

Holmdel Science Fiction Discussion Group
Club Notice - 8/4/80

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

(Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
Book discussions at South Plainfield are 3 weeks after dates shown.)

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
8/6/80	PROTECTOR by Larry Niven, rm 4H-205 [THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS by Poul Anderson, at HP]
8/27/80	DORSAI! by Gordon Dickson, rm 4H-205
9/17/80	RAX [alias HELLO SUMMER, GOODBYE] by Michael G. Coney, rm 4H-205
10/8/80	CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ by Walter M. Miller, rm 4H-205

Our library is in HO 2C-401. Rich Ditch (x3432) is librarian.
Debi Bennett (HP 1B-368 x2408) is in charge of South Plainfield
activities. Evelyn Leeper (HO 1E-321 x6334) is Club book-buyer.

1. This Wednesday the discussions will be of PROTECTOR by Larry Niven at Holmdel and of THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS by Poul Anderson, at South Plainfield. DORSAI! by Gordon Dickson is our next discussion book (as can be plainly seen from the schedule above).

2. We currently have 95 members.

3. Our BEST OF THE NOTICE issue went out Monday morning of last week. It was a little hard to admit to ourselves that this garbage was the best we could do, but there you have it. If you did not receive a copy and would like one (the backs can be used for scratch paper), let me know, since we still have a few more copies.

4. Included in this notice is a review of Robert Heinlein's new novel, NUMBER OF THE BEAST.

Mark Leeper
HO 2B-502A x7093

NUMBER OF THE BEAST, by Robert A. Heinlein. Fawcett, New York, 1980, 511p, Paper, Novel, \$6.95. ISBN 0-449-90019-3.

Robert A. Heinlein is acknowledged by many to be the best SF writer to date. He is to SF what Arthur Rubinstein is to the piano. Unfortunately, it is as painful to read a bad Heinlein novel as it is to listen to Rubinstein on a piano with one flat note. It's the combination of knowing how good he could be, and never knowing just when that sour note is going to be hit again. And, much as I hate to say it, Heinlein's piano is out of tune again.

The main problem is the characters. They have two faults: they know everything, and they can't open their mouths without a sermon falling out. Take Dejah Thoris Burroughs and her husband (Zebadiah) John Carter (I'll let the names speak for themselves; there's more of that sort of thing in the novel). She knows karate, can tell you the time to within three seconds without a clock (perfect internal time sense), is a lightning calculator, and loves sex. He is an excellent swordsman, can build complicated electronic equipment, speaks several languages, and loves sex. It's nice they have something in common.

As for sermonizing, Heinlein's characters are believers in women's lib (but also protection of females by males), militarism (but also individualism), bras and sex. It certainly looks as though Heinlein is attempting to counter his previous books favoring militarism and the military, since, in spite of their supposed belief in the military system of running a ship, his characters spend most of their time disobeying orders and arguing with the Captain (whoever he/she might be at the time; they seem to elect a new Captain every couple of days or so, which isn't like any army I've ever seen). They of course attribute their success to their military discipline; I attribute it to Heinlein's knowledge that, no matter how stupid your main characters are, the reader will hate you if you kill them all off.

Heinlein's characters' attitude toward sex seems designed to appeal to the younger (college? high-school?) audience. All his main characters seem to think of sex twenty-four hours a day (or however many hours are in a day wherever they are). Even when they are busy rebuilding their ship or scouting for a place to hide out, they talk constantly about sex, think constantly about sex, and seem to be unable to go for more than 8 hours without sex. They also carry on the most ridiculous conversations during sex that I've ever heard of. Naturally, they also believe in nudity (although the two women spend an inordinate amount of time decorating themselves with silks and jewels), and strip off all their clothes at the slightest excuse. And, of course, they are all so understanding that they practically throw their spouses into bed with various people that they meet. But they're clean; Heinlein spends more time bathing and cleaning his characters

than any other author I know. Hot tubs, cold streams, "refreshers", bidets...I suspect that Heinlein has part interest in a plumbing company. And afterwards, there is always some one to give the bather a brisk rubdown with a towel.

Heinlein tells his story from (at least) six different points of view, jumping from one to the other as he changes chapters. This makes it very difficult for the reader to keep track of what is going on, since the person referred to as "I" keeps changing, but what makes it even worse is that all the characters are called by nicknames (not necessarily similar to their real names; "Hillbilly", "Sharpie", and "Hilda" are all the same person), as well as titles ("Astrogator", "Co-Pilot", etc.), as well as their real names. Since the titles keep rotating among the characters as they elect a new captain, you really can't tell the players without a scorecard.

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST has other flaws that are becoming more "popular" in science fiction, the most obvious being the use of science fiction itself as a story element. The characters all read Edgar Rice Burroughs (you might have guessed), Isaac Asimov, L. Frank Baum, and Jack Williamson. (Strange that no one seems to have read anything written after 1970 or so, even though the story is definitely set in the future, probably post-2000.) Heinlein even has the characters discussing Heinlein, a cute idea but, unfortunately, just a bit too cute. (John Norman had characters in BEASTS OF GOR discussing John Norman; it didn't work there either.) Bad enough that the characters all talk about science fiction, but Heinlein makes it an integral part of the plot, which only makes it more artificial. It seems that one of the main characters has built a machine which can travel between (among?) alternate universes, and some of those alternate universes turn out to be those of various science fiction or fantasy novels. While the same device has been used in many different forms by many other writers (Poul Anderson's THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS, L. Sprague De Camp's Harold Shea stories, and George O. Smith's THE SECOND WAR OF THE WORLDS come to mind as examples), the author usually attempts only one alternate universe at a time, and he chooses one with which he is comfortable. Heinlein jumps from universe to universe and even attempts to write about Oz (as un-Heinleinesque a place as one could imagine). This sort of in-breeding of science fiction works best when used with a light touch; THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST has so much prerequisite reading that Heinlein's audience is very narrow indeed.

The actual story, when disinterred from under the weight of the characters, sermonizing, et al, is passable enough. Nothing brilliant, innovative, or dazzling, but solid science fiction. Unfortunately, Heinlein becomes too fascinated with his universe-hopping and gets side-tracked from his main story, to the frustration of the reader. Only towards the end does one of the main characters remind the others what their goal was, and then Heinlein sends them off into still another universe or two.

It would have made a good short novel, but stretching it to 512 pages is asking too much of it, even though the print face is large, and the pages are profusely illustrated. The illustrations, for a change, are a definite plus. Richard Powers is identified (in my mind anyway) with the science fiction of the 1950s and early 1960s, and his style works well with Heinlein's.

This novel is certainly better than Heinlein's previous two (I WILL FEAR NO EVIL and TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE), and not as good as some of his earlier ones (ORPHANS OF THE SKY and TIME FOR THE STARS). It is something like a cross between STARSHIP TROOPERS and FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD, with a little STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND thrown in (mostly the sex). Whether or not you like it depends on how you feel about Heinlein's philosophy in general.

Evelyn C. Leeper