Time for the Stars

One Of The Very Best Of The Heinlein Juveniles

This is one of the classic titles originally known as the Heinlein Juveniles, written in the 1950s and published for the young adult market. It has since been in print for 50 years in paperback, and now returns to hardcover for a new generation.

Travel to other planets is a reality, and with overpopulation stretching the resources of Earth, the necessity to find habitable worlds is growing ever more urgent. With no time to wait years for communication between slower-than-light spaceships and home, the Long Range Foundation explores an unlikely solution—human telepathy.

Identical twins Tom and Pat are enlisted to be the human radios that will keep the ships in contact with Earth. The only problem is that one of them has to stay behind, and that one will grow old while the other explores the depths of space. Always a master of insight into the human consequences of future technologies, this is one of Heinlein’s triumphs.

My Personal Review:
Please note that most of this review is actually on Heinlein’s Citizen of the Galaxy. That’s because I was unable to post this review on that product page for some reason, maybe because of a system problem, and rather than delete the review, I thought I would post it here under another one of Heinlein’s juveniles. So I apologize for that but hope you will enjoy this review too.

However, I would like to make one brief comment about Time for the Stars. The two main characters are interesting in that Heinlein has portrayed a dysfunctional twin pair who, although not close personally, they are mutually telepathic. Usually, twins are close and almost inseparable, but not in the case of these fictional twins. And when one twin dies in real life, often the surviving twin dies shortly thereafter.
Heinlein started out writing juvenile novels, although sometimes the dividing line between juvenile and truly adult works in his oeuvre is not as simple as is commonly thought. There are a number of these that Heinlein fans are familiar with, such as Rocket Ship Galileo, Time for the Stars, The Star Beast, Tunnel in the Sky, Starman Jones, The Rolling Stones, Podkayne of Mars, and Citizen of the Galaxy. As my fellow reviewer Dark Genius points out, this is probably the most mature of his juvenile works. But they are still notable for containing some of Heinleins best fiction and ideas.

For example, in Starman Jones, we are introduced to the concept of the cruel and unjust society. In Heinleins juvenile novels, they are allowed to exist, but in the later adult novels, they are resisted and overthrown. In Starman Jones, we encounter a society of intelligent but violent and carnivorous horse-like quadrupeds who capture and imprison the exploration team sent down to the planet. In this society, the old and sick are not cared for by their family. Instead, they are brought before the tribal chief where they are judged and put to death rather than allowing them to become a burden.

Although Starman Jones was written almost 60 years ago, unfortunately the quadruped culture is not so different from what modern American society has become, in which old people are considered useless and of no value. Contrast our culture with that with China, where the old people are valued for their experience and wisdom.

Getting back to the present book, in addition to the several points Dark Genius discusses, such as slavery, that make this a more adult novel, there are a number of other themes that are more mature, some of which became standard Heinlein fare in later adult works. These include the pervasive corruption of government officials, the odiousness of most governments in general, and their virtually ubiquitous abuse of power. Heinlein feels that such governments richly deserve to be violently overthrown and destroyed down to their very foundations.

Then there is the self-imposed, almost ritual poverty of Baslim, the beggar; the over-regimentation, authoritarianism, and bloodthirsty cruelty of the dominant society; the importance of education and knowledge as power; the moral and ethical obligation of duty and of an unfree citizen to overthrow unjust authority; and many others.

Another interesting idea is the female as the aggressor in initiating a romantic relationship, which Thorby encounters for the first time in the Sisu trading ship--which is actually how things normally work in both primate and human society. :-) And in Heinleins books, the female is often the more intelligent and educated of the two partners, as in his story Gulf, Mr. and Mrs. Stone in The Rolling Stones, and in the case of Valentine Michael Smiths parents in Stranger in a Strange Land.
Another way to think about the book is that it is basically a Heinleinian, Sci-Fi version of the rags to riches tale, as you watch Thorbys rise from a poor, ignorant, beggar boy to one of the richest and most powerful men on earth. Overall I think Citizen of the Galaxy counts as one of Heinleins best novels, whether juvenile or adult.

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