

# Have Space Suit-Will Travel Short Guide

## Have Space Suit-Will Travel by Robert A. Heinlein

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## Overview

The story opens in Centerville, a small town in the American Midwest, in the very near future. Clifford Russell, nicknamed Kip, is about to graduate from high school and is worried about not having enough money to go to college.

His burning ambition is to go to the moon, but the commercial trips that are available are too expensive. When a detergent manufacturer offers a trip to the moon as first prize in an advertising contest, Kip enters with fanatical zeal, only to lose first prize on a technicality.

As a consolation prize, however, he is awarded a used space suit, which he painstakingly restores to prime working condition. The suit's built-in communications system enables him to make contact with Peewee Reisfeld, an eleven-year-old girl genius and the daughter of a prominent scientist.

Together they are kidnapped and abducted to the moon by despicable wormfaced aliens. Eventually, they come face-to-face with the Mother Thing, a benign furry alien creature. Without intruding on the flow of the action, Heinlein weaves into the text scientific details about space travel, the topography of the Moon and the planet Pluto, and basic principles of astronomy.



## About the Author

Robert Anson Heinlein was born on July 7, 1907, in the small town of Butler, Missouri. One of seven children, he was particularly attached to his grandfather, a doctor who appears as a wise old man in many of Heinlein's novels. After graduating from the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, he served in the United States Navy until tuberculosis forced him to retire from active duty in 1934.

From 1934 to 1939 Heinlein was active in politics and silver mining, and pursued graduate studies in physics and mathematics at UCLA. He was forced to drop out before earning his degree because of a recurrence of his illness. In 1939 he wrote his first science fiction story, "Life-Line," and submitted it to John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction*, the most reputable science fiction magazine of that period.

In the following years, Heinlein published a substantial number of short stories in what was called the "Future History" series. These stories are currently available in three collections: *The Man Who Sold the Moon* (1950); *The Green Hills of Earth* (1951); and *Revolt in 2100* (1953). Two novels—*Methuselah's Children* (1958) and *Orphans in the Sky* (1963)—are also counted as part of the series, which was never fully completed.

The original outline for the series was published as a chart in the May 1941 edition of *Astounding Science-Fiction*.

After World War II, Heinlein entered on his career as a professional writer of science fiction in earnest. He continued to write short stories for the Future History series, but earned his reputation with a series of twelve juvenile novels he *Hove Space Suit*—*Will Travel* wrote for Scribner's between 1947 and 1958.

These novels present an enthusiastically optimistic outlook on the future of humankind, an attitude which begins to change with the darkening tone of *Starship Troopers* and continues with his acknowledged masterpieces, *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. After 1966 Heinlein's fiction becomes increasingly sexual in content and pessimistic in outlook. In spite of the author's continued impressive sales figures, many critics believe that his later novels, such as *Time Enough for Love* (1973), *The Number of the Beast* (1980), and *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (1984) are the increasingly self-indulgent expressions of a troubled soul.

Most critics agree that Heinlein's best work can be found in his two masterpieces of the 1960s and in his twelve juvenile novels. Heinlein died on May 8, 1988, in Carmel, California.

## Setting

The opening scenes of the novel evoke an endearing picture of Centerville, a rural Midwestern community with its uncomplicated way of life, its traditional value system based on the family, and its mutually supportive townsfolk.

Told in the episodic style of the adventure novel, the action proceeds rapidly from Kip's home in Centerville to the Moon and then to Pluto, Vega V—the home of the Mother Thing—and eventually to the capital of the Three Galaxies in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.



## Social Sensitivity

All of Heinlein's novels in the juvenile series deal with the conquest of space and the future of humankind. In contrast to the novels of many of his contemporaries and, indeed, to his own later works, these books are full of optimism. Human inventiveness and courage overcome the threat of the loathsome wormfaces and even triumph in the face of the coldly objective galactic judges. Heinlein is not blindly optimistic, however. Kip and Peewee manage to bargain for a probationary period during which humankind will have a chance to rid itself of its worst faults, which are declared to be violence, a tendency toward self-destruction, and excessive sentimentality.

Heinlein is implicitly critical of the American educational system. He attacks schools for failing to challenge the brightest students. Kip's school is so bad, in fact, that he is virtually self-taught. Under the guidance of his father, he studies algebra, Spanish, general science, English grammar and composition, and Latin. This is in contrast to the typical curriculum of Centerville High, which consists of social studies, commercial arithmetic, applied English, handicrafts, and gym. Heinlein also aims scathing remarks at the snobbery of certain universities and the high cost of a higher education.

Heinlein explores several other questions of social relevance. Is intelligence primarily a hereditary trait? Do the narrow attitudes and lack of opportunities in small rural towns create characters such as Ace Quigley? What is the importance of individual assertiveness and initiative in overcoming the obstacles society puts in the way of talented persons?

## Literary Qualities

Have Space Suit—Will Travel is the last and best novel in the series of science fiction novels Heinlein wrote for a young adult audience. As with most of the other books in the series, *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* is a bildungsroman, a type of story that traces the emotional and intellectual development of a young protagonist. The story's refreshing optimism, its wholesome, unsentimental advocacy of basic human values, and its unpatronizing presentation of scientific and technical material, provide entertaining and stimulating reading for young and old alike.

The literary merits of the novel are its use of first-person narrative, which accurately reflects the workings of an adolescent mind, and its plot structure.

In many ways *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* parallels Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in that there is an adolescent narrator, a faithful companion who initially seems unsuitable, and an eventful journey that leads to maturity in the characters.

These factors, in conjunction with Heinlein's expressed determination not to "talk down" to his teen-age audience, ranks *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* with the best of juvenile fiction of any genre.



## Themes and Characters

"Kip" Russell narrates the story, which allows the reader to see into the thoughts and feelings of this youthful hero-to-be. When the story opens, Kip is frustrated. The pastoral setting that provides Kip's father with such a quiet retreat from the "rat race" of his academic job has severely impeded Kip's intellectual growth. The small-town school system is not sufficiently challenging for Kip's considerable scientific talent, and he is bullied by others who aren't educated enough to understand his abilities. To live up to his potential, he must find a way to afford a prestigious university that offers rigorous courses in science and math. If he can't use his own wits and means to gain entry, he seems destined to attend a lesser state college that doesn't train scientists.

Kip is diligent, however. He applies himself to winning the detergent contest, which sets a bizarre chain of events in motion. By overcoming the dangers of his travels, Kip matures into a confident young man who has put his life on the line for the future of mankind. Heinlein brilliantly captures the personality and language of this mid-American adolescent genius, his strong attachment to his town and his family, his ambivalence toward the female sex, and a commitment to humanity instilled by the example of his father. His excursion into the far-off, exotic reaches of the galaxy enables him to return home to Centerville and to see its familiar surroundings from an entirely different perspective.

He is no longer a shy, bookish adolescent, but someone who has the power to control his own destiny.

Kip's friend Peewee Reisfeld is a fully drawn character. Younger than Kip but just as intelligent, she is resourceful, bright, and full of spirit. Kip at first rejects her sentimentality as "girlish," even though the same traits are evident in his own character throughout the story. He tries to act condescendingly toward her and then protectively of her, until he eventually overcomes his prejudices about girls and acknowledges Peewee as his equal in all respects.

The other characters in the novel are one-dimensional figures that personify various aspects of the ethical and social value systems against which Kip must measure his own standards of behavior.

The story's aliens are divided neatly into heroes and villains. The incredibly ugly, cruel, and cannibalistic wormfaces are evil intruders who have established bases on Pluto and on the Moon, and who are preparing to take over the Earth. These vile creatures are aided by the moronic and greedy Fats and Skinny—two human hoodlums. Ace Quigley, the town bully who ceaselessly torments Kip in Centerville, is a younger version of the same character type.

The Mother Thing and her people, the Vegans, on the other hand, represent a benevolent alien culture that uses its vast technological knowledge to benefit its own and other races. These aliens adhere to a strict social and political code that forces the



Mother Thing to transport Kip and Peewee to the critical intergalactic trial where she intercedes on behalf of the human race. The best qualities of humanity are personified by the Vegans; the wormfaces and their associates seem to embody the worst.

The dispassionate, computer-like judges at the trial seem to exemplify the exercise of total intellect without the moderating force of emotions.

The rest of the human characters are even more stereotyped than the aliens.

Kip's parents and Peewee's father, Professor Reisfeld, are ideal parental figures—intelligent, humane, supportive, and understanding. Mr. Charton, Kip's employer at the drug store, is a kindly grandfather figure (modeled after Heinlein's own grandfather). The rest of the cast consists of two eccentric scientists and the wily Secretary-General of the Federated Free Nations, as well as a Neanderthal man and a Roman centurion who go on trial alongside Kip and Peewee. These last figures are called to the stand as representatives of earlier developmental stages of the human race.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Scientific ideas and gadgets in science fiction are either completely speculative (contrary to current scientific theory) or extrapolative (based on current scientific theory or practice, but extended beyond present-day reality).

Into which category does the discussion of scientific material in *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* belong?

2. Why do you think Heinlein's editors objected to the last scene of the novel, in which Kip throws a malt into Ace Quigley's face? Why do you think Heinlein left the passage intact?

3. Kip's trip from the Earth to the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, via the Moon, Pluto, and Vega V, takes only one day of Earth time. On what scientific speculation is this incredible feat based?

4. At the galactic trial, the Neanderthal is judged not to be a direct ancestor to Kip and Peewee. Iunio, the Roman centurion, is judged to be only "a cousin." Does this conform with the best current theories of the evolution of the human race?

5. Kip's father calls the Centerville High curriculum "Twaddle! Beetle tracking! Occupational therapy for morons!" Yet he insists on Kip's continuing his education there. What is the basis for his decision and what are the alternatives?

6. Kip says that "if there were some way to drown such creatures [Fats and Skinny] at birth, I'd take my turn as executioner." Is this an admirable sentiment? What does it say about Heinlein's social prejudices?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Critics have called *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* a bildungsroman. What do they mean and how does this novel fit the definition?
2. On Vega V, Kip is told that "democracy [is] a very good system, for beginners." What is the political system on Vega and how, if at all, is it superior to democracy?
3. The intergalactic trial concludes that the human race is guilty of "savagery, combined with superior intelligence." What is said in defense of humans? Do you agree or disagree with the judges? Why?
4. Discuss the relationships between male and female characters in this novel.
5. Referring to Ace Quigley, Mr. Charton wonders to what extent civilization is retarded by "the laughing jackasses, the empty-minded belittlers." Is this a fair assessment of the people Ace represents? To what degree is Ace a product of his environment?

## For Further Reference

Franklin, H. Bruce. *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction*. New York: Oxford, 1980. The most recent booklength study of Heinlein's work.

Franklin divides Heinlein's creative output into five stages, but devotes little attention to the juvenile series.

Olander, Joseph D., and Martin Harry Greenberg. *Robert A. Heinlein*. New York: Taplinger, 1978. A collection of critical essays, this book contains an excellent overview of the juvenile series.

Panshin, Alexei. *Heinlein in Dimension*. Chicago: Advent, 1976. The first booklength study of Heinlein's work; highly subjective, but influential on all later studies.

Parkin-Speer, Diane. "Robert A. Heinlein: The Novelist as Preacher." *Extrapolation* 20 (Fall 1979): 214-222.

Traces the decline of Heinlein's work from the early novels to his complex work of the 1970s.

Slusser, George Edgar. *The Classic Years of Robert A. Heinlein*. San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1977. Detailed study of Heinlein's early work. Sees his social elitism as essentially Calvinist in origin.

*Robert A. Heinlein: Stranger in His Own Land*. San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1976. Contains a lengthy essay on *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*.

## Related Titles

Have Space Suit—Will Travel is the last in a series of twelve novels that Heinlein addressed specifically to a juvenile audience and published at the rate of one per year from 1947 to 1958. The first two novels in the series, *Rocket Ship Galileo* and *Space Cadet*, are tentative and rather immature, but beginning with *Red Planet* Heinlein finds his touch and the rest of the series stands with the author's best work.

*Starship Troopers* signals the end of Heinlein's early optimistic period. Still written for a juvenile audience, it emphasizes man's savage nature and was rejected by his editors at Scribner's. This must be considered a transitional work, leading to Heinlein's later, darker adult fiction.



# Copyright Information

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