A HEINLEIN CHILD PAYS HOMAGE TO THE MASTER

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SOME SCHOLARS ARGUE that Robert A. Heinlein was the most influential writer of the 20th Century. There is no argument Heinlein was the greatest influence on my life. Long before I heard the phrase “Heinlein’s Children” I considered myself such a child – a competent person raised on the principles espoused by the Grand Master of Science-Fiction.

Two major facets of my life resulted from reading Heinlein’s works: I became a writer, and I became involved in space exploration – in both the US governmental space agency (NASA) and in private commercial space ventures.

When one Heinlein fan meets another, the question arises, “When did you first read Heinlein?” My answer is: When I was about 12 years old my sister gave me Heinlein’s juvenile book Have Spacesuit-Will Travel. I was immediately captivated by the highly imaginative space travels of the children, Kip and Peewee, and by the gentle reassurances of the cat-like alien Mother Thing when their space adventures became scary and threatening.

From there I devoured all of Heinlein’s other juvenile books, and then as an older teenager graduated to his adult novels such as Stranger in a Strange Land. After I read all his books, I looked for his writings in old issues of Boys Life, and then re-read his books. I tried reading other science-fiction authors (Heinlein preferred the tag “speculative fiction”), but their works didn’t inspire me the way Heinlein’s writing did. I found myself explaining to other readers, “I don’t read science-fiction; I read Robert Heinlein.”

It was my continued search for more Heinlein to read that caused me to discover the 2006 book Variable Star co-authored by Heinlein (who died in 1988)

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and Spider Robinson. Robinson, himself a Hugo award winner, was tasked with completing the 1955 novel Heinlein started to write after his original notes and manuscript outline were discovered a few years ago.

Robinson succeeded brilliantly with *Variable Star*, keeping true to Heinlein’s original voice and didactic intentions while updating the story with modern references such as Googling and the Beatles songs in the future becoming classical music. Since Heinlein’s death I had been searching for another Heinleinesque writer, and I had found him in Spider Robinson.

While searching Spider’s website for more of his books, I came across the link to the Heinlein Centennial gala to be held on the anniversary of Heinlein’s 100th birthday — July 7, 2007 — in Kansas City. I signed up immediately.

Trying to explain to non-Heinlein muggles why I had to go to the Heinlein Centennial was challenging. To my aerospace employer and to my magazine publisher I simply stated I was “going to a writers’ conference in Kansas City.” My husband, who knew of Heinlein’s impact on me, but who was not a Heinlein child, understood that I wanted to pay my respects to the great writer. I told him, “If there was a t-shirt that said *Everything I Needed to Know About Life, I Learned From Robert Heinlein*, I would wear it.”

Reading Heinlein through most of my life had given me a perspective, points of reference, a paradigm, and life lessons I learned from Heinlein’s fictional characters, who had already traveled through the final frontier of space/time and colonized and prevailed and survived. They had taken risks, not always fearlessly, and built new worlds with new societies and new social norms to be contemplated and considered as adaptable to my own 20th-21st Century existence. As the actual future unfolded with its new technologies and moral dilemmas, it was as if I had already lived a virtual dress rehearsal through Heinlein’s writings. I greet the always-arriving future, not with the fear of the unknown, but with the warm embrace and familiarity of an old friend. I’ve been here before.

To a Heinlein child, much happens in our modern world for which there is a Heinlein reference. For example, during the Clinton administration, the FBI expressed concern about the capabilities of the new-fangled Internet. The FBI noted that it wouldn’t take much talent to alter a video of President Clinton to have him declaring war, then posting the video on the global Internet, possibly initiating a real war.

My thought then was, if the FBI had only read Heinlein’s *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, they would have long seen coming the Internet and this capability. In this 1966 novel, Heinlein’s revolutionary war leader was Adam Selene, who was
not human, but entirely computer generated. It’s interesting to note that Heinlein created Adam Selene two decades before the computer-animated TV character Max Headroom and long before today’s avatars.

A more recent example of a Heinlein reference comes to mind. A few months ago I loaned my book Waldo to a co-worker. We are both contractors on NASA’s space station program in Houston. I thought he would be interested in reading Heinlein’s story about a man with myasthenia gravis, a severe form of muscular dystrophy in which muscles atrophy rapidly with exertion. The character lived in the microgravity of a space station where he could be mobile and productive with the use of mechanical arms and hands.

My co-worker read Waldo (1) and returned the book, saying he thought the 1942 story was a little dated. Three days later a photo of Dr. Stephen Hawking floating in the microgravity of a commercial Zero Gravity flight appeared on the front page of the Houston Chronicle. I cut out the photo, wrote WALDO across it, and laid it on my co-worker’s desk. It was yet another example of Heinlein’s writings maintaining their pertinence to current events.

This is also an example of how a Heinlein child lives in the past, present, and future simultaneously, with cross-references to each – what Steve Stockdale, executive director of the Institute of General Semantics, explained was Heinlein’s interpretation of time-binding. (2) Stockdale, with science-fiction writer David Gerrold, paneled a discussion of General Semantics at the Heinlein Centennial. According to the printed program, Heinlein was “enamored of this study of thought,” so of course I had to attend and see what General Semantics was about. I left their presentation with the April 2007 Journal ETC. Imagine my surprise and delight when I came across the word “grokdueled” on the 4th page!

“. . . then they grokdueled in “opposing” pairs in front of the class.
[Ed Note: “grokduel,” coined by Edward MacNeil in 1999, refers to a contest in which two or more parties vie to see who best understand the position of the other.]”

The root word of grokduel, grok, is a Heinlein creation from his 1961 novel Stranger in a Strange Land. Again, another Heinlein reference in today’s world.

Heinlein’s influence in my life also shows itself in my magazine column Slice of Life. Heinleinesque themes such as cloning, nontraditional marriages, extended families, human longevity, space travel, love of cats, and even extraterrestrial romance have appeared in my writing, geared towards an urban female demographic.
that is mostly not inclined to science-fiction reading. I can write about these themes because Heinlein’s influence transcends its genre and reaches into popular culture.

As a working writer, I have Heinlein’s tongue-in-cheek quote from *The Cat Who Walks Though Walls* framed and hanging in my office: “…writing is a legal way of avoiding work without actually stealing and one that doesn’t take any talent or training.” When I am faced with a looming deadline, I am reminded of Heinlein’s “They didn’t want it good; they wanted it Wednesday.”

Perhaps the greatest testament to Heinlein’s influence is my interest and involvement in space exploration.

In 1982 a Texas company launched the first privately funded rocket from Matagorda Island. I was living in Wichita, Kansas, at the time. When a newspaper editorial appeared in the Wichita paper decrying the private launch and calling for “a ban on private rocketry” and to “leave rocket launches to the government,” I wrote what would become the first of many published editorials and articles about space. In this first editorial I quoted Heinlein in support of private, commercial space ventures as opposed to big national programs: “An elephant is a mouse built to government specifications.” I also reminded readers of Wichita’s proud general aviation heritage, and asked “If you had been at Kitty Hawk, would you have said ‘Leave flying to the government’?”

Many years later I was fortunate to be associated with some of the principals of the private Conestoga rocket launch. Among those were David Hannah, the Texas millionaire who personally financed the historic project that was ahead of its time, and Charles Chafer, chief executive officer of Celestis, now Space Services Inc. More recently I was involved with Advent Launch Services, one of the contenders for Dr. Peter Diamandis’ private spaceflight award, the X Prize.

At the Heinlein Centennial in the panel discussion “Heinlein’s Children,” David Gerrold noted that Heinlein’s proudest accomplishment was the drawers of letters from people who said they went into space and science careers because of his writings. “I am one of those,” I told the panel and audience. I explained I was a contractor to the International Space Station program in Houston. The catalyst leading me to the space program took place in May 1988.

That was the month Heinlein died. I was a paralegal at the time, working in a Houston area law office. The space shuttle program was still grounded following the January 1986 Challenger explosion, and all of “Space City” remained in a depressed state of mourning. It was Memorial Day weekend and the paper announced the then-Soviet space station Mir would be going overhead and visible
in Houston.

So there I was, outside early on the US Memorial Day, feeling patriotic (3) and mourning the loss of Heinlein and the inactive space program, while the Soviets’ space station was orbiting overhead. I vowed then I was going to get in the US space program somehow, someway, and do what I could to keep it ever moving forward. I went back to college and took creative writing, thinking I would write science-fiction like Heinlein to inspire others to the space frontier.

But it was my nonfiction, technical research and writing skills from my law career that ultimately ushered me into the space program. In 1989 I was selected by Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine to write the feature article about the 20th anniversary of the Apollo moon landing. That was my ticket to becoming an aerospace professional, and employment in the space program, where I remain today.

Spider Robinson stated at the Heinlein Centennial, “I owe everything to Robert.” I do too. Thank you, Mr. Heinlein. As you wrote in Stranger in a Strange Land, may you never thirst.

NOTES

1. Since the publication of Waldo robotic limbs used by the protagonist and those in the nuclear and underwater industries have reportedly been called waldoes, and I believe the term appears in some dictionaries. There are also a few of us in the space program who unofficially refer to the space shuttle’s robotic arm as a waldo, instead of the more cumbersome Remote Manipulator System, or RMS.

2. Though not the same description of time-binding as first written by Alfred Korzybski in his seminal book Science and Sanity which greatly influenced Heinlein.

3. Patriotism is another common Heinlein theme.