

Podkayne of Mars Short Guide

Podkayne of Mars by Robert A. Heinlein

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Overview

Podkayne of Mars begins on Mars sometime in the future. Both Mars and Venus, once colonies of Earth, are now independent. Podkayne Freis, the young heroine and narrator of the tale, is excited by her family's upcoming trip to Earth but has her hopes suddenly dashed when she learns her parents cannot go. They must stay and care for three of their infants that were mistakenly "decanted" from a center where they had been kept in suspended animation. Podkayne's favorite relative, Uncle Tom, agrees to accompany Podkayne (or "Poddy" as she is called) and her brother Clark on the trip. Unknown to the children, Uncle Tom is being sent as a secret ambassador to a conference to decide whether Mars and Venus should join Earth's federation of planets. He believes that Mars should stay out of the federation and remain neutral.

Aboard a luxury space vessel bound first for Venus, Poddy makes friends, flirts with the crew, explores the ship, and proves herself during a dangerous radiation storm. The action then moves to Venus where Poddy and Clark are caught up in the political intrigue surrounding Uncle Tom's mission.

About the Author

Robert Anson Heinlein was born July 7, 1907, in Butler, Missouri. He was one of seven children. He later moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where he attended Central High School. After graduation in 1924, he attended the University of Missouri for one year before entering the United States Naval Academy. In 1929 he graduated twentieth in his class and was commissioned as an ensign in the Navy.

Heinlein served in the Navy from 1929 to 1934. He was stationed aboard various kinds of vessels, including the first modern aircraft carrier. His promising career was cut short in 1934 when he was found to have tuberculosis.

Heinlein then continued his studies in physics and mathematics at the University of California at Los Angeles. Once again poor health forced him to stop and move to Colorado to recuperate. Between 1934 and 1939 Heinlein explored many careers, including architecture, silver mining, real estate, and even California politics. He was an unsuccessful candidate in the Democratic primary for state representative.

Heinlein's career as an author began in 1939 at the age of thirty-two. He saw an advertisement for a competition offering fifty dollars for the best amateur science-fiction story. In four days he wrote a story that was accepted instead by the magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction*. Encouraged by this, Heinlein continued to write stories and became one of the most popular science-fiction writers in the country.

Heinlein's career was interrupted when the United States entered World War II. During the war, he worked as a civilian engineer at the Naval Air Materiel Center in Philadelphia. There he was involved with the design and testing of aircraft materials and parts.

During this time, he published only technical writings.

After the war, Heinlein resumed writing for an expanded audience. He wrote stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1947 he began a series of popular juvenile novels with *Rocket Ship Galileo* and later turned this novel into a movie, *Destination Moon* (1950). He used another of his novels, *Space Cadet*, as the basis for an early television series, "Tom Corbett: Space Cadet" (1950-1955). *Podkayne of Mars* was his last novel for juvenile readers.

Several later novels for adults made him a popular figure in the 1960s.

Stranger in a Strange Land was the first in a series of controversial books that explain Heinlein's individualistic notions about love, sex, religion, and politics. *I Will Fear No Evil* (1970), *Time Enough for Love* (1973), and *The Number of the Beast* (1979) are major works from this later period. Heinlein continued writing into the 1980s, publishing *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (1984) and *The Cat Who Walked Through Walls* (1985).



Like Isaac Asimov, Heinlein carried the themes of science fiction beyond science and adventure into issues of social and political concern. His views are often unorthodox, and critics are divided on the merit of his works, but no one denies his contribution to the science-fiction genre. Heinlein is the only author to receive science fiction's highest honor, the Hugo Award, four times in his career. He died on May 8, 1988, in Carmel, California.

Setting

In *Podkayne of Mars*, Heinlein skillfully combines the traditional interests of the genre—technology, foreign worlds, and alien creatures. His descriptions of the space vessel and its operations are technically detailed. He depicts futuristic societies on Mars, a pioneer world, and on Venus, a civilized but corrupt planet that is run like a business by the Corporation. Its citizens are "stockholders," and their capital, Venusberg, is a bustling metropolis of casinos, lavish shops, and bizarre nightlife.

When aliens make their appearance, they are not appealing creatures; one is a nasty, humanlike Venerian addicted to drugs, and the other is a small, furry mammal called a "fairy" because it can fly. The fairy looks cuddly but is actually quite dangerous.

Throughout the story, the exotic settings and creatures remain subordinate to human elements, however. For all the strangeness of their future worlds, Heinlein's characters act like common people.



Social Sensitivity

Podkayne of Mars, published in 1963, was the first of Heinlein's novels to feature a female protagonist. Heinlein seems to have made a conscious attempt to portray a more well-rounded woman's view of the world than he did in previous works. Intelligent, resourceful, and ambitious, Poddy in many ways resembles the young male heroes of Heinlein's earlier fiction. In some respects, her character is more compelling than those of Heinlein's earlier protagonists because of the added obstacles she faces—she is a young woman who wants to succeed in a male-dominated profession. On the other hand, Poddy is drawn to more traditional female roles, such as flirting and child-care.

Poddy's mother is portrayed as attractive and nurturing, but also as a master engineer of heavy construction who has been decorated for her outstanding work. From her mother, Poddy inherits ambition, but also a conflicting desire to devote herself to caring for infants. In a similar way, many women today struggle to balance the demands of career and family. Heinlein seems to suggest that ambitious women must place their infants in "suspended animation" until they have time to take care of them.

In having Podkayne abandon her career goals, Heinlein suggests that biology might ultimately be the deciding factor in the career/family dilemma. Instead of trying to combine both interests, as her mother does, Podkayne submits to her maternal instincts. As she says at the book's end: "One might say that we were designed for having babies. And that doesn't seem too bad an idea, now does it?" Heinlein's Podkayne is truly a curious blend of older and newer concepts of womanhood.

Heinlein also addresses issues of prejudice and bigotry. Because of the history of Martian settlement, the population there is a diverse mixture, formed by the intermingling of ex-convicts and genetically selected settlers of all racial and ethnic strains. Podkayne herself is a mix of Polynesian, Asian, and Swedish ancestry. Uncle Tom has Maori blood.

The inhabitants of Mars are proud of their mixed heritage, seeing it as representative of their rugged individualism and their ability to adapt to the demands of the frontier.

The destructive force of prejudice is seen in the characters of Mrs. Royer and Mrs. Garcia, who call Uncle Tom a "black savage." They consider themselves better than their fellow passengers and amuse themselves in bigoted gossip about their "social inferiors."

Their venomous remarks are heaped on Girdie, whom they shun because she associates with the "trash" of Mars.

Ironically, Girdie has a higher social standing than either of the two gossips.

When confronting such nastiness for the first time, Podkayne is shocked to discover this unpleasant side of human nature.

Literary Qualities

Heinlein tells the story from Poddy's perspective in the form of a diary.

Poddy's journal is full of superlatives, invented language, and broken sentences. She relates events after the fact, as if she were finding time to write during a quiet moment. Because of this form, the plot jumps from one distinct set of happenings to another, instead of proceeding in a continuous manner.

Some critics have found this technique choppy and disconnected, although others have praised Heinlein's use of the diary form.

Much of the suspense in *Podkayne of Mars* is derived from the fact that Podkayne only reveals as much of the plot as she knows or can deduce at any one time. For example, she knows that Clark has smuggled something aboard the ship but does not know what. She is also kept in the dark about her Uncle Tom's mission. The picture is always incomplete, but Heinlein provides clues along the way. He stresses Uncle Tom's political stature, and portrays Clark as capable and inventive, qualities that determine the ending of the story. Like a good mystery story, all of the threads of the novel come together in the final scenes.

Heinlein incorporates other literary devices: he uses one-dimensional characters that emphasize particular traits or qualities; he often uses character names as commentaries or jokes; he describes ordinary experiences in elaborate and inventive ways; he sprinkles the narrative with classical references to add depth to the work; and he creates complete and believable alternate worlds. All of these elements make *Podkayne of Mars* a superlative sciencefiction story.



Themes and Characters

Podkayne of Mars features three main characters: Podkayne, Clark, and Uncle Tom. Podkayne is a bright, adventurous sixteen-year-old whose ambition is to become the first woman deep-space pilot. She has looked forward to the trip to Earth because she wants to explore a space vessel and learn as much as possible about flight. Poddy is aware that she is attractive to men, and she candidly uses her feminine charms to flatter the egos of the captain and his crew.

They, in turn, allow this "harmless" young woman into areas of the ship that are off-limits to the other passengers.

Podkayne's driving ambition is tempered by a great love for infants, which emerges more strongly as the story develops. She finds herself in a dilemma, trying to envision a career that will unite and balance both sides of her character.

Podkayne sees life as an adventure, and through her adventures she matures into a young adult with quick perceptions and an ability to make realistic judgments about her world.

Clark is Poddy's precocious eleven-year-old brother, who has a higher IQ than his sister and enjoys bragging about it. He speaks several languages, beats "unbeatable" security systems, and performs complicated chemical procedures with makeshift equipment. He is calculating, slightly antisocial, and unnaturally greedy for someone his age.

For a price, he devises a bomb and smuggles it aboard the vessel, without considering the consequences. In Venusberg, he gambles in the casinos and consistently wins because he has figured out how to "beat" the odds.

Although Clark seems cold and surly, he gradually warms up and becomes more likeable as the story progresses.

For example, Clark reveals an unexpected talent for calming babies. He also develops a crush on one of the passengers and, when tricked into thinking she is in danger, rushes off to help her—only to be captured himself. When he and Poddy are kidnapped by terrorists, Clark has the chance to redeem himself.

As it turns out, the children are kidnapped by the same political group that paid Clark to smuggle the bomb aboard the vessel. Always prepared, Clark devises a clever escape plan that saves both his life and Poddy's.

The third main character, Uncle Tom, is a blustery, outspoken veteran of the revolution that won Martian independence. He is strongly committed to the freedom of the individual and the right to fight for this ideal. As a senator-at-large for the Republic, he will have a decisive influence at the upcoming conference to determine the role of Mars in Earth's federation. But Uncle Tom's devotion to his niece is a weakness that his



enemies try to manipulate by kidnapping her. These enemies want to coerce Mars into joining the Earth federation and demand that Uncle Tom change his vote or not attend the conference. Although devastated, Uncle Tom determines not to give in to the kidnapers no matter what their threats. Before he is put to the test, however, the children escape.

A variety of minor characters also contribute to the action. Podkayne's father is a history professor at Ares University.

Podkayne's mother is drawn in more detail: Mrs. Fries is a busy, well-respected engineer who has kept several infants in suspended animation. When these infants are "decanted," her professional life is interrupted, and a powerful maternal instinct takes over. Poddy describes her mother as having a "soft Madonna look in her eyes" when she is caring for these infants. This same dichotomy of ambition and maternal instinct is part of Podkayne's character.

The captain of the spaceship and his crew treat Poddy as a developing young woman, rather than as a child, and introduce her to the technicalities of space flight. Other passengers aboard the ship include Mrs. Grew, a fat old woman whom everyone likes because she is "fun," and Mrs. Royer and Mrs. Garcia, who consider themselves socially superior to the "trash" from Mars. These women gossip meanly about Uncle Tom and one of Poddy's new friends, Mrs. Girdle (Girdie) Fitz-Snugglie.

An attractive woman, Girdie enjoys the attentions of the crew and earns the scorn of some of the passengers. She is always kind to Poddy and offers her maternal advice. But there is more to her than first meets the eye. Girdie is the widow of a notoriously wealthy businessman who frittered away every dime before his death. Instead of despairing, however, she calls on her own inner resourcefulness. Girdie decides that she will get a job and support herself. On Venus, she is hired as a change girl in a casino, but within a week, because of her common sense and ability, she is training to be a dealer. The reader gets the impression that Girdie will soon be running the casino herself.

Fun-loving Mrs. Grew also turns out to be more than she first appears. She is actually a calculating professional terrorist who is paid to kidnap Poddy and Clark. Her assistant is the loathsome Venerian, whom she keeps manageable by feeding his addiction to illegal "happy dust." She plots to give him a larger dose than usual, thus turning him into a murderous maniac, and set him loose on Poddy.

While in Venusberg, Podkayne meets the handsome and charming Dexter Kert Cunhra, the son of the chief stockholder of the Corporation. He shares Poddy's interest in space travel, and, like her, plans to be a ship's captain. As Podkayne becomes more attracted to Dexter, she also begins to see how much of an advantage he has over her—he comes from a privileged family, and is a male in a male-dominated career. As a result of these realizations, her feelings for Dexter are ambivalent.

Throughout the novel, Uncle Tom's digressions on politics and life reflect Heinlein's own views. Uncle Tom sees individual freedom and self-determination as the cornerstones of human society, and compares the Martian struggle for independence with the American Revolution. Mars' commitment to remain neutral reveals Heinlein's belief in freedom of choice. But true freedom is not possible in societies that have become corrupt, such as Earth and Venus. Only on Mars, a frontier planet imbued with the pioneer spirit, do individuals have the freedom to act according to their principles.

Topics for Discussion

1. Podkayne and her mother have much in common. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

Does knowing her mother help us understand Podkayne?

2. Discuss Heinlein's description of the Corporation on Venus. What does it say about the author's views on business and free enterprise?

3. Podkayne is excited by the prospect of a trip to Earth. What is her picture of Earth? What do you think the author might be saying?

4. Uncle Tom has a very important political mission in the book. Do you think it is fair of him not to tell Podkayne and Clark about it?

5. Throughout the novel, Podkayne expresses herself on how women should act and what is expected of them. Compare these views with the way she acts around Dexter Cunnra.

6. What role does Girdie play in the novel?

7. Several times Clark intrudes in Poddy's journal with his own entries.

What effect does this have on the action and on the success of the journal form itself?

8. Heinlein likes to challenge his readers with references drawn from literature or history. In this novel there are several references to ancient Greek mythology, history, and culture. Find as many as you can and discuss what they add to the story.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. It is unusual for a male sciencefiction writer to write in the voice of a young female. Heinlein combines this unusual voice with a first-person narration. Does this combination succeed or fail in *Podkayne of Mars*?
2. In *Time for the Stars*, Heinlein also uses the journal form. Compare this book with *Podkayne of Mars*. Is one book more successful than the other? Does Heinlein succeed in creating realistic diaries? Does the form detract from the plot?
3. Critics have taken Heinlein to task for his treatment of women, especially in the later novels. How does he treat the subject in *Podkayne of Mars*? Does he disappoint the reader? Do you think the novel would be as popular if published today?
4. Mars figures in other Heinlein novels, such as *Red Planet*. Using both novels, discuss Heinlein's depiction of Mars and its societies, both human and alien. What themes can you see developing in these works?
5. Heinlein has been praised for creating realistic characters with whom young readers can identify. Consider the character of Clark. Does he fit this description? Is he believable? Is he sympathetic? How does he function in the novel?
6. Heinlein once remarked that science fiction, or speculative fiction, was the only genre that still allowed an author to exercise his imagination and wonder about things. In *Podkayne of Mars*, Heinlein wonders about future technology and humankind's adaptation to its changes. How realistic are Heinlein's speculations about suspended animation and space travel?

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Related Titles

Between 1947 and 1958, Heinlein wrote a series of juvenile novels, twelve in all, for the publisher Scribner's. Each is an adventure story in which the young protagonist grows up" and finds his or her place in the world. Heinlein never patronizes or confuses his readers, but rather challenges them with historical and literary references. More important, he presents situations that require the reader to question his or her own attitudes. All of these books remain contemporary in their appeal, but a few deserve special note.

Space Cadet still speaks to the aspirations of the young to explore the unknown, but also suggests that a competent elite must guide common people. Mars provides the setting for *Red Planet*, in which Heinlein develops his theories about a frontier society and rugged individualism. In *Tunnel in the Sky*, a group of young people is stranded on an isolated planet when a nova explodes. Instead of descending into savagery like the children in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Heinlein's group struggles to create a disciplined civilization.

Heinlein first uses the journal form in *Time for the Stars*. It is written by one twin, Tom, who goes off into deep space to search out new worlds for a crowded Earth to colonize. His brother, who stays behind, grows old and dies, whereas Tom—who has been traveling at speeds faster than the speed of light—remains young. In *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, Heinlein depicts a young heroine, Peewee Reinfeld, who resembles the spunky and resourceful Podkayne. Many consider this work the best of his juvenile novels in that it combines a light touch with interesting characters and a wellfocused plot.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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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

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