David Starr, Space Ranger Short Guide

David Starr, Space Ranger by Isaac Asimov

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Overview

David Starr, Space Ranger is quintessential "space opera," with both the strengths and the limitations of that formula. Good prevails against evil, science over ignorance, the humans of Earth over threats from elsewhere in the galaxy. Continual action and descriptions of imaginative gadgets keep the pace of the narrative brisk. The lucid, straightforward prose includes frequent explanations of space phenomena in general and the planets in particular.

Like its sequels, David Starr, Space Ranger presents a mystery for readers to solve along with the hero.

In addition to a satisfying good versus evil theme and an action-oriented plot with a mystery angle, the novel offers appealing characters. David Starr (later known as Lucky) has brains, athletic ability, courage, and a welcome modesty; young readers can readily identify with this attractive hero. Bigman, the diminutive Martian who becomes David's devoted companion, offers comic relief. The villains are satisfactorily unpleasant.

Written during the cold war years, a time of heightened political tensions and military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Lucky Starr series portrays the values of the individual who voluntarily fights for a democratic system prevailing over those of evil would-be dictators. (The villains are sometimes conspicuously racist in a way that recalls the crudest of Nazi genetic ideas, as in Lucky Starr and the Moons of Jupiter.) Asimov's insistence on technology's importance to a democratic system reflects that these books immediately precede the crisis caused by the Soviet launch of Sputnik, the Earth's first artificial satellite, in 1957.

In recent years, the reissue of the Lucky Starr books has enabled Asimov to write new introductions to all of them.

In them he tells of advances in knowledge since the books' original publication: Mars has no canals; Mercury does in fact rotate and therefore has no permanently cold side; Venus has no oceans but is dry and hot, with a very dense atmosphere composed mostly of carbon dioxide; Jupiter's satellites are in a highly charged magnetic field, and there are thirteen of them, not twelve; and Saturn has another recently discovered satellite, Janus. Each of the new introductions ends with the caution that "the advance of science can outdate even the most conscientious science-fiction writer."

About the Author

Isaac Asimov was born in Petrovichi, in the Soviet Union, on January 2, 1920.

When he was three, his family emigrated and settled in Brooklyn, where they operated a series of candy stores. An early and voracious reader, Asimov advanced rapidly through the public school system and completed junior high school at age eleven and high school at fifteen. During this period he discovered science fiction and became an ardent fan as well as an aspiring writer. His first story came out when he was eighteen and others followed steadily. "Nightfall," the most anthologized science-fiction story ever, was published when Asimov was twenty-one.

At Columbia University, Asimov began to drift away from medical studies in favor of chemistry. (His distaste for zoology intensified when one assignment required him to capture, chloroform, and dissect a stray cat—something that Asimov says he still regrets having done.) He graduated at nineteen, was turned down by various medical schools, and with relief, turned to graduate work in chemistry. His graduate studies were interrupted by three years at the Philadelphia navy yard, followed by nearly nine months in the army. He received his doctorate from Columbia in 1948 and became an instructor at the Boston University School of Medicine.

He remained at Boston University, rising to the rank of associate professor, until he left in 1958 to pursue a full-time writing career.

Asimov has written a two-volume autobiography, In Memory Yet Green (1979) and In Joy Still Felt (1980). He has also written about his early interest in science fiction in the introductions to separate stories in his anthology Before the Golden Age (1974).

Setting

As in later Lucky Starr books, most of the action of David Starr, Space Ranger takes place on a single planet, in this case Mars. Most of this planet serves as an agricultural colony, exporting grain, fruit, and other commodities to the crowded Earth. The planet's three cities are domed, as are the central buildings of the outlying farms. Once outside the domes, humans must wear breathing masks.

The entire Martian colony depends on agriculture, and human survival on Earth depends on the produce of the isolated Martian farms. Thus, when David Starr opposes a corrupt landowner, the stakes are high. Asimov draws a sharp distinction between the Martian cities, which are much like any city on Earth, and the distant domed farms, which are virtually beyond the reach of law.

Asimov points out in his 1978 preface that the canals that he pictures on Mars are now known not to exist. In addition, scientists have determined that the atmosphere could never have supported intelligent life of the sort David Starrencounters beneath the surface. In spite of these shortcomings, Asimov's depiction of life in a rugged colony, far distant from Earth, retains its interest. The blowing sands, the bare landscape, and the great fissures in the planet's surface provide an appropriate background that reinforces the corruption, brutality, and human weakness that David and his friend Bigman Jones confront.

Social Sensitivity

The world of David Starr, Space Ranger shows the frontier mentality common to most stories of exploration, whether of the American West or of outer space.

Good is good and bad is bad, with little room for subtlety or ethical complexity.

Democracy reigns, and totalitarian regimes must be resisted. Within the democratic system of Earth, progress holds a high place; authority comes through a special kind of meritocracy, with the best scientists entering the Council of Science, "not an official government agency, but its members were nearly above the government." In every volume of the series ability wins out over the circumstances of birth or fortune. Even the Council of Science, however, must defer to the elected government, which includes some selfserving politicians. After vanquishing one of them (in Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury), David observes that the corrupt Senator Swenson "keeps the Council on its toes" and adds that the Council "needs its critics, just as Congress and the government do," lest a scientific dictatorship should develop.

Throughout the series, progress coexists with a general sense of the need to preserve the environment. Humans make up only a part of the galaxy's population, and other sentient and semi-sentient beings have their riches too: the lovable V-frogs of Venus, the heat-seeking "ropes of rock" on Mercury, the orange patches and other marine life of the Venusian oceans. Considering the exploitation of the universe accepted in so much science fiction until very recently, this tolerance deserves notice.

Racism, as well as totalitarianism, becomes an issue after the first volume in the series. In Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury, Lucky comments, "it is variety in the human race that brings about progress." By the last of the novels, Lucky Starr and the Rings of Saturn, the totalitarian Sirians have developed a Nazi-like system of values, aiming at "a clean human race, composed of the fit." Lucky angrily retorts, "the great men of Earth have come from the tall and the short, from all manner of head shapes, skin colors, and languages."

While Asimov treats race and environment with sensitivity, gender is another matter. Virtually no women appear in the series; a rare exception, Mrs. Turner in Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus, who looks "almost too young to be a housewife," devotes all her time to arranging the Turner apartment—"colorful, frilly, almost fragile." Noting Bigman's surprise at this, she "dimple[s]" and observes (unnecessarily), "I just love little doodads and whatnots. Don't you?" Asimov's ability to create convincing women, as demonstrated in his adult novel The Gods Themselves and his later Norby series for children, is lacking here.

Literary Qualities

Asimov writes clearly and fluently, starting the plot on an exciting note—a mysterious death in a restaurant—and proceeding swiftly along the familiar lines of the mystery-quest. The simple and straightforward plotting mirrors the "we-versus-they" outlook of the cold war period in which the book and its five sequels appeared; the optimistic view of technology as a cure-all for the world's problems also marks this as a work of the 1950s.

Though some ideas set forth in David Starr, Space Ranger are dated, the basic themes of good versus evil and of the expanding frontier of human knowledge have just as much relevance today. As in most space operas, the characters are relatively simple, but the nature of the galaxy is not, and Asimov adds interest to the book through descriptions of planetary geography, scientific concepts, and gadgets of the future.

Asimov's wonderfully clear expository style suits his subject perfectly. Description and accounts of action rank high; dialogue, partly because the characters are rather simplistic, is sometimes less satisfactory. For instance, Bigman's constant exclamation, "Sands of Mars!"

becomes tiresome through too much repetition. As the series progresses the dialogue becomes more effective, and by the sixth volume, such repeated expressions have almost disappeared.

Themes and Characters

David Starr, Space Ranger, like all the books in the Lucky Starr series, sets good against evil. As in many adult space operas, the characters fall into three distinct groups: the major heroes (David Starr, the Council of Science, Bigman Jones), the local "good guys," and the "bad guys" (one principal villain and some unpleasant bullies).

In this book, Asimov introduces two characters who recur throughout the Lucky Starr series, David Starr and Bigman Jones. David Starr, youngest-ever member of the Council of Science, is the sole survivor of an expedition to Venus during which pirates killed his parents.

Tall, athletic, and brilliant, he has carried on his father's career with the help of his father's old friends, Hector Conway and Gus Henree. John "Bigman" Jones, a scrappy, stubborn Martian farmboy who stands barely five foot two, has run afoul of some influential people on Mars. When David arrives on Mars, Bigman befriends him, and by the end of the book the farmboy has become David's permanent sidekick. These two characters and their relationship give continuity to the Lucky Starr series.

Makian, the Martian owner of the farm where David and Bigman start their investigation, is a typical corrupt landowner who resembles a classic western villain more than he does a sciencefiction antagonist. His foreman, Hennes, supervises a large number of farm boys and is usually accompanied by a brutal bully, Griswold. Zukis Benson, a mild-mannered research scientist, serves as the farm's resident agronomist.

Within the book's rather simplistic portrayal of good opposing evil, two secondary themes are worth noting. One is the idea of a galaxy-wide government headquartered on Earth—perhaps Asimov's prophecy of space exploration's next stage. The other is the preeminence of science and the mind: among Earth's people, none are more important than the members of the Council of Science, and in each adventure the most intelligent person—David Starr, of course—prevails by solving an apparently impossible puzzle.

Topics for Discussion

1. David Starr has few, if any, noticeable faults. Does this make him harder to identify with?

2. The Martian farm boys show a simple but consistent code of loyalty and fair play. How does this contribute to the overall effect of the novel?

3. Does the fact that we now know the existence of intelligent life on Mars to be impossible affect your response to the novel?

4. What does "Bigman" Jones add to the story?

5. Is the villain plausible? How convincing are his motivations?

6. This book presents an optimistic view of science and technology. Do you think this view is exaggerated or even simplistic? Would readers of today be as optimistic about this subject as those of the early 1950s? Why or why not?

7. Like most science fiction of its time, David Starr,Space Ranger has no female characters. What assumptions are being made in such a book? How do you feel about this?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare David Starr, Space Ranger to the 1977 film Star Wars. What themes do they have in common? Is their appeal basically similar? Are there any important differences?

2. Relate the ethical code shown in David Starr, Space Ranger, to that of the typical western book or film. You may wish to include later volumes of the series in your discussion.

3. Some people consider the last volumes of the Lucky Starr series to be better than the first. Read the rest of the series and write about the changes that occur between the beginning and the end of the series, indicating which of these changes you consider improvements.

4. In the society portrayed in David Starr, Space Ranger, science and scientists have a great deal of power and status. Present a report on the relative value given to science and scientists by several Western countries in the 1950s and today. How do situations shown in the novel compare to those of actual twentieth-century society? Is the high status of science and scientists as depicted by Asimov possible—or desirable?

5. Some readers have thought that elements of David Starr, Space Ranger, such as the force-shield and the Martians themselves, seem more like magic than like science fiction. What is the distinction between science fiction and magic or fantasy? Classify various elements of the novel as science fiction or fantasy. Does the presence of almost magical elements detract from the book?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 12. Detroit: Gale, 1982.

Provides biographical information and a bibliography for Asimov.

Fiedler, Jean, and Jim Mele. Isaac Asimov. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982. A chapter on the Lucky Starrseries favors the last two books and comments on the parallel between Sirians and Russians.

Gunn, James. Isaac Asimov. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. Contains a brief entry on the Lucky Starrbooks that treats them as primarily scientific exposition and compares them unfavorably with Robert Heinlein's young adult works.

Patrouch, Joseph, Jr. The Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974. The discussion of the Lucky Starr books focuses on David Starr. Space Ranger development throughout the series, such as how Bigman is toned down and some of the more farfetched aspects of the "space ranger" persona are discarded.

Senick, Gerard, ed. Children's Literature Review. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1987.

The entry on Asimov summarizes accounts in several Gale publications and gives a substantial excerpt from Patrouch.

Related Titles

Lucky Starr and the Pirates of the Asteroids, the second book in the Lucky Starr series, pits Lucky and Bigman against pirates in the asteroid belt.

Though somewhat thin in both plot and theme, the book ties up the loose ends left by the long-ago disappearance of Lawrence and Barbara Starr, David's parents. The astronomic theories set forth in this volume are less dated than those in the other five books.

In Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus, a spectacular undersea setting elevates the standard quest for a hidden villain. Irresistibly appealing "V-frogs," a whimsical Asimov invention, feed on peas dipped in axle grease and affect the course of events with telepathy. The underwater battle with a giant, primitive creature, the "orange patch," rivals the action scenes in the novels of Jules Verne.

Lucky Starr and the Big Sun of Mercury poses a threat from the totalitarian Sirians, who are using an unknown local scientist as a double agent. This is also the first book in the series to include the subject of robots and their place in society. The book has been strongly affected by advances in scientific knowledge; part of the plot hinges on the idea that one side of Mercury is permanently exposed to the sun and is very hot, while the other side never sees sunlight and is very cold. Since it is now known that Mercury does rotate, this part of the plot suffers accordingly.

Many critics consider the last two volumes of the series to be the best. In Lucky Starr and the Moons of Jupiter, the Sirians have again planted a double agent in a group of scientists working on an "Agrav" project. Unlike earlier versions of the double agent, the culprit is not obvious this time. Lucky Starr and the Rings of Saturn carries the continuing battle right into Sirian territory. Far more complex thematically than the earlier volumes, this one takes up such questions as conflicting loyalties, elitism, military rule, and the ethics of colonialism.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996