

Red Planet Short Guide

Red Planet by Robert A. Heinlein

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Overview

Red Planet is the story of a group's struggle to survive on a newly colonized planet. Two boys, Jim Marlowe and Frank Sutton, together with Jim's Martian "pet," Willis, learn of a plot that endangers the entire colony on Mars.

The adults of the colony gradually begin to organize themselves in response to the threat, but they continue to rely on the enthusiasm and skill of the youngsters.

Just as the adults admit that they have lessons to learn from the children, so too does the human community eventually open itself to lessons from the native Martian community. The colonists discover that many of their initial assumptions about the Martians—particularly those concerning intelligence—have been faulty. The humans realize that they must strive to understand civilizations that differ from their own, and to appreciate the value of others' insights.

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 novel takes place sometime in the future, on the planet Mars. Humans have colonized the planet, but have not yet conquered its environment. As a result, the colonists must constantly protect themselves against external dangers—the harsh Martian winters, the oxygen-poor atmosphere, and the occasionally hostile Martian animals and plants. Heinlein frequently parallels the Martian environment with that of the American frontier, and the colonists with the pioneers who settled the American West.

Social Sensitivity

Red Planet stresses the danger of allowing initial impressions to control one's opinions of others. Heinlein relates the colonists' attitudes and situation to those of past pioneers and revolutionaries, and refers to historical episodes in which the inability or unwillingness to understand other cultures proved harmful.

There is violence in this book, much of it performed by two young boys.

Throughout, however, Heinlein is careful to examine the motives that spark dramatic action. Jim rebels because the headmaster does not treat Willis as an intelligent being; the colonists rebel because the Company does not treat them as intelligent beings. There are clearcut moral standards, upheld by characters such as Doc MacRae; those who resort to prejudice as a result of greed and self-interest are shown to suffer in the end.

Literary Qualities

Red Planet is an adventure novel that explores such issues as friendship, intercultural relationships, and the importance of historical patterns. Heinlein's predominant literary technique is the creation of parallels between actual human society and the fictional world of Mars. Rather than create a totally fantastic world in Red Planet, Heinlein fills his novel with familiar characters, incidents, and relationships, all operating in an unusual, futuristic environment.

The friendship theme, as played out in the relationship between Jim and Willis, will find almost universal appeal. The book presents a fantasy come true: a pet who is actually a sentient being, able to communicate with its owner. More important, though, the story of Jim and Willis forces readers to consider the obligations humans hold toward those creatures they consider pets. The relationship between Jim and Willis also parallels that between colonists and Martians. By the end of the book, evidence has accumulated to suggest that, in both cases, the two parties may never really know enough about each other to exist under any but the most risky and potentially explosive circumstances.

Heinlein adds complexity to his work by developing his parallels from more than one perspective. On one occasion the Martians allow Jim to see himself as they see him: "loved but not respected .

. . . a great bumbling servant . . . like a poorly trained dog." The reversal of points of view is central to the thread that runs through the novel: friendship.

All of the human characters exhibit a range of attitudes toward Willis over the course of the book, and despite a whirlwind plot, the most compelling issue in Red Planet is the fate of Jim and Willis's friendship. The resolution of their difficulties teaches readers that the dearest parts of childhood do not always withstand the social upheavals of growing up.



Themes and Characters

Red Planet opens with Jim and Frank paying a visit to their friend Doc MacRae on the eve of their departure for school in Syrtis Minor, a settlement at the Martian equator. Both the school and the settlement are owned by the Mars Company—the organization that headed the original colonizing effort on Mars and continues to control the planet's government.

School proves to be hardly the pleasant experience the boys had expected.

The headmaster, Mr. Howe, demands conformity and absolute obedience of his pupils—just as the Company does of the colonists. Jim and Frank soon learn that the Company's plan for Mars will not only whittle away the colonists' liberties and rights, but will actually threaten their lives.

Both Jim and Frank are adventurous, independent, and well-adapted to life on Mars. The only subject on which they disagree is Willis, a childlike Martian creature who repeats, word for word, whatever he hears people say. Jim trusts Willis as a friend and treats him like an intelligent being; Frank considers Willis a pet, an animal with few or no capabilities beyond mimicry. Frank eventually comes to appreciate Willis, but his original doubts reflect Heinlein's belief that hasty judgments are unfair and often dangerous. Jim, too, is often wrong in his analysis of Willis's behavior patterns—not because he is prejudiced, but because he cannot conceive of the kind of life an "alien" might lead.

The most important adult in the novel is the colony's physician, Doc MacRae.

A cynical and occasionally irascible fellow, Doc provides a balance to the youthful exuberance of the two boys. He believes that the colonists' efforts are bound to go to waste, because the next wave of humans to populate Mars will be neither as dedicated nor as strong as their predecessors. Doc is also a link to long-ago days on Earth—a position that allows him to pass along to Frank and Jim those lessons from human history that he considers most important. The ideas and principles inherent in these lessons are adopted, defended, and ultimately preserved by the boys and their families when the Company threatens the colonists.

The process of exploring, colonizing, and civilizing a new land has occurred countless times in the history of humanity. In Red Planet, Heinlein pays close attention to the role played by the inhabitants of the colonized land. The Martians in the book—including Willis—are crucial to the spiritual development of the humans, and guide the colonists through the confusing web of moral issues that accompanies their revolution. Despite this guidance, the colonists' position at the end of the book remains precarious. They have declared their independence from both the Earth and the Company, and as a result must begin shaping a new world for themselves and their partners, the native inhabitants of Mars.

Topics for Discussion

1. During the discussion of whether or not Jim can take Willis to school, Doc MacRae says, "Trouble is the normal condition for the human race. We were raised on it. We thrive on it." What events later in the book support Doc's opinion?
2. Red Planet begins as an adventure story but changes into something more complex. When do the concerns of the story start to change? What are these new concerns?
3. Early in the book, Jim's father says that "Marlowes pay their debts." Jim repeats the line toward the end of the story. Why is this idea important to both Jim and his father?
4. After one colonist decides not to join the revolution, Doc MacRae says, "Most people never grow up. They expect Papa to get 'em the pretty moon." What does Doc mean by the statement? Does it apply to any of the main characters in the book?
5. What attracts Jim and Frank to Doc MacRae? Can you point to instances when they trust Doc more than they do other adults?
6. Analyze the relationship between Willis and Jim. Who do you think is the pet, and who the master, or are these labels totally inapplicable?
7. Why do Jim and Francis disagree so much about Willis? Who is proven correct by the end of the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. More than once, Doc MacRae compares Mars to the "Old West" in America.

Why? Are the comparisons valid? What do they add to the story?

2. Compare the colonization effort on Mars with other colonization efforts in history. How does the colonists' treatment of the Martians differ from other colonists' treatment of native populations?

3. One character points out that it took white civilization a long time to understand Native American civilization.

Focus on one Native American tribe and its struggles with the U.S. government, and compare this situation to the lack of understanding between races described in *Red Planet*.

4. What does *Red Planet* have to say about the necessity of leaving good friends as one grows older? Compare this theme in *Red Planet* to the same theme in another book you have read.

5. Write a short story or description of what you think Willis's life will be like after the end of the novel.

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Related Titles

Red Planet has an interesting connection to Heinlein's most famous work, *Stranger in a Strange Land*: the Martians in both stories are the same. The books do not, however, tell related stories, and *Stranger in a Strange Land* is a work aimed at older readers.



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