



Science-Fiction Fanzine

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### The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

כנס "עולמות 2007" יערך בחול המועד פסח, 3-5 באפריל במדיטק שבחולון. <http://www.olamot.org>

#### הוג מדע בדיוני ברחובות – SFIR - Rehovot Science Fiction Club

ימי א' בשעה 20:00 בפקולטה לחקלאות ברחובות, חדר 2, בבניין ליד הבריכה. הפעילויות ללא תשלום.  
18.3: הקרנת הסרט G.O.R.A.

25.3: הקרנת הסרט **צהוב הזקן (Yellowbeard)**.

**תא אנימה** - ימי ג' בשעה 20:00 (אותו מקום)

20.3: הקרנת הסרט **הרוח במעטפת: תום** (2004). כתב וביים: ממור אושי.

מידע נוסף ניתן לקבל באתר התא (<http://sfir.tk/>) או בדוא"ל [sfir42@yahoo.com](mailto:sfir42@yahoo.com).

More Society information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

### Short Book Reviews by Aharon Sheer

**Red Thunder** by John Varley (2003), 411 pages.

This was one of the most enjoyable sf books I've read in a long time. Four young people, aged 19 and 20, and one older guy age 36, build a spaceship all by themselves, for only a little over a million dollars, and fly it to Mars. (Shades of **Rocket Ship Galileo** by Robert Heinlein (1947), in which three teenage boys join with a scientist to build a rocket that will take them to the moon.) The heroes are fascinating and unexpected. They are all residents of Old Florida – the kind of people whose families have lived in Florida for generations, from long before all the rich New Yorkers began moving down to retire there. The story takes place a few years in the future.

So who are these characters? The teller of the story, Manny Garcia, lost his Cuban father when he was small – killed in some kind of a drug deal. Manny's Italian mother runs a small hotel and Manny tries to help keep the hotel running. His best friend Dak was abandoned by his white mother when small, and raised by his black father, a fine mechanic who fixes cars and trucks. (Manny is a bit jealous of Dak because Dak has a close relationship with his father.) Alicia is Dak's girlfriend. She has no parents as far as anyone knows. Kelly's white parents are divorced, but her father owns a very successful Mercedes auto dealership, has a new Miss Iowa wife, has custody of his daughter and tries to run her life every minute. Kelly is always trying to rebel against her selfish and demanding father, but at the same time he has taught her how to run a business, and she knows how to do so, and has really good financial sense.

All four of these young people are hard-working, smart, and honest. Manny and Dak have dreamed from early on of becoming astronauts. They live in Daytona, Florida, within sight of Cape Canaveral, and watch the modernized NASA shuttles taking off daily flying up to the space station. Both Manny and Dak graduated from a typical Old Florida high school, in the top 5% of their school class. They learned everything the

school had to teach them. But when they take the Scholastic Achievement Tests, they discover that they know nothing. Their scores are so low that no college will take them. The alternative is to get a degree via the internet -- and even getting such a degree means studying hard and learning a lot of things (mathematics, for example) which their high school never even tried to teach them.

And then they have a fantastic piece of luck. Riding on the beach in Dak's fancy self-built truck one night they almost run over a drunk sleeping on the sand. A check of his wallet shows that he is Travis Broussard, an ex-astronaut, with lots of money in his pocket. Dak and Alicia and Manny take Travis home. They don't touch Travis's money. It turns out that Travis lives in the bayous -- Old Florida country with lots of wildlife and water, where his strange cousin Jubal takes drunken Travis in by throwing him into a wheelbarrow and wheeling him into the house.

Dak and his friends go back to the bayou the next day to see how Travis is, and gradually learn that Travis was kicked out of being a top-notch space shuttle pilot because he has become an alcoholic. They learn that Travis's crazy cousin Jubal is a brain-damaged genius. Jubal's preacher father didn't allow his children to go to school, just reading the Bible should be enough. Jubal's father hit Jubal in the head with a heavy nail-studded board when he discovered that Jubal had a biology textbook that taught evolution. Travis -- who gave Jubal the book -- feels responsible for what happened and years later took crazy Jubal into his house to care for him. However, Jubal knows and understands, from books and reading on the internet, mathematics, physics, chemistry. Travis says that Jubal is Newton and Einstein wrapped up in one person. Travis has built Jubal a lab, and Jubal putters around inventing things just for fun. Travis figures out how Jubal's inventions might be useful, patents them, sells the ideas, and makes lots of money. Basically Travis and Jubal are rich because of Jubal's inventions and Travis's business sense.

Let me tell you, all of these characters are funny. They make jokes and they have fun. The young people become Travis's only friends. He's driven away all of his old friends by his drunkenness, including his ex-wife and two daughters. Well, Jubal has a new invention: something which Jubal succeeded in making with one of these devices that he just put together. The device, called a Squeezer by Jubal, creates balls the size of tennis balls whose surface exists in a sixth dimension. Thus they are indestructible by anything in our world. Jubal can control them, and by doing so properly, he can create unlimited energy. The device could power a spaceship which could accelerate at 1 G forever. Such a spaceship could fly directly to Mars in four days.

On the other hand, such a device could make a tremendous weapon. Travis, and his unwitting young friends, are now the only people in the world who know about this device. And Travis doesn't want any government in the world to take over Jubal's device.

Purely by coincidence, the Chinese have send a manned spaceship in the direction of planet Mars. NASA has done the same, in competition, but the Chinese are going to get there first. Jubal doesn't want the Chinese to get to Mars before America. He's patriotic. Not only that, Jubal has calculated that the new propulsion system of NASA's spaceship is going to fail before it can get to Mars. And just by coincidence, Travis's ex-wife, who is an astronaut, is on that NASA ship. So Travis enlists the help of Manny, Dak, Kelly, Alicia, and Jubal (and all of Jubal's family, who can keep a secret -- that's

how people are in Old Florida), to build a spaceship SECRETLY, for a million dollars (half of it Jubal and Travis's money, half of it Kelly's). Travis wants to fly to Mars, not only to prove that he's still a great astronaut pilot (he is), but also to rescue his ex-wife. And Manny and Dak want to go to space. And their girl friends couldn't care less about space, but they're ready to help their men (that's the way women are in Old Florida). And so they build their spaceship in a few months, and go to Mars.

The story tells us in great detail about how to build a spaceship when you have unlimited power to drive it. You can make the ship big and heavy. Space is an extremely rugged and difficult environment for man to go into, very dangerous. They have to build that spaceship with lots of fail-safe systems, and back-up systems. If something fails when you are in space, you'd better have the needed spare parts with you. One of the problems is spacesuits. You can't just walk into a store and buy a working spacesuit. If you want to buy one, the suit alone might cost a million dollars. And they need five suits. What's the point of going to Mars if you can't walk on the surface? How else will they be able to do Extra-Vehicular Activity in space to rescue Travis's wife? Travis' solution is to buy used spacesuits from the Russians. He still has friends among the Russian astronauts, who drink a lot, and have high respect for a man like Travis who can handle an emergency and land a spaceship safely, even though he is stinking drunk. So the Russians sell him surplus suits for hardly \$10,000 each.

We also get a detailed description of surface conditions on Mars. The Chinese get there second, but their astronauts all have Ph.D.s and are on Mars for scientific study. Poor Dak and Manny couldn't even get accepted to college after graduating from an Old Florida high school in the top 5% of their class. Makes them feel pretty inferior, what can they do on Mars now that they got there first?

John Varley has written a great Heinlein juvenile, with a happy ending. I laughed and I enjoyed it tremendously.

***Have Space Suit – Will Travel* by Robert Heinlein (1958), 175 pages.**

This is a Heinlein juvenile (what they would call "young adult" nowadays). It's intended to entertain and teach a teenage boy reader about science and about life. It does that well, and it's fascinating and exciting reading as well.

Robert Heinlein (1907-1988) may be the "all-time most important writer of GENRE SF, though not its finest sf writer in strictly literary terms; his pre-eminence from 1940 to 1960 was both earned and unassailable. For half a century he was the father -- loved, resisted, emulated -- of the dominant US form of the genre." [Quoted from the Grolier Science Fiction Encyclopedia.] This book is not in modern depressing "how horrible the world is" sf style. And it's filled with ideas that will make its readers think.

What's surprising about this book is that it's like a parallel history. It seems to take place in 1958, the year that it was published, but it has one really crucial difference from life in 1958: They have space travel. There are several satellite stations (what we call today "space stations"). There are colonies on the moon, as well as several research stations there. They have traveled around Venus, and around Mars.

With this major difference, how do I know it's taking place in 1958? Heinlein doesn't say so. But his hero Kip is a teenage high school student who works after school in a drug store as a "soda jerk". That means he serves customers at the drug store's "soda fountain", making malted milks and sundaes and chocolate cokes. Why did they call

such boys “soda jerks”? Because the boy would put Coca Cola concentrate or other tasty stuff in a glass. And then he would jerk down the handle of the soda water dispenser, which would then fill the glass with soda, thus making the customer a chocolate coke, or a cherry coke, or a root beer, or a chocolate float (with ice cream in it), or whatever the customer had ordered. You can’t get drinks like that anymore! Do they still have soda fountains in the U.S.? Do they still have soda jerks? A “choc malt” (chocolate malted milk shake) in this book cost 35 cents. (Nowadays you can’t buy a candy bar for that price.)

Once he finishes high school, Kip wants to go to a good college. Tuition will cost him \$500 for the first semester, but he doesn’t have that much money. (Nowadays tuition is more likely to be over \$10,000 for one semester.)

Other clues that this is 1958: No computers. Not even pocket calculators. Kip uses a slide rule (which he calls a “slipstick”). That’s what all scientists and engineers used in 1958. No cellular telephones.

As far as I can tell, besides space travel, there is only one thing in *Have Space Suit – Will Travel* but which was not true in 1958: The United Nations has been replaced by the Federated Free Nations, which meets in New York in place of the U.N. My guess is that Heinlein was bothered by the fact that the majority of the countries in the U.N. are brutal dictatorships, and felt that a Federation of Free Nations would make more sense.

In this book you could buy tourist excursions to space, if you had enough money. (Sound familiar?) But working as a soda jerk, Kip didn’t have that kind of money.

So where did teenage hero Kip’s space suit come from? A soap company had a slogan contest. First prize: a trip to the moon. (Such slogan contests were common in those days. In the early 1950s my mother entered such a contest and won a trip to Mexico for my parents.) Kip is dying to go to the moon, so he submits hundreds of slogans, each of which requires buying a bar of soap and sending in the soap bar wrapper with the slogan. Kip persuades as many drug store customers as possible to buy soap bars, and give him the wrappers. Many do it to help him out.

But Kip doesn’t get the first prize, he gets one of the many second prizes: a used space suit! This is a genuine space suit that was used on one of the satellite stations. And it’s functional. In fact, after Kip’s been photographed for the newspapers and TV with his prize, the manufacturer offers to buy the space suit back from him for \$500, just what he needs for a semester of college. Hmm – what would a used NASA space suit be worth today? But he turns the offer down. He wants to study that suit.

True it didn’t come fully equipped. Kip has to add oxy-helium air tanks, fill up the water, make sure the radio is working and has fresh batteries, and that it’s airtight. He adds a first-aid kit, which goes in the helmet. Heinlein tells his readers in great detail about this space suit. Remember this was before the first unmanned U.S. satellite orbit of the Earth. (The Russians did the first unmanned Earth orbit in 1957). There were no space suits in our 1958. But they did have deep-sea diving suits, and it was possible to extrapolate to what must be needed for a space suit. Heinlein’s readers must have been fascinated to learn all the details of how a space suit will work, and Heinlein gives such details to them page after page.

Kip does a good job of making his space suit functional, and one evening climbs in it, seals it up, and goes for a walk. Now Kip and his family live in a small rural town (Centerville). However, Kip’s father is some kind of a scientist (Kip really doesn’t

understand what kind) and one might expect them to live near a big university in an academic community. Kip's father explains their choice to live in a small town:

"...a tough prep school back east can drill you so that you can enter Stanford, or Yale, or any of the best – but you can pick up false standards, too – nutty ideas about money and social position and the right tailor. It took me years to get rid of ones I acquired that way. Your mother and I did not pick a small town for your boyhood unpurposefully. So you'll stay in Centerville High." [p. 9]

But Centerville High didn't offer very demanding courses. Those that it offered were watered down. The only science course was a general science course on the level of newspaper articles.

His father provided him with serious textbooks for self-study. As Kip explains:

"Algebra and plane geometry were all the math our school offered; I went ahead on my own with advanced algebra and solid geometry and trigonometry ...

"...But when you read about chemistry and physics you want to do it, too.... I had a chem lab and a darkroom and an electronics bench, and for a while, a ham station....

"When I took the College Boards my senior year I passed them." [p. 10]

Living in a rural area, there are open fields just behind Kip's house. Kip walks in his sealed functioning space suit, practicing calling messages on the suit radio which is set for space frequencies. And somebody answers him! A flying saucer lands in response to his call! They pick Kip up and kidnap him.

Flying saucers? It turns out that there are aliens living in camouflaged bases on the Moon that the Earth people know nothing about. The aliens take Kip to the Moon, where he tries to run away from them, and has a chance to walk around the surface of the airless moon in his functioning space suit, getting acquainted with conditions on the Moon. We get a detailed speculation of what it's like to walk on the Moon in a space suit, written before any human had walked on the Moon.

Later on, the aliens take Kip to Pluto, where they also have a secret base. And on Pluto he also gets to walk outside in his space suit.

But Pluto was a lot rougher environment for his space suit than the Moon. Pluto was at its closest approach to the Sun – inside the orbit of Neptune. Where he is on Pluto, it's summer, "... if 'summer' is the word for warm enough to melt air." [p. 79] So where Kip is, Pluto has an atmosphere. On the Moon, if your feet are insulated, there's nothing to drain heat from your space suit. No air. In fact the biggest problem on the Moon is cooling the insulated space suit whose internal air heats up from physical activity. But on Pluto there are winds at temperatures not far above the temperature of frozen air, which Kip's space suit is not well-enough insulated to withstand.

And everything is described in engineering detail.

The story moves right along, keeps up interest all the way, but does not end in a typical Heinlein fashion. Kip's father has been telling him all along: If you want to do something badly enough, you will have to find a way to do it yourself. Nobody is going to do it for you. But in this case, things end rather differently. A good read, even with the rather unexpected ending.

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