A Note on

Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Home Planet: The "Other" in Robert Heinlein's Juvenile Science Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Heinlein's Young Adult (YA) stories—commonly referred to as his "juveniles"—and argues that Heinlein's "Others" are not defined by race, gender, or planet of origin but by their inability to understand and deal with the changes that inter-planetary travel will bring. (CWS)

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, gender, home planet, race, Robert A. Heinlein, the "Other"

Robert A. Heinlein's science-fiction short stories and novels have elicited more than their share of knee-jerk criticism from critics who either fail to read the works carefully or are unable to separate the author from the characters in the novel. Those who call Heinlein a fascist for *Starship Troopers,* such as M. Keith Booker, Ann-Marie Thomas, and Jeffrey Cass, or a promoter of free love and drugs for *Stranger in a Strange Land*, such as *New York Times* reviewer, Orville Prescott are certainly guilty of confusing the author with the novel.[1] Could the same man have written both? Heinlein has suffered even worse misreading at the hands of most of those who comment on his portrayal of women in his novels, especially in the juveniles. However, race, ethnicity, and planet of origin in Heinlein's juveniles have escaped critical notice.

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Heinlein published the 12 juveniles, from *Rocket Ship Galileo* to *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, between 1947 and 1958. *Starship Troopers*, rejected for the juvenile series by Scribner's, was published in 1959 and won science fiction's Hugo Award that year. *Podkayne of Mars*, which might have appeared as a juvenile had Heinlein continued with Scribner's, was published in 1963. The juveniles, with the possible exception of *Podkayne*, appeared at a very conservative time in American cultural history and at a very conservative period in the publishing history of science fiction. Rock and roll and the election of John F. Kennedy, among other things, were beginning to change the cultural landscape in the early 1960s, and New Age science fiction would soon change the science-fiction landscape. But none of these currents was moving strongly when Heinlein wrote the juveniles proper and *Starship Troopers*—or even *Podkayne*. So, why should critics look for anything but the "same old same old" from a science-fiction writer who had been publishing since 1939 and was considered one of the "good old boys"?

Why, indeed. Because Heinlein was a serious writer and, by his own admission, never more serious than in his juvenile fiction.

> I have held to that rule [that is, not writing down to juvenile readers] and my books for boys differ only slightly from my books for adults—the books for boys are somewhat harder to read because younger readers relish tough ideas they have to chew on and don't mind big words—and the boys' books are slightly limited by taboos and conventions imposed by their elders (Fuller 109).

Heinlein was not just talking about scientific ideas here, although, as I have written elsewhere, he was very concerned about presenting correct information, and often criticized comic book or cartoon science fiction ("'Space Opera' vs. 'The Right Stuff'") while talking about cultural

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ideas and ideals. His juvenile novels are full of cultural references to art and artists, history, music, philosophy and philosophers; they also include considerations of such issues as ideals worth dying for, the nature of and reasons for various social organizations, the rationale(s) behind political structures, and the qualities of successful human beings.

Heinlein was also a serious writer in that he saw science fiction as a positive influence, especially on young readers.

> I claim one positive triumph for science fiction, totally beyond the scope of so-called main-stream fiction. It has prepared the youth of our time for the coming age of space. Interplanetary travel is no shock to youngsters, no matter how unsettling it may be to calcified adults. Our children have been playing at being space cadets and at controlling rocket ships for some time now. Where did they get this healthy orientation? From science fiction and nowhere else. Science fiction can perform similar service to the race in many other fields (Heinlein, “Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults and Virtues,” 60).

One can only wonder what “other fields” Heinlein had in mind, although I would argue that, because his juvenile science fiction is so replete with cultural and historic references, he was also attempting to to broaden the minds of his young readers by showing them that the future was a product of and might be comprehended by examining the past and the present.

The “problem” of women in Heinlein’s juveniles, however, has elicited the most commentaries, both positive and negative. Marietta Frank has done an admirable job of summarizing the debate and illustrating the positive and challenging female role models in the series. Although I will not repeat her conclusions here, I will state for the record that beginning with a strong mother in *Rocket Ship Galileo* who argues with her husband that their

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son should be allowed to go into space, Heinlein presents a long line of strong and capable women, including all of the "pioneer mothers" on Ganymede in *Farmer in the Sky*, a doctor and an engineer in *The Rolling Stones*, a female chess champion in *Starman Jones*, a teenager who has divorced her parents in *The Star Beast*, women survivalists who prove more capable than men in *Time for the Stars*, an advanced mathematician in *Citizen of the Galaxy*, the Mother Thing and Peewee in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, and women starship pilots in *Starship Troopers*. In addition, there are matriarchal/matrilineal societies in *Space Cadet*, *The Star Beast*, and *Citizen of the Galaxy*. And if some of the capable women seem to "hide their light under a bushel," as does chess champion Ellie when she allows Max to teach her the three-dimensional chess she already knows or theoretical mathematician Loeen when she allows Thorby to give her unneeded help with mathematics, it is because, as Ellie says to Max, "has it ever occurred to you, the world being what it is, that women sometimes prefer to appear not too bright?" (*Starman Jones* 211). Hazel Meade comments, when her son, Roger, asks why she didn't stick with her career as an engineer, "I saw three big, hairy, male men promoted over my head and not one of them could do a partial integration without a pencil. Presently I figured out that the Atomic Energy Commission had a bias on the subject of women" (*Rolling Stones* 22).

Although less conspicuously, race, ethnicity, and home planet are also stirred into the mix in the juveniles. *Space Cadet* and *Starship Troopers* have, for the most part, the academy as their setting, with the students coming from various planets. In *Rocket Ship Galileo*, Morrie is Jewish: his situation is made obvious by references to Nazi Aryanism and the Holocaust. English-Irish national frictions come up in *Farmer in the Sky* in phrases that are perceived as national, racial or ethnic slurs, such as "Limey," "Skin Head," and "Fog-Eater" (the latter used by a Heinlein character to refer to Venerians, a planet in permanent clouds or fog); these find their way to and are discussed in *Farmer in the Sky*, *Between Planets*, and *Citizen of the*

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Galaxy. Moreover, various contemporary ethnic groups—Hispanics, Africans, African-Americans, Asians, Asian-Americans—are present in many of the novels in the series. Also, as with the women in the juveniles, these characters from planets other than the Earth or representatives of races other than White, middle-class Americans are also presented as positive role models. The main character in *Starship Troopers*, for example, Johnnie Rico, is a Filipino, while his Third Lieutenant, Jimmie Bearpaw, is Native American.

Aliens, in the juvenile series, are a far cry from the bug-eyed monsters that graced the covers of the pulp magazines or movie theater posters at the time. In Heinlein's science fiction, they do not want to invade the Earth, or kill the men, and take away the women. Still, it must be noted that some of Heinlein's aliens are violent, and do kill Earth people in *Red Planet*, *Space Cadet*, *Starman Jones*, *Tunnel in the Sky*, and *Time for the Stars,* but that only happens when the Earth people invade their territories and threaten them or commit violence against them. The aliens in *The Star Beast,* for example, threaten the Earth with destruction in case they do not get their kidnapped princess back. The somewhat stereotypical aliens in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* do want to take over the Earth, but that plot is something of a red herring to get Kip and Peewee to the trial that they, as representatives of the human race, must face in The Court of the Three Galaxies. The aliens in *Starship Troopers*, who also want to conquer the Earth and its Federation of Planets, are presented not only as an alien race against which we (the humans) must fight; they also provide both an occasion for a discussion of why we should fight, and a comparison of the hive mind of the aliens to the individualistic culture of the humans.

Race, gender, ethnicity, alien-ness, and home planet are almost never determiners of "otherness" in Heinlein's juvenile series—or in any of his fiction, for that matter. He does make Nazis the villains and, therefore, "the other" in *Rocket Ship Galileo*, perhaps understandably, as this short story was published in 1947. Headmaster Howe, in *Red Planet*,

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and the Wormfaces, in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, are stock antagonists and, to some extent, a diversion from the real themes of those books. The first serious threats to Earth, other than humans themselves, are the Bugs of *Starship Troopers* (planned as the 13th novel of the series), but even the Bug War is but a pretext on which Heinlein builds his social and political philosophy. In addition, there are corporate interests and political structures opposed to the freedom of Mars and Venus in *Red Planet* and *Between Planets*, and there are forces like population pressures in *Tunnel in the Sky* and *Time for the Stars* forcing the Earth people to seek out new planets to migrate to. Much in the manner of the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, released in 1951, which presents the same cultural milieu as that of Heinlein's juveniles, the real "other" is us—mostly White, middle class, mostly male; us, who stand in the way of any progress the main characters are trying to make; us, who, to some extent, are opposed to the values the main characters promote.

There are three main groups of "Others." The first group includes the quitters. Two young men drop out of the Patrol Academy in *Space Cadet*. One is Girard Burke, a young man cynical about the ideals on which the Patrol was founded, critical of the Patrol's sense of honor, and confident that he can make it without graduating as a Patrol officer—especially as his father owns a space ship company. Burke's disregard of the rules, and insensitivity to native Venerian cultures gets him in trouble on Venus, and he has to be rescued by the former cadets on whom he looked down. Bill Arensa also drops out, but he does so because he does not want to shoulder the responsibility that goes with being a Patrol officer, responsibility that could include dropping a bomb on any city or country that started a war. In *Farmer in the Sky*, after a severe quake on Ganymede, a moon of Jupiter that the Earth people are trying to terraform, a number of people quit and elect to go back to the Earth. The main characters initially think of doing the same, but when they see the names of those wishing to leave on the list, they decide to stay, partly because, as Bill Lermer says to his father, "I don't *like* being

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classed with these lugs" (183). And in *Time for the Stars*, when all of the twins and triplets find out that they have been tested to take part in a long-range space flight, one set of twins gets up and walks out, jeered at by many who choose to remain and participate in the experiment.

The second group is made up of the ignorant, lavishly portrayed by Heinlein. In *Farmer in the Sky*, to the main character's amusement, there is a woman who cannot understand the difference between an interplanetary ship and the vessel that will take them up to it. A woman passenger in *Between Planets* takes one look at the Venerian, "Sir Isaac Newton," and demands, screaming, that she and her family be moved to another compartment even though she must have seen Venerians before, at least in pictures. In *Citizen of the Galaxy*, Thorby's grandparents tell him he is wrong in thinking that slavery exists in the Sargonese System—even though Thorby was a slave there; his grandfather is, ironically, a history professor. Rod Walker's aunt, another ignoramus, in *Tunnel in the Sky*, referring to the gates that allow instantaneous travel from one planet to another, says that "if the Almighty had intended for us to use those gate things instead of rocket ships, He would have put His own holes in the sky" (248). In *The Star Beast*, the Secretary for Spatial Affairs, a political appointee, is essentially incompetent, and all the real work has to be done by the Permanent Under Secretary for Spatial Affairs. Throughout the series, Heinlein contrasts real science with popular misconceptions and, by implication, good science fiction with its manifestations, often of inferior quality, in cartoons or comic books.

The last group is that of the obstructionists, mockers, and non-believers. In *The Star Beast*, "T. Omar Esklund, Doctor of Philosophy" appears in court to demand that the alien known as Lummox be destroyed in the name of the "Keep Earth Human League" (62-63). When Tom and Pat Bartlett talk with their extended family about one of them going into space in *Time for the Stars*, their brother-in-law, Frank, suggests that their telepathy is a

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"freak talent," therefore he would forbid them from going into space if he were their father, and adds that he would be glad to give them jobs in his bakery (40). Simes, an astrogator in *Starman Jones*, is both jealous of and doubtful about Max Jones's ability to remember perfectly everything he has read and tries to hinder Max's career. Saunders, a colonist in *Farmer in the Sky*, spends all his time complaining about how difficult it will be to terraform Ganymede and then goes back to Earth. Some of the students from Teller University, in *Tunnel in the Sky*, do not want to do their share of work when they, along with students from several other schools, are stranded on a planet far from Earth. But perhaps the most interesting of these negative characters is "Ace" Quiggle, the juvenile delinquent and high-school dropout in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*. He makes fun of Kip after Kip has won a space suit, calling him "Commander Comet" and suggesting that he saves universes. In fact, in a way, Kip does save the Earth by the end of the novel. When Mr. Charton, the owner of the drug store in which Kip works as a soda jerk, says that Kip does not need to serve "Ace" Quiggle anymore, Kip comments, "Oh, I don't mind. He's harmless." To which Mr. Charton replies, "I wonder how harmless such people are? To what extent civilization is retarded by the laughing jackasses, the empty-minded belittlers?" (39).

Heinlein does not tolerate fools or ignorance lightly; both come in for criticism and ridicule in the juvenile novels. As H. Bruce Franklin has argued, the juveniles

> consist of extended tests of endurance, loyalty, courage, intelligence, integrity, and fortitude. They dramatize a personal and pervasive social Darwinism displaying how and why "fit" types survive while the "unfit"—the skulkers, the weaklings, the whiners, the lazy, the self-centered, the vicious—are eliminated. (76-77)

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I would add preparedness to Franklin's list of positive traits. In *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, Kip totally reconditions the decommissioned space suit he has won in a contest so that the suit could, again, operate in space—even though he plans to sell it at the end of the summer to help him pay for college. But during what he thinks is his last walk in the space suit, he is kidnapped by aliens, is taken to the Moon and to Pluto, travels beyond the galaxy, and has to defend Earth before an alien tribunal, The Court of the Three Galaxies, to save our planet from destruction. When he gets back and tells an eminent scientist that he had "an awful lot of luck," he gets the following lecture: "'Luck' is a question-begging word," he answered. ". . . 'good luck' follows careful preparation; 'bad luck' comes from sloppiness" (250). Kip, he says, has been well prepared.

Heinlein's "we," then, "The Us," are the ones who—whatever our gender, ethnicity, race, or home planet—are prepared for the future, for whatever it brings. We will not scream at Venerian dragons, quit the Patrol Academy, or tolerate the "Ace" Quiggles, and we will try not to allow them to retard our civilization. Heinlein's "Them," "The Others," are not defined by gender, ethnicity, race, or home planet either, but by their attitudes, their ignorance, their obstructionism, their mocking, and their non-belief. According to Heinlein, they are all around us, on the bus, on the airplane, or in the crowd—although not among those reading this journal.

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Note

[1] Prescott in his review, in addition to making a few other questionable statements, calls *Stranger in an Strange Land* "a disastrous mishmash of science fiction, laborious humor,

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dreary social satire and cheap eroticism" and says that Heinlein "has failed to write an even passably mediocre novel" (19).

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