Cities in Flight Short Guide

Cities in Flight by James Blish

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

Cities in Flight Blish's concern is Inhumanity as a whole and individual men and women are important only insofar as they initiate or participate in events which affect the destiny of the species. For this reason his characters tend to be fairly simplistic, verging on stereotypes. Bliss Wagoner of They Shall Have Stars (1956), along with most of the other heroes in the series, is a politically adept, lantern-jawed idealist with a strong faith in both humanity and technology. Crispin de Ford, the young protagonist of A Life for the Stars (1962), the second volume, is a bright young adolescent who shows a considerable potential for both political agility and lantern-jawed idealism. Blish's female characters tend to be spunky rather than lantern-jawed, but they too are idealists. Even John Amalfi, Mayor of New York, an important character in A Life for the Stars and the central figure in both Earthman, Come Home (1955) and The Triumph of Time (1958), fails to achieve any great complexity. Blish endows him with a certain roguishness of the sort prerequisite to success either as the mayor of a major city or as a horse trader, but, in his heart. Amalfi is little more than a mildly ethnic Bliss Wagoner.

Social Concerns

Blish began his Cities in Flight series in the early 1950s, a period of enormous national paranoia. Fear of the Red Menace was at its height, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was working hard to cow the intelligentsia of the United States into passivity, and Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was at the pinnacle of his notoriety, destroying careers, threatening any day to disclose the hundreds of communists supposedly working in the federal government. Many liberal science fiction writers of the period reacted to this political atmosphere by writing stories set in futures which were logical extensions of the Cold War period, and Blish's Cities in Flight series is an example of this trend. Using concepts borrowed (not always accurately) from the philosopher Oswald Spengler, the author of The Decline of the West (1923), Blish described a future America on the verge of collapse, sunk into a totalitarianism not noticeably different from that practiced by its enemies. Freedom is virtually dead, fundamentalist Christianity is gaining more and more power, and scientific inquiry has been strangled by security restrictions. The nation is essentially controlled by Francis X. MacHinery, hereditary head of the F.B.I., a demagogic, paranoid combination of McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover.

Into this situation steps Bliss Wagoner, Democratic Senator from Alaska, a visionary who realizes that America is on its last legs and who is willing to do anything it takes to assure that some portion of American culture will escape the inevitable collapse. Wagoner connives to bring several vital research projects to fulfillment, the first a gravity-related experiment on Jupiter which will lead to a practical interstellar drive, the second an anti-aging program which will give humanity a long enough life expectancy to make such interstellar journeys practical. Eventually Wagoner's activities are discovered and he is executed as a traitor, but in the meantime the scientific breakthroughs he backed have saved the human race. Entire cities, powered by an offshoot of the gravity research called a Spindizzy field, flee the collapse of American society and develop a new civilization which gradually spreads across the galaxy.

Techniques

John W. Campbell, Jr., Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, and other writers of the late-1930s and 1940s had introduced to science fiction a plain, straightforward, expository writing style, an engineer's style of sorts, which is still widely used by the more conservative among today's genre writers. Blish too began his career using prose in this manner and Cities in Flight is full of earnest lectures on scientific and sociopolitical topics, fast-paced, exciting adventure sequences, and well-drawn, but understated descriptions of alien scenes.

However, the book already shows indications of the somewhat more literary writing style Blish would later adopt. A fondness for quotation is evident throughout the series, and even the most hard-headed scientists among Blish's cast are occasionally given to unidentified allusions to Dante or Shakespeare.

Another aspect of Blish's technique, of course, is the sheer scope of the series. Book one of Cities in Flight begins in the year 2013, book four ends in the year 4104, and the plot spans entire galaxies. Due to the life extension drugs discovered in They Shall Have Stars, the inhabitants of the spaceship-cities live incredibly long lives; John Amalfi, the Mayor of New York, is more than a thousand years old at the end of the story, and has been mayor most of that time.

Themes

To a very great extent, Blish's social concerns are his great theme in Cities in Flight. America, he suggests, is at a crossroads. Western civilization is wearing out in a very real sense and is about to be replaced by something new, what Blish rather clumsily labels Earthmanist Culture. Through the four books of the tetralogy readers see this culture grow, pass through the various stages predicted by Spengler and then itself begin to decay. Blish ends the series with the ultimate in cultural collapses as Mayor Amalfi, protagonist of much of the series, intentionally sets off an explosion which will destroy, and then recreate, the entire galaxy.

Another theme of some importance here is the necessity of faith and, more specifically, a faith based upon rational analysis. Blish's main characters are not conventionally religious people, but they are believers of a sort and they have an abiding, almost mystical faith in things outside themselves.

They are sometimes loners, but they invariably care about humanity as a whole. They have a sense that the absolute does exist and that it exists within the realm of free rational inquiry into the universe. Blish's heroes, in short, are technocrats in the most positive sense of that term. Science, properly handled by men of good will, can save humanity. Those who reject scientific knowledge in Cities in Flight invariably do so out of irrational fear. The relationship between faith, reason, science, and morality continued to obsess Blish throughout his career and, as he grew older, he became less sanguine about the value of both reason and technology. This, in fact, became a central theme of A Case of Conscience (1958).

Key Questions

The world of science fiction was fairly small in the 1940s and 1950s.

Most of the writers knew each other and read each other's work. The fiction of Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov was particularly influential on other authors and James Blish was no exception. Any discussion of Cities in Flight might be profitably carried on within a context provided by having read such novels as Heinlein's Double Star, Methuselah's Children, and The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, as well as Asimov's original Foundation trilogy.

Central to these works is a belief in the inherent superiority of rational thought to faith and of science to religion. Although Heinlein and Asimov are both advocates of democracy, neither puts much faith in the abilities of the common man. Both depict politics as being a matter of the few manipulating the many, sometimes for personal gain, sometimes out of more idealistic motives. Although Asimov, Heinlein, and Blish are all writing science fiction stories set in the far future, any discussion of their work must be grounded in a firm understanding that all three authors are, in a very real sense, writing about the present and their concerns for the immediate future.

1. Writing in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War era, James Blish described a world where democracy seems to be on the point of collapse, the primary enemies being conservative totalitarian government and fundamentalist Christianity. Today these two forces are obviously still with us, though much else has changed. Seen from the vantage point of the 1990s and the post-Soviet era, how accurate were Blish's predictions? To what extent are the warnings to be found in Cities in Flight still relevant?

2. Essentially a technocrat, Blish argues that society's salvation lies in the development of new scientific concepts, new technologies. Those who would hinder scientific advances for religious reasons or out of a concern for national security are at best wrong headed, at worst villains. Based on more recent developments in science and technology, particularly in the areas of computer science and genetics, to what extent does Blish's position still hold water? Beware of simple black and white answers to this question.

3. One of the heroes of Cities in Flight, Senator Bliss Wagoner, violates federal law in order to make possible the secret scientific research he believes is necessary to save humanity. It is obvious that he is right to do this within the context of the book, but what about in the real world? Should government officials consider themselves above the law? Think about Nixon and Watergate or Oliver North, Ronald Reagan, and the Iran-Contra Affair.

4. A popular character in the science fiction of the 1940s and 1950s was "the man who can," the super-competent white male technocrat. As first popularized by Robert A. Heinlein, such characters are essentially idealistic, but have little faith in the common run of humanity. Although they defend democracy, they often feel the need to

unilaterally subvert it for the good of the world. Bliss Wagoner is an example of such a hero, as is John Amalfi. Chris de Ford is a young example of such a hero in the making. How do you feel about such characters? If you've read Heinlein's The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, you might compare the major characters of the two works.

5. Blish was fascinated by the interaction between religion and science.

For him there could be no true conflict.

Faith must be based on rational analysis and must take into account scientific evidence. How do you feel about this?

6. Overpopulation was a topic of concern in Blish's day, but the problem was more theoretical than it is now. If science should discover a way to make humanity immortal, or even significantly more long-lived, how would this affect the world? How would the potential for immortality affect our attitudes toward birth control and those religions which prohibit it? Towards overpopulation, the poor, and religion in general?

7. If you have read Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, how would you compare the two? Both series cover huge time-spans. Both focus on historical crises and on people who have the ability to shape the future for all humanity. Both assume that even the greatest societies have a built-in lifespan, that the collapse of civilization is virtually inevitable, but that it is possible to salvage something from that collapse. Which series seems the more believable of the two?

8. Blish was an avid reader of the historian Oswald Spengler, and particularly his Decline of the West. Read some Spengler and then ask yourself how directly that writer's ideas apply to Cities in Flight.

9. A devotee of James Joyce, Blish was fond of puns, symbolism, and literary allusions. The titles of the individual volumes in the Cities in Flight series are linguistically very rich.

What possible meanings (and double meanings) can you attach to them?

Consider in particular the alternate titles for the fourth volume in the series, The Triumph of Time, and A Clash of Cymbals.

10. Like most science fiction writers of his generation, Blish had relatively little interest in female characters.

What functions are performed by the few significant female characters in the series?

Literary Precedents

Viewed as a work concerned with the future destruction of Western civilization, Cities in Flight is part of a long tradition. Stories touching on the political collapse of the United States have, of course, been common since the midnineteenth century, if not earlier.

Among the most important immediate predecessors of Blish's work would be Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here (1935), Robert A. Heinlein's Sixth Column (1941), and Fritz Leiber's Gather, Darkness! (1943). Science fiction stories which projected the worst aspects of Cold-War America into the future were extremely common in the 1950s.

Among many such works might be noted Judith Merril's much underrated Shadow on the Hearth (1950), Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction" (1951), Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (1953), and Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth's The Space Merchants (1953). Although Blish published primarily in Campbell's Astounding Science Fiction, throughout the 1950s Galaxy Science Fiction, edited by H. L. Gold, published stories about the collapse of civilization on a regular basis. Both the late1960s and the mid-1980s saw a similar interest in science fiction stories featuring this theme.

Cities in Flight can also be compared to such works as Isaac Asimov's Foundation series (1942-1993), and the various so-called Future Histories of Robert A. Heinlein, Poul Anderson, Larry Niven, Ursula K. Le Guin, C. J. Cherry h, and other science fiction writers.

Like the Asimov series, Cities in Flight began as a number of short stories which were then cobbled together to form novels. Like Foundation it attempts to apply a major theory of political change to the future of humanity.

Although Asimov's is undoubtedly the more popular series of the two, Blish's use of his source material, Spengler, is arguably much more sophisticated than is Asimov's use of Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

Related Titles

Cities in Flight is an omnibus volume consisting of They Shall Have Stars, 1956, novel (also published as Year 2018!); A Life for the Stars, 1962, novel; Earthman Come Home, 1955, novel (based on the short stories "Okie," 1950, "Bindlestiff," 1950, "Sargasso of Lost Cities," 1952, and "Earthman Come Home," 1953); The Triumph of Time, 1958, novel (also published as A Clash of Cymbals).

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