Farmer in the Sky Short Guide

Farmer in the Sky by Robert A. Heinlein

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Overview

Farmer in the Sky is a novel about pioneers, about youth and age, and about the boundaries of the human spirit. It challenges the reader to consider the very real possibility that the human race will soon embark upon a new era of exploration. This time, the frontier is space.

Pioneers of the future will need the same emotional and spiritual resources as those of the past. However difficult it may be to imagine actually populating another world, humans will undoubtedly take their personalities with them—all the bad traits as well as the good. This fact alone will make society in space similar in many respects to society as we know it on Earth. The pressures of establishing human life on distant worlds will magnify the faults and demand more of the virtues.

Farmer in the Sky is told from the point of view of a teen-age boy. The move he makes from Earth to a distant planet parallels his movement from childhood to adulthood. When the unique demands of relocation fall upon the shoulders of a young person, they reveal the need for courage and self-reliance.

Farmer in the Sky demonstrates that the triumph of humanity is rooted in the pioneer spirit.

About the Author

Robert Anson Heinlein was born in Butler, Missouri, on July 7, 1907, one of seven children. His family relocated to Kansas City, where he attended public schools. After one year at the University of Missouri, Heinlein was granted an appointment to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. He preferred the study of engineering to the social aspects of the Navy and was particularly interested in aircraft design. He graduated and was commissioned an ensign in June 1929.

Heinlein's naval career was cut short in 1934 when he contracted tuberculosis. He retired, but not before having experienced shipboard service and the technically demanding duties of a naval officer at sea. He married Leslyn McDonald while he was in the Navy, but this relationship was short-lived.

Heinlein briefly studied mathematics and physics at UCLA, and then held a variety of jobs in Colorado and California. He began his literary career with the publication of the short story "Life-Line" in Astounding Science-Fiction magazine in 1939. During World War II he was employed as an engineer by the Philadelphia Navy Yard, where he met his second wife, Virginia Gerstenfeld, a naval officer. They married in 1948.

Originally a "pulp writer" who churned out stories for low-paying science fiction magazines, Heinlein led a movement after the war to expand the audience for science fiction. Popular magazines for readers of all ages and interests eventually published his work.

When his wartime job ended, Heinlein devoted himself exclusively to writing.

Prolific, prodigious, and professional, he has captivated and influenced generations of science fiction writers and readers. Even the impressive number of awards he has won —including four Hugo Awards for best science fiction novel of the year, and the first Science Fiction Writers of America Grand Master Award in 1975—fails to reflect the full scope of his vision and the complexity of his fictional worlds.

Heinlein is noted as a conservative writer, one whose work reflects traditional values. His books remain popular, however, not because of any political stance, but because they remain rooted in the concerns of ordinary people. Science fiction is simply the genre Heinlein chose to examine human needs, desires, and patterns of behavior that, in his opinion, remain constant no matter what the level of technological development. Heinlein's themes are familiar ones, no matter what their setting in time and space. Heinlein died on May 8, 1988, in Carmel, California.

Setting

The story begins in the near future on a tired Earth that has nearly been depleted of its resources. Food is scarce, and rationing is in effect. The government occasionally reduces the ration so that all of the teeming billions can receive an equal share. Bill Lerner, a young man of high-school age, lives in a huge apartment complex with his widowed father, George.

Bill and his father seize the opportunity to escape Earth when it is offered: the government is allowing a select few to emigrate to new worlds in the solar system, one of which is Ganymede, a moon of the planet Jupiter. Ganymede is not like Earth. Its environment is barren, dangerous, and hostile to humans, and the new inhabitants must "terraform" Ganymede, that is, use technology and engineering skills to reshape the planet to support terrestrial plants and animals. A certain amount of "social engineering" also takes place on Ganymede, because not everyone selected for the journey is suited to be a pioneer.

Social Sensitivity

In Farmer in the Sky, Heinlein clearly wishes to make important points about cooperation and about the individual contributions of both males and females to the survival of the group. At the same time, he wishes to emphasize that humans will carry familiar roles and attitudes with them into space. To this end, he divides social roles according to "traditional" gender categories. Men are given more active roles, while women are allotted more domestic tasks. Despite this division of labor, women are routinely consulted when important decisions are made, and their opinions are given equal weight. Ultimately, everyone's contribution is essential to the survival of the colony.

Heinlein also makes a point concerning a group's tendency to take extreme measures when survival is at stake. The quasi-military discipline that prevails aboard the space transport produces examples of infractions and punishments that may seem brutal. However, these episodes are nicely balanced by more democratic procedures instituted once the pioneers get to Ganymede. The reader is left with the impression that strong, even dictatorial leadership is sometimes required by circumstances.

Similar arguments are often used today to justify government support of dictatorial regimes in Third World countries. Are these arguments valid?

Teachers might wish to use the issue as treated in Heinlein's book to start a classroom discussion of current events.

Literary Qualities

Farmer in the Sky allows us to see what happens to a group of people who are removed from their usual environment and placed in a new one. The settings of the transport ship and the Ganymede facilities resemble a laboratory, and the pioneers refer to their planet-roving expeditions as "experiments." In these laboratories and through these experiments, the unfamiliar surroundings of Ganymede and the familiar habits brought from Earth are intermingled to create a new breed of explorer and settler.

As might be expected, the pioneers cling to familiar objects that provide security and a sense of connection with the past. Bill's Scout uniform is an example. He refuses to leave it behind, but it slowly deteriorates as the travelers move farther away from Earth. The beliefs and goals of Scouting represented by the uniform do not deteriorate, however. On the contrary, they are strengthened. Heinlein firmly believes that although familiar objects are comforting, the ideas represented by these objects are more important than the objects themselves.

Several of the characters in Farmer in the Sky derive from Heinlein's attempt to replicate the pioneer experience of settling the American West. For example, Mama Schultz is a stereotypical immigrant homemaker, who displays a tireless drive and a resourcefulness that contribute to the overall success of the pioneers. The character of Mama Schultz is based on similar stock figures found in earlier books about settling the American frontier.

A significant symbolic emphasis in the book is Heinlein's use of Ganymede to personify hostility. The most trying period for the pioneers is during and after a devastating earthquake that destroys their homes and crops and uproots their lives. It is as though Ganymede itself has decided to reject the pioneers as intruders. The earthquake underscores the fact that the environment cannot be taken for granted.

Heinlein makes good use of parallel constructions to emphasize Bill's development. The world of young people, their organizations, their concerns, and their personal conflicts—all have corresponding situations in the world of adults. Whenever Bill is struggling with a personal problem, the colony as a whole seems to be experiencing a similar problem, only magnified in scope and severity. Heinlein's emphasis on cooperation, sharing, and independence suggests that the solutions to the problems at both levels are remarkably similar.

Themes and Characters

Typical of others his age, Bill Lerner pursues many interests, experiences rivalries with other youngsters, and worries about the future. For the most part, he is a competent, serious, and selfassured young man, who is still confused by many aspects of the adult world. His involvement in a youth group called the Scouts introduces him to the travails of becoming a young adult. He learns the hard way that other people's behavior does not always meet his standards.

Bill's mother, Anne, is no longer alive.

Before the departure for Ganymede, Bill is disturbed to learn that his father plans to wed a woman named Molly Kenyon—meaning that his new life will bring with it a new family, including a younger stepsister, Peggy. For the first time, Bill must share the companionship and affection of his father with others, and this makes him uncomfortable. The friction among Bill, his father, Molly, and Peggy is magnified by their difficult journey to the new world. Bill eventually learns to appreciate his new family by sharing their struggles and successes.

To reach Ganymede, the pioneers must travel on a transport ship. The large number of people living in such close confines generates various conflicts. Some of the would-be settlers are not as dedicated to the requirements of pioneering as others; a few are simply troublemakers. On board the ship, the captain has absolute power to punish those who misbehave or to reward those who display exceptional behavior. Bill is shocked by this exercise of absolute authority but, at the same time, recognizes the need to enforce cooperation among the passengers and crew in order to avert disaster. Even before the ship arrives, he begins to understand that he must play a very different role in the social system of the new world than he has played on Earth.

Bill often asks his father's advice when caught in a difficult or challenging situation. Wise and intelligent, George Lerner obviously cares for his son but refuses to insulate Bill from the harshness of the real world. He prides himself on his ability to teach Bill the lessons of life by setting an example through his own deeds and decisions. Whenever Bill's crises have passed, he routinely sums up the lessons he has learned in words from his father's experience. George is a stable presence in the book, who provides a standard against which Bill measures his own growing maturity.

Bill's stepsister, Peggy, is as game as any pioneer in the group, but her body does not adapt well to the environment of Ganymede. Despite her physical difficulties, no member of the family considers her anything less than a dedicated member of the group. Peggy is a stronger character, in terms of mental toughness, than many of those who are physically able to withstand the changes in climate and gravity. Peggy suffers from her stay on Ganymede, but her spirit is never broken.

As Ganymede is transformed into a more hospitable place through the pioneers' efforts, it becomes relatively more comfortable. This physical comfort is reassuring, but the

pioneers' growing self-satisfaction is soon shattered when Bill discovers evidence that a race of alien beings has visited Ganymede sometime in the past. These aliens seem also to have explored and inhabited the barren moon but later to have vanished.

The settlers wonder if this is to be their fate, as well. Bill also becomes more aware of the real situation on Earth, where the prospects for survival are more bleak than he or any of the others have imagined.

Many of the successful pioneers find it difficult to leave their new world, despite its hardships, when offered the chance to return to the old one. Bill cannot return to Earth, any more than he can return to his childhood. His decision to stay on Ganymede is the first irrevocable decision he makes as an adult.

Topics for Discussion

1. Would you be willing to abandon everything that is familiar to settle a new world?

2. Bill's Scout leader, Mr. Kinski, says that "anybody who can't keep order without using his fists can't be a patrol leader." Does Bill follow this advice? Is it good advice?

3. Why does the captain of the space transport push the immigrants to form their own government?

4. When the captain of the transport punishes the rule-breakers, do these punishments fit the crimes? Why or why not?

5. Why does Bill work so hard to keep and preserve his Scout uniform?

6. Why does Noisy Edwards hit Bill even though Bill has saved his life? Does Bill do the right thing by not fighting back? What does George mean when he says that "sometimes therejust isn't any cure for a situation"?

7. Bill learns that some people are travelling to Ganymede because of political favoritism, not because they passed the required tests. His father says, "Old Mother Nature will take care of them in the long run. Survivors survive." What does George mean? Support your answer with examples from the book.

8. Is Bill's initial reaction to his new mother and sister justified? How do his feelings toward them change? What, or who, helps this change take place?

9. At one point during the earthquake, George lies to Molly about Peggy's condition. Bill says that, under the circumstances, this lie is "better than the truth." Is he right?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Farmer in the Sky is a book about pioneers. Describe the similarities and differences between these space pioneers and other pioneers in history.

2. Bill remarks at one point that "Dad says there's a lot in a name." Discuss the importance of names in the book. Why, for instance, are the space ships named Mayflower and Covered Wagon?

3. One of Bill's friends says, "A new colony is always a new hope." Is this true of Ganymede? What do the colonists hope for? Do you think they will get what they hope for?

4. Bill finally decides that the aliens whose equipment he discovers were "men." How does he define "men"? Do you agree with his definition? Why or why not?

5. What role does Bill's natural mother, Anne, play in the book?

6. Chapter 15 asks the question, "Why did we come?," and Bill and his dad have a conversation about the subject. Does the question ever get answered? If not, why not? If so, what is the answer?

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