

Robert Anson Heinlein

1907 - 1988

"The obituaries called Heinlein 'the most influential SF writer since H.G. Wells,' and that was accurate enough. He pioneered the techniques of modern sf writing, the matter-of-fact acceptance of change and the economical ways of evoking that change in his stories, and he pioneered new fields in which that sf could present itself: the slick magazines, books, the juveniles, film, and finally the bestseller. Like Moses he led sf into the promised land . . . perhaps he was the writer Wells might have been if he had been born in Butler, Missouri, in 1907. Certainly it is as impossible to imagine contemporary sf existing as it is without Heinlein as without Wells."

James Gunn, Ph.D. "Robert A. Heinlein: In Memoriam"
LOCUS magazine, July 1988, p. 42

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN came late to writing: his first story was sold at age 32, more than a decade after most writers start their writing careers. Writing was Heinlein's *third* career, after the Navy and California politics — but it was the last, and it was the most important.

Heinlein was born on July 7, 1907, in Butler, Missouri. A few months after he was born, his family moved from Butler to Kansas City, where he was to grow up as the family grew, by 1920, to seven children. He was fascinated by astronomy and earned money as a teenager, lecturing on astronomical subjects. His other great fascination was with the family's long military tradition. A Heinlein had served in every war since the family emigrated from Bavaria to the U.S. in 1754. As a teenager he joined both his high school R.O.T.C. and the Missouri National Guard. He discovered science fiction at the age of 16.

Heinlein entered the U.S. Naval Academy in June 1925 and graduated in 1929. He was assigned to the most science-fictional environment on earth at the time: fire-control officer on the world's first purpose-built aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. *Lexington*. He settled into his first choice of career as a naval officer, receiving his promotion from Ensign to Lieutenant, j.g. in mid-1932. *Lexington* was headquartered in San Pedro, California, and he had just married a California girl, a minor actress who was then working for the Music Department of Columbia Pictures, Leslyn MacDonald.

Following his tour on the *Lexington*, in mid-1932 Heinlein was assigned to the destroyer U.S.S. *Roper*. The constant rolling of the destroyer caused him to be seasick much of the time, and he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis. When he finally recovered, he was retired (August 1934), medically unfit for service — "totally and permanently disabled." His first choice of careers was a washout.

He returned to California and started classes at U.C.L.A. to work toward a doctorate in physics, but left college to take up politics. The Socialist writer Upton Sinclair had been asked to run as the Democratic candidate for governor, to try a radical program for handling the effects of the Great Depression on California, when Depression Relief threatened to bankrupt the state. Sinclair was defeated in 1934, but Heinlein continued to work with his Democratic program, EPIC — "End Poverty in California." In 1938, he ran for the 59th Assembly District seat (Hollywood) and lost to the Republican incumbent.

The failed campaign was a pivotal event of Heinlein's adult life. His efforts after the campaign to get the California Democratic Party back on track were unsuccessful, and he decided to get out of politics. In the fall of 1938, he was broke, with a wife and a mortgage to support. Casting around for some way to

support himself, he hit on what would become his third — and final — career.

Heinlein has said that he read all the science fiction he could lay hands on from the age of 16. The cosmic romances of Olaf Stapledon affected him particularly. He read the first series of Tom Swift books, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells. He had read the pulp magazines where most science fiction appeared, and noticed that the pulp science fiction field was expanding. Several magazines were running contests to recruit new writers. Over a four-day period in early April 1939, Heinlein wrote the story "*Life-Line*" and thought it might be good enough for the top market of the day. He sent it to John W. Campbell, Jr., at ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION. Campbell was at that time just at the start of his own career as the most influential editor in the field. He recognized in the story just what he wanted to do with science fiction: expand the permissible story formulas and treat serious issues.

By the time "*Life-Line*" appeared in the August 1939 issue of *Astounding*, Heinlein had sent half a dozen more stories to Campbell, which were rejected (and ultimately sold to lesser markets)—but Campbell did buy another story, "*Misfit*," and in quick succession published a pivotal series of stories — "*Requiem*," "*If This Goes On —*," "*The Roads Must Roll*," "*Coventry*," and a story that predicted the atomic weaponry and explored the dynamics of the Cold War (in 1940!), "*Blowups Happen*."

By February 1940, Heinlein had been able to retire the mortgage on his Laurel Canyon home. He would continue to write science fiction only as the spirit moved him. He set an "up or out" policy for himself: if ever he began to slip from top place in reader ratings or in payment rates or if he began to collect rejections, he would get out then, leave at the top.

Eventually (mid-1941) Campbell did reject a Fortean story Heinlein considered a fairly important work. Heinlein took it as a sign and quietly retired, fiddling with photography and masonry, his favorite hobbies. He found, however, that he could not stay retired. He had somehow acquired a permanent itch for writing and allowed himself to be talked back into it. Campbell accepted a revised version of the rejected story, published later under Heinlein's original working title of "*Goldfish Bowl*."

Heinlein had been following the war news from Europe with increasing unease. He finished *BEYOND THIS HORIZON* on December 6, 1941. The next day, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the U.S. was in the war.

Heinlein immediately applied for active duty, but was rejected for medical reasons — it was the policy of the Navy medical department not to have recovered tuberculosis victims

working side-by-side with seamen, because they could become carriers. However, a Navy buddy, Albert Scoles, was in charge of the Materials Laboratory at the Naval Air Experimental Station in Philadelphia, and he wanted to take on Heinlein as a civilian engineer.

He and wife found a house in Lansdowne, a suburb of Philadelphia, and Heinlein went to work on what he described as “the necessary tedium of aviation engineering.” Although he was trained as a “mechanical engineer specializing in linkages,” his experience with aircraft on the U.S.S. *Lexington* targeted him toward the Navy's aircraft program.

One of the more interesting aspects of his work was two letters written in the closing weeks of the war, formally urging the Navy to take up space exploration. One was killed at the Materials Laboratory. The other went up the naval hierarchy, finally reaching the level of Truman's cabinet. When the sponsoring officer was asked if these spaceships might be launched from the surface of a seagoing vessel, the proposal was officially turned down, and so the Air Force would later become the official “owner” of space exploration.

Some time in 1945, Heinlein had been approached by “a Philadelphia publisher” to do a “boy's book.” The Philadelphia publisher turned down *YOUNG ATOMIC ENGINEERS: Atomic rockets and rogue Nazis on the moon were too “out there”* for his line. Heinlein's new agent, Lurton Blassingame, took the manuscript to Scribner's, where the editor for the juvenile division recommended they buy it. Heinlein's book was scheduled for release in 1947 under the title *ROCKET SHIP GALILEO*.

All the writing of this period (1945-1947) was produced under difficult and trying circumstances for Heinlein, because his personal life was deteriorating. His fifteen-year long marriage had disintegrated. In 1947 he moved out while Leslyn applied for a divorce. After a year of traveling, he felt the need to make a break with his past — and to avoid fall-out from the major atomic targets on the coasts. As soon as he finished working in Hollywood (on a “spec” screenplay), he met Ginny Gerstenfeld, a Wave lieutenant he had worked with during the War, in Colorado Springs, and they were married, little more than a year after his divorce from Leslyn.

As 1948 ran down and Heinlein started writing *RED PLANET*, his third juvenile for Scribners, John Campbell received a fan letter with an intriguing “gimmick”: it commented on the contents of an issue of *ASTOUNDING* that would not appear for a year yet, in November 1949. Heinlein and Campbell cooked up a scheme to make this fictitious issue come true, and Heinlein agreed to write a story to the title the fan had mentioned for the new Heinlein serial, “*Gulf*.”

Robert and Ginny brainstormed the problem one evening in the fall of 1948. Ginny was already an integral element of Heinlein's professional life, having organized and vetted his working files into the “opus system” Heinlein described for L. Sprague de Camp's 1949 *THE SCIENCE FICTION HANDBOOK*. On this occasion, one of the ideas she threw out was a twist on Kipling's Mowgli — a human raised by Martians. Heinlein was galvanized by the idea, but thought it would take longer to develop than he had available. They passed on to other ideas, and “*Gulf*” turned out a very short novel on the superman/next-step-in-evolution theme that was popular just then.

In the meantime, Heinlein cracked the last of the major markets he had targeted in his postwar plan. His 1948 script for *DESTINATION MOON* was purchased by George Pal and scheduled

for production in the summer of 1949. Robert was hired to do technical direction. The Heinleins duly set off for Hollywood, but the production was delayed as the script was re-written and re-written.

DESTINATION MOON is considered the first modern science fiction film. It was nominated for an Oscar in three categories (Art, Direction, Set Direction, and Special Effects) and won the Award for its Special Effects. Although Heinlein never made a great deal of money from the film, his writing career was booming. When they returned to Colorado Springs, they decided to design and build their own ultramodern home in the Broadmore district.

Among the contracts that came in while they were building was a television adaptation of his second juvenile for Scribner's, *SPACE CADET*, into the television series *TOM CORBETT, SPACE CADET*. Heinlein did no scriptwriting (or even consulting) for the series. Since that network was not carried by the local television markets, he did not even see the show until years later.

The 1950's were a vintage era for the Heinleins. Ginny had introduced Robert to figure skating. In 1952 they began traveling, with a tour of the National Parks. In 1953, they took a six-month round-the-world tour, and Robert wrote a kind of fascinating travel-diary called *TRAMP ROYALE*. The Heinleins were a gregarious and outgoing couple, entertaining houseguests, sometime for weeks at a time, between jaunts.

One consequence of his increasing fame he found flattering, if distracting: in 1952, he was invited to be a guest speaker on Edward R. Murrow's “This I Believe” program for CBS radio. He scripted a kind of credo for the post-war period.

Even with these distractions, Heinlein managed to push out two novels in most years, one for the Scribners juvenile line, the other for the adult market. And there were his own collections to assemble — particularly his Future History stories (*THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON, REVOLT IN 2100, and THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH*) — as well as one notable anthology of Fortean stories for which he wrote the introduction, *TOMORROW THE STARS*, plus short stories in the intervals between major projects.

In 1956, Heinlein was given his first Hugo, the award given by science fiction fans at the annual World Science Fiction Convention, for *DOUBLE STAR*, which had been published in 1955.

One project Heinlein continued to work on periodically was the Mowgli satire he and Virginia had come up with in 1948. On April 5, 1958, Heinlein was again working on the Mowgli story when a full-page ad appeared in the local newspaper, sponsored by the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, urging the U.S. to suspend nuclear testing unilaterally. Outraged by what they considered a major blunder in the Cold War's international brinkmanship, the Heinleins jointly prepared a responsive full-page counter-ad, whose text Heinlein preserved in *EXPANDED UNIVERSE* as “Who Are the Heirs of Patrick Henry,” and encouraged others around the country to do the same. Once attacked as ultraliberal, Heinlein found himself attacked by his colleagues in the science fiction community for excessive *conservatism*.

Following the Patrick Henry campaign, he went back to writing, but not to the Mowgli story. Instead, he wrote *STARSHIP TROOPERS*, with a strong anti-communist message, and shocked the science fiction community silly. Predictably, the reaction of critics has been one of spluttering indignation, but *STARSHIP TROOPERS* does what science fiction does best when it is at its best: it challenges the reader to re-think his basic assumptions.

Nor, despite the volume of noise, was Heinlein's reputation in science fiction fandom diminished: *STARSHIP TROOPERS* won the Hugo Award at the 1960 World Science Fiction Convention, Heinlein's second.

And then Heinlein went back to work on his Mowgli story. This time he wrote through the huge novel and finished it in spring 1960. It was published by Putnam's after being cut by a third, as *STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND* — an amazing, iconoclastic and complex satire of sex and religion, with clever name games and private jokes embedded in the story. In 1962, *STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND* received Heinlein's third Hugo Award.

Heinlein's next books were wild zigs for him, starting with a kind of offbeat, pseudo-juvenile, *PODKAYNE OF MARS*, a full-bore exploration of the sword-and-sorcery epic that was just coming back into vogue: *GLORY ROAD* with a "turn" in the last hundred pages that refreshed the possibilities of the genre. Then a "thinking the unthinkable" Cold War book, *FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD*.

By 1965, the Heinleins had outgrown the Colorado Springs house; Ginny's health problems relating to altitude sickness had gone from intermittent to chronic; and the original rationale for choosing Colorado — to be away from nuclear targets and out of the fallout drift patterns — was long gone. Both the Air Force Academy and the headquarters of North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) had been built nearby, into the base of Cheyenne Mountain, virtually in Heinlein's back yard. Colorado Springs had become the #1 nuclear target in the U.S. (Heinlein took his revenge by pounding Cheyenne Mountain flat in *THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS*. (1966)).

After some surgery and a brief scouting trip to the Seattle area, they found a wooded lot along Bonny Doon Road, in the mountains close to Santa Cruz, California, and Heinlein began the tortuous two-year process of designing and building another ultra-modern house customized to the Heinleins' lifestyle.

The first years at the Bonny Doon house were occupied by other matters than writing. A new series of collections appeared, culminating in the 1967 omnibus of the Future History stories, *THE PAST THROUGH TOMORROW*, which had been in the works since 1963. In 1967 he also won his fourth Hugo Award, for *THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS*.

In the meanwhile, sales of the Avon paperback issue of *STRANGER* suddenly took off. The book had been "discovered" by what would become the Counterculture, and Heinlein found himself elected a personal guru for people he had never met. But that was long in the past for him — Heinlein was already breaking new ground.

July 20, 1969, is probably the most important day in human history — the day men from Earth first set foot on another planet, Earth's moon. Robert Heinlein was a guest commentator (along with Arthur C. Clarke) with Walter Cronkite on this historic occasion. Although CBS apparently destroyed its own archival copy of this appearance, a videotape was preserved and is now in the Robert Heinlein Archive at Special Collections of the University Library, University of California, Santa Cruz.

In January 1970, *I WILL FEAR NO EVIL* was in the initial stages of cutting when Heinlein developed a perforated diverticulum. By the time it was discovered, seventeen days later, peritonitis had set in, and he very nearly died. All the business affairs, including getting the new book ready for publication, fell on Ginny's shoulders, with only the barest minimum of feedback from a man sometimes too weak to

manage more than a nod or a word or two in response to questions. Recuperating from major illnesses was always a full-time job for Heinlein, and this one took the better part of two years. During this period, Heinlein gave a few interviews, but it was not until 1972 that he was back to strength for writing, and he started *TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE*, the second of his books (after *STRANGER*) on the New York Library's recommended list.

He was awarded the first Grand Master Nebula Award by his colleagues in the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1975. The years of 1976 and 1977 were spent organizing blood drives, tied in with his appearance as Guest of Honor for the third time at a World Science Fiction Convention, "MidAmeriCon," in Kansas City, Missouri, over the Labor Day weekend of 1976.

At the end of 1977, exhausted by the ongoing effort of the blood drives, Robert and Ginny took a vacation to the South Pacific. Early in 1978, they were walking on a beach at Moorea, Tahiti, when he had a Transient Ischemic Attack, a brief blockage of blood to his brain that can be a precursor to a cerebral stroke. A CAT scan ruled out a brain tumor, but the flow of blood to his brain continued to decrease. Only two months into a six month regime of medication he was "dull-normal, slipping toward 'human vegetable,'" sleeping 16 hours a day and barely functional the rest of the time. A heart catheterization for angiogram revealed that his left internal carotid artery was completely blocked, too high for surgery. An experimental carotid bypass operation restored oxygen flow to his brain.

In July 1979, Heinlein was requested to give testimony in Washington D.C. before a joint session of the House Committee on Aging and the House Committee on Science and Technology, on the subject of applications of space technology for the elderly and the handicapped. It was not a subject on which he had expert knowledge but any opportunity to promote the Space program called for superhuman effort. As a NASA functionary's testimony covered the technical material in depth, on July 19, he gave a performance testimony drawing extensively on his own high-tech carotid bypass operation more than a year previously.

As soon as he was able to work, Heinlein started writing *THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST*. The advance paid by Fawcett/Columbine was a record-breaking \$500,000. 1979 was also the year Heinlein provided new material for the 1966 collection *THE WORLDS OF ROBERT A. HEINLEIN*. Altogether there was an additional 84,000 words of new material for *EXPANDED UNIVERSE*.

In 1981 Heinlein had to give up all non-writing work. *FRIDAY* appeared in 1982 and was immediately hailed as a return to the master storytelling of his adventure-writing days. But there is no sacrifice of subtlety in *FRIDAY*: it is a powerful and complex examination of prejudice on many levels.

In 1983, the Heinleins took a long-delayed trip to Antarctica, the only continent they had not yet visited. Heinlein came home and wrote *JOB: A COMEDY OF JUSTICE*, another great departure, for *JOB* is a deliberate evocation of James Branch Cabell, one of Heinlein's earliest models. The next two novels took off from the discoveries and inventions of *THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST*.

On Heinlein's 80th birthday, June 7, 1987, Putnam's published what would be his last novel, *TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET*, sending balloons and chocolates to Bonny Doon. Heinlein's health had been worsening over the years. By 1987

he needed rapid access to advanced medical facilities. He and Ginny gave up the Bonny Doon house and found a place in nearby Carmel. He was in and out of the hospital four times in his last year.

On May 8, 1988, he died peacefully in his morning nap. His

body was cremated, his ashes strewn in the Pacific from the deck of a warship. He has returned to the elements from which we all came: If we want to take his body to the stars, it will have to be in a jar of seawater. Heinlein would probably find that appropriate.

“Robert A. Heinlein, A Biographical Sketch” was written by Bill Patterson (UCSC Heinlein Scholar 2003-2005) and published in the July 1997 number of THE HEINLEIN JOURNAL. A version of this condensation appears on The Heinlein Society website (heinleinsociety.org) by permission.

HAVE YOU READ THESE BOOKS BY ROBERT HEINLEIN?

His best-known and most controversial books

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND (1961)

STARSHIP TROOPERS (1959)

THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS (1966)

The “Juveniles” -- his most enduring legacy

ROCKET SHIP GALILEO (1947)

SPACE CADET (1948)

RED PLANET (1949)

FARMER IN THE SKY (1950)

BETWEEN PLANETS (1951)

THE ROLLING STONES (1952)

STARMAN JONES (1953)

THE STAR BEAST (1954)

TUNNEL IN THE SKY (1955)

TIME FOR THE STARS (1956)

CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY (1957)

HAVE SPACE SUIT -- WILL TRAVEL (1958)

The Future History

THE PAST THROUGH TOMORROW (1967)

Comprised of *THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON* (1950)

THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH (1951)

REVOLT IN 2100 (1953) and

METHUSELAH'S CHILDREN (1941, 1958)

ORPHANS OF THE SKY (1963)

TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE (1973)

THE NOTEBOOKS OF LAZARUS LONG

and the related series: The World As Myth

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST (1980)

FRIDAY (1982)

JOB: A COMEDY OF JUSTICE (1984)

THE CAT WHO WALKS THROUGH WALLS (1985)

TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET (1987)

Story Collections

ASSIGNMENT IN ETERNITY (1949)

WALDO & MAGIC, INC. (1950)

TOMORROW, THE STARS (ed.) (1953)

THE UNPLEASANT PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG (1959)

THE MENACE FROM EARTH (1959)

EXPANDED UNIVERSE (1980)

REQUIEM: (ed. Yoji Kondo)

Other Books by Robert A. Heinlein

FOR US, THE LIVING -- Heinlein's first book, just published in 2003

SIXTH COLUMN (1941, 1949)

BEYOND THIS HORIZON (1942, 1948)

THE PUPPET MASTERS (1950)

DOUBLE STAR (1955)

THE DOOR INTO SUMMER (1956)

PODKAYNE OF MARS (1962)

GLORY ROAD (1963)

FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD (1965)

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL (1970)

Non-fiction and Miscellanea

TAKE BACK YOUR GOVERNMENT! (written in 1946 but not published until 1992)

TRAMP-ROYALE (written in 1954 but not published until 1990)

GRUMBLES FROM THE GRAVE (a selection of letters, edited by Virginia Heinlein)