TUNNEL IN THE SKY (REISSUE) by Heinlein

Should Be A Real School Course

It was just a test . . .

But something had gone wrong. Terribly wrong. What was to have been a standard ten-day survival test had suddenly become an indefinite life-or-death nightmare.

Now they were stranded somewhere in the universe, beyond contact with Earth . . . at the other end of a tunnel in the sky. This small group of young men and women, divested of all civilized luxuries and laws, were being forced to forge a future of their own . . . a strange future in a strange land where sometimes not even the fittest could survive!

. . . fascinating . . . ingenious . . . this a book in the grand tradition of high literature!

-- The New York Times

Heinlein felt that anyone who could not do everything from plan an invasion, change a diaper, butcher a hog, write a sonnet, design a building, or program a computer was at least partially incapacitated. In addition, he felt that our schools did a very poor job of preparing young people for what life was all about. This book presented at least one partial solution to both problems: have a school course in survival, whose final test was to be dropped onto some unknown wilderness planet for a week and forced to actually survive. Around this basic concept Heinlein fashioned what is probably one of the best of his so-called juvenile novels.

Roderick Walker is the prime character, a young man with some doubts about whether he is really ready to take the final exam in this course. With some encouragement and advice from his older sister, he decides to proceed, going through the gate to a new world where nothing is familiar, where everything must be viewed as potentially deadly. But after managing to survive for the prescribed time, there is no pick up signal, no return gate,
and Rod slowly comes to the conclusion that, regardless of what has gone wrong, he must make a go of really living long term on this new world. Along with other class survivors, a small society is formed, initially with Rod as the nominal leader. From this point, Heinlein manages to show the essentials of how and why a government is formed, what type of government make sense for a small group, how a society protects itself from bullies (the only truly deadly animal is the two-legged variety), the contribution made by both sexes to a properly functioning society, just what makes a man a man, and the essential qualities of a leader. All buried within a fine adventure story of just how the little group builds itself from an unrelated bunch of people huddling in a cave to a bustling, forward looking industrious town, with excellent characterizations of not just Rod but most of the people around him, and with very little direct preaching, but rather showing his points as results of the events and actions of his characters. Heinlein's typical unforced, simple American prose style is much in evidence here, making both dialog and descriptions seem perfectly natural. This makes for a very fast reading experience, with a lot of his philosophical points sliding in under the readers conscious radar, only to wake you up at 3AM with an Oh, yeah! That makes sense. And perhaps you will come away from this book, as I did, thinking that the idea of a school course in survival is something that should actually be implemented. Everyone, from teens to adults, homemakers to rugged individualists, engineers to social workers, can enjoy this book. There are very few works that can appeal to such a wide range of audience as this one does, but this is something that Heinlein made a habit of. Written almost fifty years ago, it reads just as well, if not better than anything published today.

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