AI who exists only in the Ansible communications network, the instant internet of the galaxy in the Enderverse, and she's quite the sympathetic character.

The catch to these two astounding books is that they're so astounding that I don't think I ever mustered up the courage to dive into the third one, *Xenocide*. There are five books, all-told, in Ender's story, four in strict succession and the fifth, *Ender in Exile*, filling in the gap between books one and two. However, it does not end there. There are currently eighteen volumes within the Enderverse: sixteen novels and a couple of novellas, outlining the Formic Wars before Ender was born, the *Shadow Saga* focused on characters he left behind after becoming the Speaker for the Dead, and a *Fleet*



School novel that I reviewed a few years ago. Oh, and there's another one on the way that aims to wrap it all up. I should delve further.



DAVID BRIN

THE UPLIFT WAR

PUBLISHER:
BANTAM SPECTRA

PUBLICATION DATE:
1987

WON IN 1988
AT NOLACON II,
THE 46TH WORLDCON,
IN NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA,
U.S.A.

It might seem a little odd to suggest, after finishing up a 638-page paperback that could have been far shorter without losing impact, that David Brin is an author with admirable restraint, but I'm writing this review with that thought very much in mind. *The Uplift War* is the third novel set in a rich universe that's focused on a fantastic science fiction concept, that of biological uplift, the use of genetic manipulation to raise species to sentience, but he's only written three more since, though he's built quite the expansive bibliography.

What's more, it's a standalone novel, as indeed were its two predecessors. *Sundiver* was a novel of strong imagination, especially for a debut, but it's clearly the work of an author in the process of honing his skill. *Startide Rising*, which won the Hugo in 1984, is a peach of a book, telling a very different story within that same universe and exploring the central uplift concept in a mature way against an excellent backdrop of good old fashioned adventure. I liked the one and loved the other but was eager to dive into this third book, which also won the Hugo, four years on in 1988.

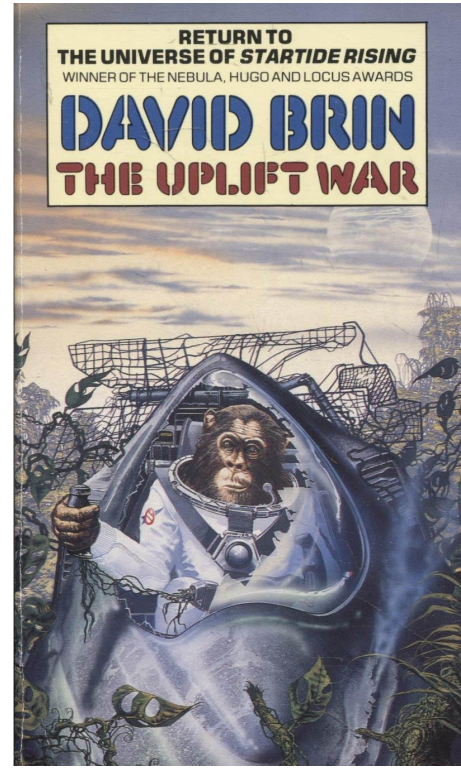
And here I want to know far more, which means that I may have to dive into the *Uplift Trilogy* that told a single story across three volumes in the nineties. The story of the *Streaker*, that neo-dolphin ship that sparked such galactic response in *Startide Rising* is only mentioned in passing here but has a prominent place somewhere in that trilogy. I want know what happens to it and what really lies

behind the huge secrets that it inadvertently stumbled upon. Those answers are not here. They may or may not be found in the *Uplift Trilogy* but I can't help but wonder why Brin didn't go on to milk a series that had brought him two Hugos in three books and had so much potential for exploration.

Compare that restraint with the approach of Orson Scott Card, for instance, who won two of the three Hugos given out between Brin's pair of wins. His were for the first two novels in the *Enderverse*, not as immediately rich a universe as Brin's but which he's expanded on in a whole slew of directions over the years, so that *The Last Shadow* wraps up more than one strand of novels amongst the sixteen novels, two novellas and one collection published so far. I respect Brin for expanding his universe without letting it dominate his career.

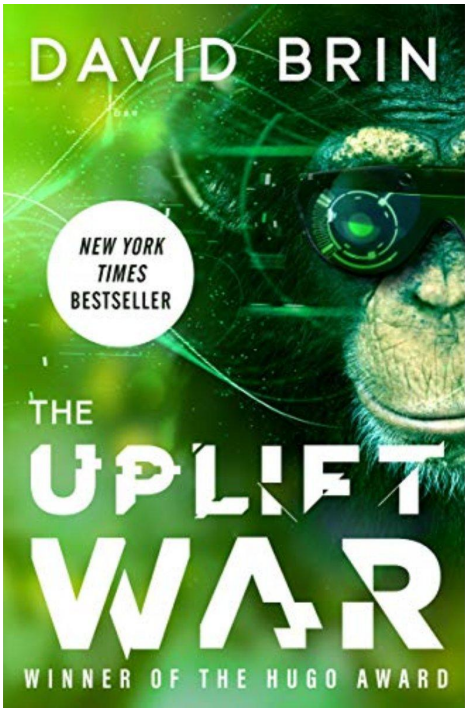
This time, we're on a planet named Garth, previously leased to the Bururalli, who were not uplifted well and so devolved and ruined its ecosystem. That was fifty thousand years ago and now humans are there, a wolfling clan in the eyes of the galactics, who award leases only to planets deemed this hopeless for colonisation. The events of *Startide Rising* have shaken up the balance in this universe. Now the Gubru, a species of intelligent alien birds, invade Garth in order to hold it hostage as a bargaining chip in learning whatever secrets the *Streaker* uncovered. And that's the novel.

Well, it's not quite that simple, but it pretty much is. We've leased Garth and we've been doing what we can to restore it to health but now the Gubru have taken over and we want it back. Six hundred pages later, we see how that went. As a war story, it's occasionally fascinating for tactical reasons, but its true value doesn't lie there. It's never going to be seen as



one of the great science fiction war novels, because the war for Garth ends almost as soon as it begins and becomes a battle of resistance. The Gubru overwhelm our meagre spacefleet and drench the occupied areas of Garth with a gas that incapacitates human beings. For a novel all about humanity's ever-shifting place in galactic culture, it contains precious few humans.

And that's what makes this special, as it made *Startide Rising* special, because it's told through a range of perspectives that aren't ours. In fact, the most prominent human in the story, because he figures out how the gas is being targetted and how to avoid it ongoing, moves away from being an overt human as the book progresses. He's Robert Oneagle, the son of the planetary coordinator of Garth, and he



spends a good part of this novel in Tarzan mode, sometimes literally, but he also builds a relationship with an alien, Athaclena, who's the daughter of the Tymbrimi ambassador, and the burgeoning connection between them changes both greatly.

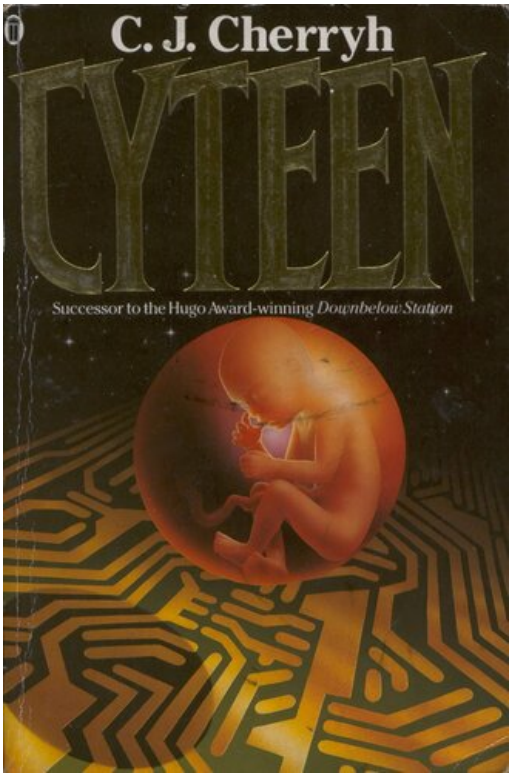
Both are worthy characters, but their plot strand are far from the only ones here. There's another that follows Athaclena's father, Uthacalthing, who fails to leave Garth when the Gubru arrive but, according to the manner of the Tymbrimi, has a long game to play that involves practical jokes. He spends a majority of the book in the company of the Thennanin ambassador to Garth, Kault, as they travel on foot from their wrecked ship back to civilisation. Those sections seem skippable until we grasp what Brin is actually doing and realise how important Uthacalthing is to the bigger picture. I almost want to re-read immediately with that in mind, especially as one notable pun that I won't spoil is enough to suggest that parallel between this character and the author who created him.

And there are plenty of strands focused on neo-chimps, the first client species that we uplifted to sentience. They aren't affected by the gas that takes out the humans on Garth and the Gubru fail to realise how advanced they've become in a mere few centuries, and thus consistently underestimate them. Easily my favourite character here is Fiben Bolger, a neo-chimp who serves as a military pilot on Garth. His pivotal story arc interacts with the story arcs of almost everyone else and that makes him a notably important link between everything that goes on, whether he's leading the way or not.

Then there are the Gubru, whose society is fascinating, and their own client species, the Kwackoo. We're given plenty of chapters from their perspective, especially focused on the most important of them, the three Suzerains appointed to the Triumvirate as representatives of the military, the church and the bureaucracy. They run things together until they reach clear consensus, when one of them ascends physically to queen and the others can mate with her. Between Gubru, Tymbrimi and Thennanin, there are more important Galactic characters here than humans, even before we factor in the neo-chimps and the neo-gorillas, who play a pivotal role beyond that pun.

I've enjoyed all three of these standalone *Uplift* novels, but in notably different ways. I found *Sundiver* a fascinating debut novel. It's wildly ambitious and it doesn't succeed at all the things it tries, but it's a blast seeing how Brin works through so many wildly different

concepts on his first time out. My favourite of the three is *Startide Rising*, because I was enthralled not merely by the concepts but by the tense action adventure that frames them. This time, I enjoyed a deep dive into client species and how they think, along with a solid look at multiple galactic species and how they think too. This is impeccable worldbuilding and it's majestic stuff, even if it is long. And it's very long.



C. J. CHERRYH

CYTEEN

PUBLISHER:
WARNER BOOKS

PUBLICATION DATE:
1988

WON IN 1989
AT NOREASCON 3,
THE 47TH WORLDCON,
IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS,
U.S.A.

C. J. Cherryh won her first Hugo in 1982 for *Downbelow Station*, a novel in her expansive *Alliance-Union* series, which now numbers twenty-seven novels, if we count all the sub-series, with another due in 2024. I found it a fascinating novel that I admired deeply, not least for its vast worldbuilding and worthy characterisations; and not to forget a glorious sense of place right in the middle of a space war that it wasn't really part of but which did affect them deeply. However, I didn't really enjoy that book and I found it heavy going. It took me three weeks to finish.

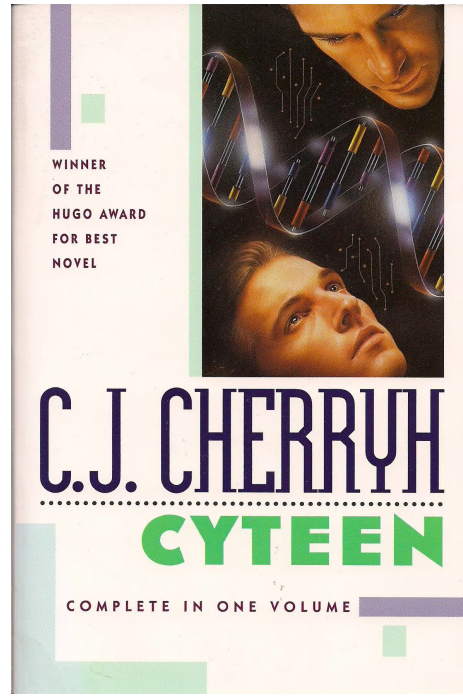
Almost everything I said about *Downbelow Station* in that review holds true here too, but doubled or even tripled. *Cyteen* is a long book, running 680 trade paperback pages of small print in my New English Library edition, and it took me a long time to get through, an entire month reading maybe twenty or thirty pages a night. In the U.S., it was sometimes published in two volumes. It's dry stuff, full of admirable detail about the Union world of Cyteen and especially its politics. Most of the book is built on intrigue rather than action, making it very talky, but the author also dips deeply into science, which is admittedly one of the most interesting things about Cyteen, but so deeply that we're almost in textbooks at points. There are whole chapters written in italics.

In other words, it's a particularly daunting read that should not be tackled lightly, which makes it unfortunate that my edition frames it as a murder mystery in its back cover blurb.

Ariane Emory runs the bio-engineering labs at Reseune, the heart of Cyteen, which in turn is the capital planet of the Union. It was initially founded by dissident scientists and they found a need, when threatened by Earth, to grow a much larger population. That was largely done through cloning, performed at Reseune, much of it designed and guided by Emory. She also represents Science on the Council of Nine that governs Union and has done so for fully half a century, being a hundred and twenty years old when she's murdered.

Now, in one sense this is a murder mystery, because there is a murder, albeit not until a hundred pages in, and the one character who confesses to the crime and accepts exile as a punishment likely didn't do it. Yet everyone accepts his confession and moves on. After all, Emory, who's the corpse, and Jordan Warrick, the apparent murderer, are both specials, the select group of geniuses deemed so crucial to Union that they're exempt from pesky things like laws. They spend what seems like every waking hour working, so people are OK with that. That means that the only people who are wondering whodunit are the readers and we wonder why Cherryh doesn't even attempt to explore the subject. In fact, while revelations in the final few pages suggest who the real killer might have been, we're never really told. It's simply not what this book is about.

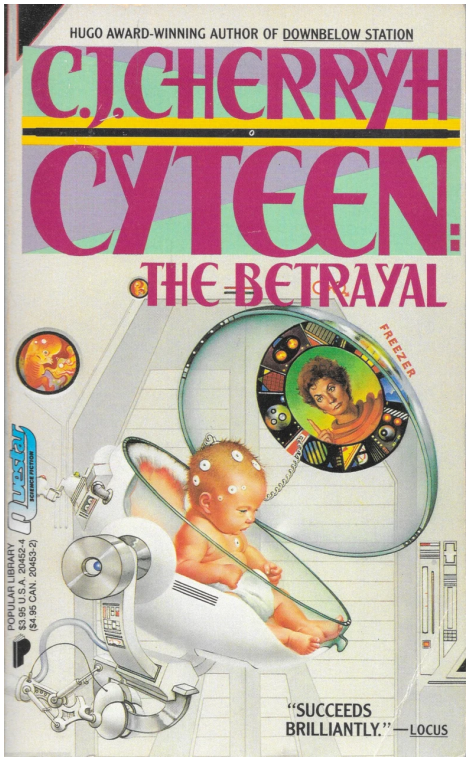
What it's about is science, because Emory is clearly the most important character in the book and to Union. Not only has she effectively been running the place for decades but she has plans, wildly detailed plans that will frame the future of Union as much as she's framed its past. In many ways, I would happily compare her to Hari Seldon in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* books, but she's far more hands-on



and, unlike Seldon, she doesn't stay dead.

As soon as she's murdered, she's reborn in the form of a PR, a Parental Replicate, a clone with full rights to inherit from her former self. And she continues to be the primary character in the book, merely as Ariane Emory II. Ariane Emory I isn't quite gone either, because she was a genius who coded every contingency she could possibly think of into her computer, with access reserved to her PR so that she can advise her from beyond the grave, literally a ghost in the machine.

This is all fascinating stuff and, thinking back at just how deeply Cherryh extrapolated the culture of Union from its scientific base, with levels of rights afforded to PRs and CITs and azis that echo a caste system or a culture of indentured servitude, if not quite outright slavery, I'm stunned at just how much she managed to achieve here. After all, there's



worldbuilding and there's worldbuilding.

Frankly, people could read this novel, and the rest of the Alliance-Union series and write entire history and psychology books all about planets and cultures that have never existed. In a way, Cherryh has, merely framing them as fictional novels.

The problem is that, as endlessly fascinating as Arianne Emory is, as both I and II, and as thoroughly important as she is to Reseune, Cyteen and Union, and by extension the entire future of this universe, she's not particularly likeable. We could argue about the morality of cloning and azis and psychsets and so on, but moral lines are crossed all the time here and some far more clearly than others.

The supposed trigger for Jordan Warrick to kill Emory I, for instance, is his discovery that she's been sleeping with his son, Justin. Given that she's 120 and he's Jordan's still underage PR, we're hardly on her side from the outset. That there turn out to be reasons for why she did this and sexual satisfaction may not even be the primary one isn't much of a help. And that's just the beginning.

A couple of hundred pages in, we find out about Gehenna because it's just come to light in the press and the politicians are a making a huge deal about it. Regular readers of Cherryh would have known about it already through the 1983 novel *Forty Thousand in Gehenna*, an earlier work in the sub-series of *Alliance-Union* that *Cyteen* belongs to, *The Era of Rapprochment*. It's a planet to which Union sent a colony that was comprised mostly of clones, not for their own benefit but, through heavy involvement and planning by Emory, to become a problem for the enemy later whenever they discover it. Location, location, location.

And it isn't just Emory. She and her political faction may be more palatable than their opposition, especially given that some of them are outright terrorists who plant bombs, but that doesn't mean that they're at all palatable. Emory II is created in her image, a full clone, but nurture is as important as nature, so she's raised as closely as possible to the original, just in case. That means involving people who probably didn't want to be involved and then exiling them at the appropriate point just to replicate a life event in Emory I's background. Valued members of the scientific community with decades of service are tossed aside like garbage just to mirror the past of one clone.

As you might imagine, there's no real warmth here. Effectively, by reading this book, we're tuning in to an ongoing experiment over twenty-odd years. Everything is intrigue

and suspicion. The fear of failure is palpable and omnipresent. The stakes seem high to begin with and we only learn more about them as Cherryh piles on detail. We gradually become subject matter experts on the planet Cyteen, its history, politics and culture, and the science that framed it and continues to do so. And yet we'd not likely to choose to go there even if we could. To be fair, we probably wouldn't want to go to the future Earth at this point either, but at least there were some sympathetic characters in residence at Downbelow Station. There aren't any here. There are just predators and prey.

Talking of *Downbelow Station*, that won the Hugo in its year but wasn't even nominated for the Nebula, an interesting scenario that's replicated here. The 1989 Nebula went to Lois McMaster Bujold for a *Vorkosigan Saga* space opera novel, *Falling Free.* The difference is that Hugos are voted for by fans, those who attend the annual Worldcon convention, wherever it happens to be, while Nebulas are voted on by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, so fellow authors. I wonder why the former like Cherryh more than the latter.

One factor that I sincerely doubt affected anyone who was voting in 1989 but certainly seems notable today is a constant focus on tape. The digital revolution was well under way at this point in time, but this far future civilisation still uses tape for what appears to be everything, including programming clones with psychsets, the name given to the induced educations that give them a grounding to life. It felt just as jarring to me in 2023 as William Gibson's use of payphones in his cyberpunk dystopia in *Neuromancer*. What's more, computers record absolutely everything, but Emory II is unable to find out anything about her

former self, because she's been kept from the news. How? I guess Cherryh failed to predict the internet, which, of course, already existed in 1989. Gibson built his entire genre around it, but Cherryh still talks about timesharing on computers and tapes but can't see the value of the instant accessibility of information.

And so here's another Hugo-winning novel that I appreciated but didn't enjoy. Once more, I can acknowledge just how immense it is not just as a physical object but as an example of deep worldbuilding. It can generate discussion on any one of a hundred topics. But is it fun, engaging and worthy of investing emotion? Not at all.

And that's an odd place to find myself in as I wrap up the first four decades of Best Novel Hugo Winners, which has been a wild ride.

SUBMISSIONS

I welcome submissions to Apocalypse Later Music, though I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be reviewed.

Please read the following important notes before submitting anything.

I primarily review the good stuff. There's just too much of it out there nowadays to waste any time reviewing the bad stuff. Almost everything that I review is, in my opinion, either good or interesting and, hopefully, both. I believe that it's worth listening to and I recommend it to some degree, if it happens to be your sort of thing. Now, if you're a die hard black/death metalhead, you might not dig any of the psychedelic rock and vice versa. However, maybe you will! Open ears, open minds and all that.

I have zero interest in being a hatchet man critic who slams everything he writes about. I'll only give a bad review if it's in the public interest, such as a major act releasing a disappointing album. Even then, I'll often keep away.

If I do review, I'll still be completely honest and point out the good and the bad in any release.

I'm primarily reviewing new material only. Each month at Apocalypse Later Music, I review releases from the previous two months. I might stretch a little beyond that for a submission, but not far. Each January, I also try to catch up with highly regarded albums and obvious omissions from the previous year that I didn't get round to at the time. I then bundle my reviews up at the end of a quarter and publish in zine form midway through the following month.

I'm especially interested in studio albums or EPs that do something new and different. I try to review an indie release and a major band each weekday, one rock and one metal, with each week deliberately varied in both genres and countries covered.

If you still want to submit, thank you! You can do so in a couple of ways:

1. Digital copy: please e-mail me at hal@hornsablaze.com a link to where I can download mp3s in 320k. Please include promotional material such as an EPK, high res cover art, etc.
2. Physical: e-mail me for a mailing address.

Either way but especially digitally, please include any promotional material such as a press kit, high res cover art, band photo, etc.

And, whether you submit or not and whether I liked it or not, all the best with your music! Don't quit! The world is a better place because you create.

Submissions of books for review at the Nameless Zine wouldn't come to me directly. If you have books that fit the scope of a predominantly science fiction/fantasy/horror e-zine, please see the contact details at the bottom of the main page at thenamelesszine.org.

I don't review film submissions much any more, as most of my film reviews are for books.

CREATIVE COMMONS

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ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, Apocalypse Later, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the Nameless Zine.

Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a ghost guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He watches anything unusual and much that isn't. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*.

He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

My personal site is Dawtrina. I run Smithland, a Guy N. Smith fan site. I founded and co-run the CoKoCon science fiction/fantasy convention. I co-founded the Arizona Penny Dreadfuls. I've run the Awesomelys since 2013. I write for the Nameless Zine.

The Arizona Penny Dreadfuls	azpennydreadfuls.org
The Awesomelys	awesomelys.com
CoKoCon	cokocon.org
Dawtrina	dawtrina.com
The Nameless Zine	thenamelesszine.org
Smithland	guynsmith.rocks

ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable episodes of long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last and it stuck. It didn't have to be funny.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, such as old films, foreign films, indie films, local films, microbudget films, and so on, always avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background. Let's just get to the content and make it readable.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by plenty more with double digits worth of others always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, Arizona, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF. He publishes books by himself and others. He presents programs of quality international short films at conventions across the southwest.

Apocalypse Later celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival	alfilmfest.com
Apocalypse Later Roadshow	roadshow.apocalypselaterempire.com
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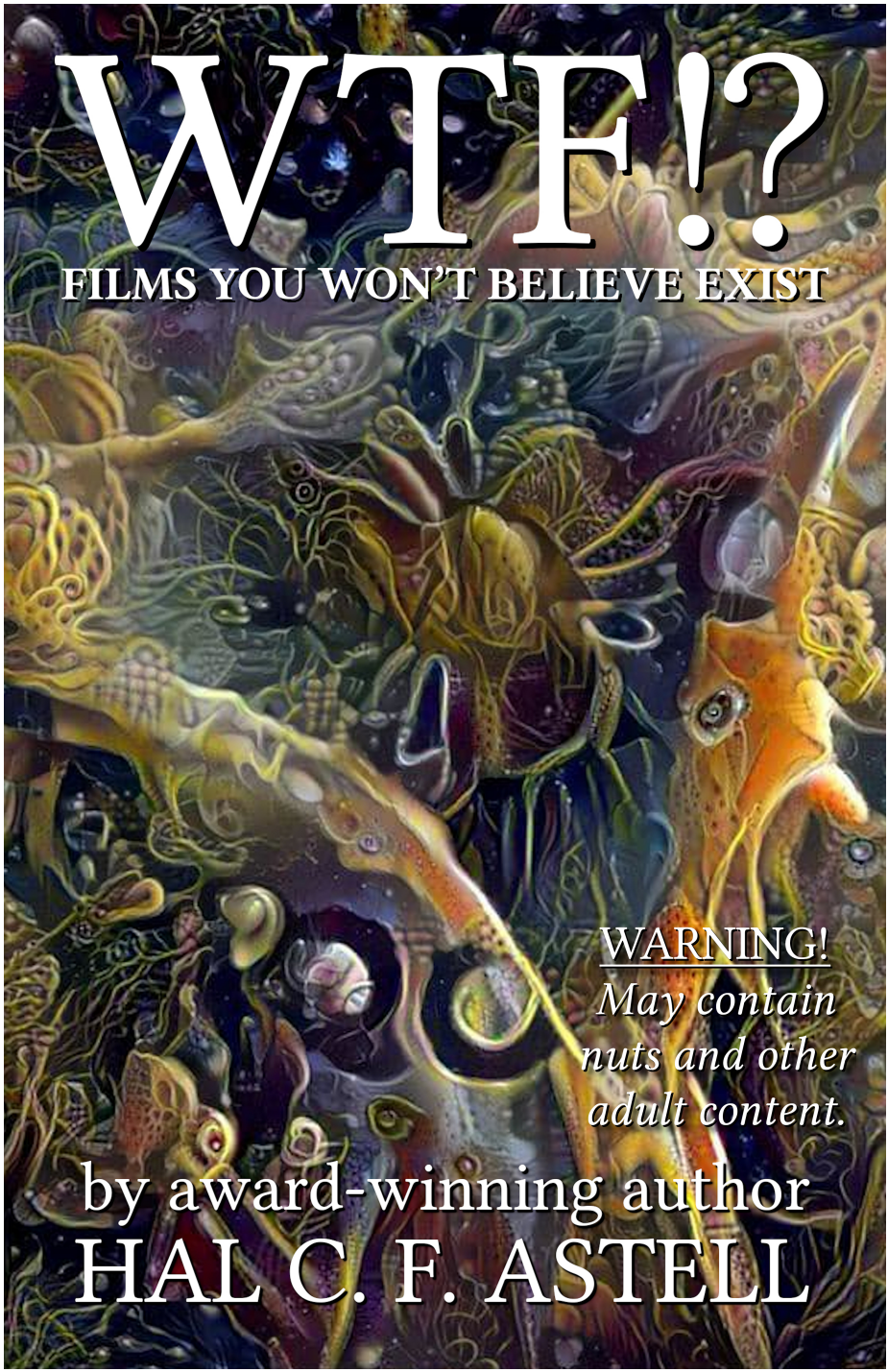
Latest Books from Apocalypse Later Press (available on Amazon):

A Horror Movie Calendar
WTF!? Films You Won't Believe Exist

A HORROR MOVIE CALENDAR
HAL C. F. ASTELL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Tempe, Arizona — September 1-4

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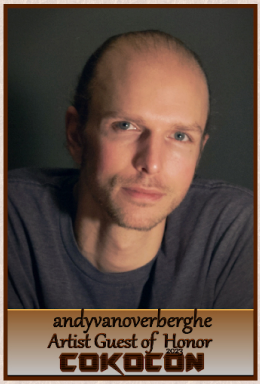

andyvanoverberghe
Artist Guest of Honor
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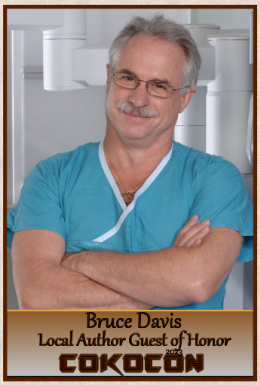

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Tempe, Arizona — September 1-4

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LOCATION: *DoubleTree by Hilton Phoenix Tempe*
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MEMBERSHIP: *Adult (12+): $50 (pre-con), $60 (at con)*
Youth (7-12): half current price
Kid-in-Tow (<7): FREE
(limit of 2 per adult member)

HOTEL RATES: *$92 per night (single/double)*
$102 (triple) or $112 (quad)

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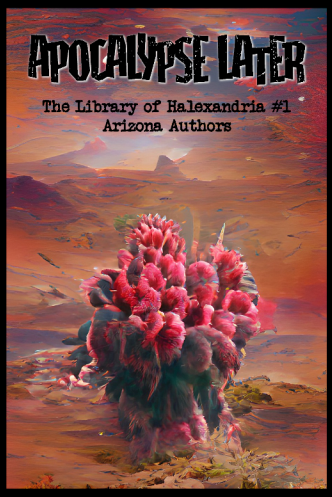

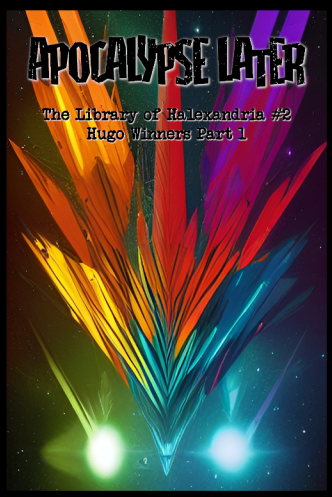

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