

The Voyage of the Space Beagle Short Guide

The Voyage of the Space Beagle by A. E. van Vogt

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Overview

As the novel begins, Coeurl is prowling his desolate planet looking for food. The arrival of beings in a spaceship, beings who can be his food, inspires ravenous hunger.

The beings are humans on a scientific expedition. They are curious about this vaguely cat-like alien and carefully bring the caged alien into their ship. On board, the alien proceeds to kill as many of the humans as it can, and to take over the engine room. The ship is saved only after one of the crew, the Nexial Science department head Grosvenor, devises a plan to trick Coeurl into stealing a lifeboat. The alien is fooled into following the ship instead of returning to his own planet, and commits suicide rather than be destroyed.

The Space Beagle is a ship staffed with nearly a thousand men, travelling from Earth on a deep exploration mission through our Milky Way galaxy and beyond it. The crew intend to spend four or five years travelling before eventually returning to Earth, but only half of these exploration missions return. Grosvenor is the first Nexial scientist to be sent on this type of mission, in hopes that his integrated knowledge of all sciences may improve the odds for survival.

The attrition rate may be understandable, not only because of internal politics but also because the number of dangerous alien races seems particularly high. While Grosvenor is coping with a rival science department head, the ship must cope with what appears to be a mental attack from telepathic aliens. Grosvenor has to invent a way to communicate with the aliens, who are actually friendly and peaceful, and tell the Riim to quit sending these confusing telepathic images—or else the captain will steer the spaceship into a star to keep it out of the hands of the scientists fighting him for control.

The humans have barely settled their dispute over who will be director of the mission when they meet another alien. Ixtl (as it calls itself) has been marooned in intergalactic space for an immeasurable amount of time. This tough, strong alien has survived unprotected in space, and one of the crew calls it a "blood-red devil spawned out of a nightmare." When the crew traps the alien Ixtl and brings it into the ship to be examined, Ixtl moves freely through the ship, walking at will through bulkheads, decks and everything but the dense outer shell of the ship. Ixtl kills some crew members and takes others as host incubators for its eggs. The humans' only hope is to follow Grosvenor's plan: to evacuate the ship and irradiate it. Ixtl escapes the radiation to drift once again in intergalactic space, unaware that the humans have returned to their ship.

On arrival at the next galaxy, M31, the crew becomes aware of the Anabis, a planet-changing alien which modifies planets so that they will be covered with dense jungles of living plants and animals. The alien, in the form of a gaseous cloud suffusing the entire galaxy, then envelops the planet and consumes all the life. It wishes, driven by the tropism of hunger, to follow the humans' spaceship to their own galaxy and graze there. Grosvenor devises a plan to trick it into following them in the direction of an impossibly distant galaxy until it starves; then the humans will return to their own galaxy in about

five years. He applies all the persuasions of his Nexialist training, and not only is given his way, but begins a successful series of lectures teaching the Nexialist methods to his fellow scientists, including the department head who used to be his rival and enemy.

About the Author

Alfred Elton van Vogt was born April 26, 1912 on a farm near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, the son of Henry van Vogt, an attorney, and Agnes (Buhr) van Vogt, a homemaker. His father seems to have been unstable financially and the writer's early life was marked by frequent migrations to and from various towns and villages in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Young Alfred was an enthusiastic reader of fairy tales until he was twelve, when a teacher's sarcastic comment made him ashamed of his taste in literature. When Alfred was fourteen, the family returned to Winnipeg. The shock of city life turned him into an introvert. He read two books a day for years, mostly detective stories.

Because of the family's poverty, young Alfred was unable to go to college, but he educated himself as best he could by haphazard but wide and intense reading—as many as five hundred books a year. He later studied at the University of Ottawa and the University of California.

Van Vogt began writing while employed in Ottawa by the Canadian census bureau in 1931. His early ambition was to win one of the prizes offered by McFadden's True Story magazine, and, in fact, it was not long before he had received a prize of \$1,000, an amount equal to his yearly salary as an employee of the census bureau. Despite this reward and his understandable euphoria, he developed a revulsion against this type of fiction and turned to other ways of making a living. Among these was the writing of plays for Canadian radio, for which he received about \$10 each—making a total of only \$600 for fifty plays, a sum which included bonuses and some resales in the United States.

Perhaps not many would have said at this point that van Vogt had much future as a writer. But in 1938, in McKnight's Drugstore in Winnipeg, he casually picked up the August issue of Astounding Stories and read the first half of a novella by Don A. Stuart. He wrote the editor, John W. Campbell, Jr., not knowing that Campbell was himself the author of "Who Goes There?", and briefly outlined a story more or less inspired by it. Campbell replied with words of encouragement and advice and subsequently accepted "Vault of the Beast," although he wisely withheld it until some stronger pieces by the new writer had been published.

Shortly after this, in 1939 van Vogt married Edna Mayne Hull, daughter of a Canadian economist and herself a writer, and they began living what was to be for some time a precarious existence. Canada was already at war with Germany, and van Vogt was drawn into service as a clerk for the government, working long days and weeks for barely subsistence wages, and writing *Slan* in the late evening hours.

A. E. van Vogt was recognized as a major science fiction talent with the publication of his first story, "Black Destroyer"—later to become part of *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*—in the July 1939 issue of *Astounding*.



This verdict was confirmed the following year when his first novel, *Slan*, was serialized in the same magazine.

Within a year and a half he had become an important figure in science fiction, the only writer at that time approximating the stature of Robert A. Heinlein; and, after Heinlein had left to fight in World War II, van Vogt easily and happily dominated *Astounding*, the most important science fiction magazine of its day, for several years.

After the acceptance of *Slan*, van Vogt quit his job and began slowly but very industriously to turn out stories for *Astounding*. He wrote by the Gallishaw method: in 800-word scenes, the action in each developing through five carefully delineated steps. This technique was much discussed in the 1940s and 1950s, perhaps because, in contrast to the vague statements offered by other writers about their methods of composition, it could be discussed. The method sounds mechanical, but van Vogt supplemented it with work habits that were anything but prosaic. Like some writers, he slept on his stories, but, unlike those others, he purposely dreamed them—he would awaken himself every hour and a half during the night with an alarm clock to fix the new incidents in his mind.

Slan, published as a book in 1946, is still widely regarded as a classic, and continues to be the mainstay of his fame.

Van Vogt's second published novel, *The Weapon Makers*, was serialized in 1943 and published as a book in 1947. This story did not engage the interest and affections of readers to the same extent as his first novel, but it was good-humored, colorful, and uninhibitedly inventive.

In 1944 the van Vogts moved to Los Angeles, and the number of van Vogt's publications fell off in 1945 because he was at work on a 90,000-word serial, *World of A*. Editor John W. Campbell spoke of this novel as "one of the truly great stories of science fiction," and he was never careless with his praise. But for the first time, dissenting voices were heard and antagonistic reviews appeared.

A. E. van Vogt's science fiction career divides into two distinct phases: the period when he was published in *Astounding* science fiction magazine (1939-1950) and the modern period (1962-present). During the gap from 1950 to 1962, he was heavily involved in dianetics, a system of psychology invented by the science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, who later founded the Church of Scientology. He was the first managing director of the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation of California, Los Angeles from 1950-53, and co-owner of the Hubbard Dianetic Center in Los Angeles from 1953-61.

Van Vogt had only one wholly new work published during this time, *The Mind Cage* (1957), but he also released several "fix-up novels," as he terms them: magazine pieces stitched together to form more or less coherent narratives. He became a naturalized American citizen in 1952.

He returned to full-scale writing in 1962, with the publication of *The Violent Man*, a book that is not science fiction but was of crucial importance in the development of his career.



It was meant to expose the psychogenesis of violence, a subject he felt to be of such importance that the book would necessarily become a best-seller. But, though the book was carefully constructed and undoubtedly his most serious piece of writing, his hopes for it were not realized.

Instead, van Vogt returned to science fiction with some rather safe and unadventurous magazine pieces. He wrote a series of paperback novels, most of which were published in the 1970s, reflecting his growing preoccupation with the nature of violence.

This seemed to be a topic of inexhaustible interest to this gentle man who said in many fanzine interviews that he turned inward and to writing because of the remorse he suffered when, at the age of seventeen, he pursued and killed a harmless snake.

Van Vogt was still writing in the 1980s.

He not only produced four new books from 1978 through 1980, but set about learning what seemed to be virtually every language of this planet. He was a Founder of the 200 Language Club in 1974.

His first wife died in 1975; he later married Lydia I. Brayman (a linguist and superior court interpreter) in 1979. Van Vogt died of Alzheimer's disease on January 26, 2000, in Los Angeles, California and is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery, Culver City, California.

Setting

The novel takes place in deep outer space, after months of travel from Earth's own solar system. The characters are travelling in a space ship among star systems across the Milky Way galaxy, and even to the neighbouring galaxy, M31, in Andromeda.

The Space Beagle is a spaceship of grand proportions, larger than any aircraft carrier which actually existed at the end of the twentieth century, but smaller than the fictional "Death Star" from the Star Wars movies. The duties of only a few characters are described, or even sketched out, among the crew of 180 officers and soldiers and 804 scientists.

The planets and beings encountered by the crew of the Space Beagle are intended to be plausible, scientific speculations of what could possibly be discovered during such a journey. The places and cultures described are also intended to be interesting and educational for the reader. A great deal of facts, as well as the author's opinions, are inserted into every scenic description of ruined cities or analysis of the motives of tentacled aliens.

With courageous explorers moving their high-tech equipment from planet to planet as easily as an automobile is driven, the novel is easy to identify as a classic example of pulp fiction published serially in America before World War II, and as a seminal influence upon the space opera sub-genre of science fiction writing. The reader will be overwhelmingly aware that all post-1950 films and television series set on a spaceship are at least as heavily influenced by *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* as van Vogt was influenced by Jules Verne's *Voyage to the Moon* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.



Social Sensitivity

Teachers using this novel in a classroom must be acutely aware that the first alien met by the crew of the Space Beagle is named pussy by them. There will be no escaping the scorn and hilarity of adolescents, an understandable reaction. There was no need for the author to use this particular word with its associated obscene and denigrating meanings when naming a beast which appears vaguely feline in shape: in 1939, "kitty" was used at least as often to name cats in print and in polite conversation. The author, who never spent time in the company of men at a university, in the Armed Forces or the work force, clearly was unfamiliar with the common, informal vocabulary of grown men. He may be excused for his inexperience, but his editor can be blamed for perpetrating the womanhating theme of this novel through bad editing.

In this novel, the reader can see all the essential traits of van Vogt's writing throughout his career, and even his later obsession with ethics and violence.

In his latter years, van Vogt no longer wrote in the action/adventure style as he did in *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, when that style of pulp science fiction writing was popular. It seems that during the years of his absence from the field of science fiction publishing, van Vogt's involvement with dianetics brought him into contact with questions concerning the health and happiness of human beings. Contact with a bustling movement addressing itself to matters of large import changed his perspective. He could not go back, innocently, to writing pulp-magazine stories. He was troubled by the feeling that such "unreality writing" is "aberrated."

But there was a way in which science fiction could be worthy—it could become a vehicle for his ideas. By suggesting to the reader something of the underlying dynamics of life and the universe, van Vogt could affect him in a more basic and permanent way. Van Vogt is quoted as saying in Arthur Coax's biographical essay: My feeling is, that once a reader has read any science fiction of mine, his brain will no longer be the same. That's my mark on the sands of time; several million readers all over the world changed (for better or worse—I think for better) without their even noticing it.

In numerous magazine interviews, van Vogt claimed immortality as a writer—based on the quality of his fiction of ideas, his speculations on the psychology of violence, the character of women, and the politics of totalitarianism. Even the misogynistic theme of *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* can be read as feminist in that it regards females as active, powerful characters in a narrative, and that it gives any consideration at all to the existence of females (unlike much pulp fiction of the 1930s and 1940s). His insis-

tence on the idea component of his work invests him, as a science-fiction writer, with a peculiar authenticity. His life as a writer and his life as a man are linked by the ideas which dominated his later writing. But his most striking work results from his translating figurative ideas into literal realities; and he is remembered above all else as the author of *Slan*, *The World of Null-A*, and *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*.

Literary Qualities

The Voyage of the Space Beagle was a popular novel when it was published, because it combined interesting scientific speculations with a plot that leapt from crisis to crisis, written in the plain language style of the Golden Age science fiction pulp magazines.

The novel's flat characterization and AngloAmerican-centered worldview were expected by the editors and writers of that time. It is no longer as popular, because the dialogue has very little emotion or personal content; this and the abrupt transitions from scene to scene make this novel old-fashioned.

Readers may find this novel emotionally flat and didactic. The author tends to "tell" the reader that actions have happened, instead of "showing" the reader what is happening through the thoughts and reactions of the characters. A few energetic fight scenes and high-tech tools are no longer enough to keep the attention of most young readers engaged for an entire book.

As one of the influential works of sociological science fiction, this was primarily a novel of ideas, in which the author showcased several science concepts without cluttering up the narrative with too many motivations or metaphors. The Voyage of the Space Beagle has spawned many intellectual grandchildren. But during the more than sixty years since "Black Destroyer" (the first published portion of the novel) appeared in print, there have been several literary movements in the science fiction genre. Sociological science fiction published in the twenty-first century now relies considerably more on characterization, foreshadowing and symbolism than can be found in van Vogt's first novel.

Van Vogt's decline in popularity may have been caused by many of his stories of recent years not having the same degree of narrative interest as his early ones. Arthur Coax suggests in a biographical essay that van Vogt had become more and more interested in conveying his ideas to the reader, and the result is a loss of narrative credibility that causes the startling transitions and violent actions of the plots sometimes to seem insufficiently motivated and therefore out of focus or even comic.

The genesis of this later trend in van Vogt's writing can be seen even in this first novel, in which the violent actions and startling transitions do at times seem insufficiently motivated. The author is conveying science ideas instead of making his narrative credible. It is hard for a reader to summon up fear for the survival of the crew of the Beagle when few of them have names or distinguishing habits, and they endure successive attacks by aliens instead of making useful discoveries.



Themes and Characters

The only character well fleshed out in this novel is Elliot Grosvenor (pronounced ell-yot grow-venn-er), sometimes called Grove by his crewmates. He is some five or six years younger than any other science department head on the Space Beagle, perhaps thirty-five years old, and that is the only physical characteristic which the reader is told about him. Apparently he is healthy, strong and active, as would be expected of any astronaut.

All the other crewmates exist as foils for Grosvenor to interact with; they are knowledgeable in only one field, helpful or interfering as they see fit, and all of them are eventually deeply impressed by Grosvenor's Nexial training.

What the reader is told about Grosvenor is that he has been thoroughly trained in Nexialism, or to understand all the sciences. The author seems to have intended to impress the reader with Grosvenor's analytical ability, rather than inform the reader with the knowledge of how to be so capable and well-trained.

In short, Grosvenor's character is like that of Mr. Spock or Data from the Star Trek television series, and he is probably at least as hard to get along with as either of them.

Like them though, he does have some friends. Grosvenor has only good intentions for everyone on board his ship. He never misuses his knowledge and talents to gain any personal benefits. It may seem that he does, in the latter part of the novel, when Grosvenor takes over the entire ship and applies his persuasive techniques for a short while; but he does so only to ensure that the crew will seriously consider his methods to defeat the current alien menace and save the ship. Then Grosvenor gives up control of the ship. He is, of course, achieving the goal he was placed on the ship to do: keep the people alive in the face of great danger, and teach them Nexialism while doing so.

He has always been working toward this goal, all along.

In this novel van Vogt originated and explored ideas and themes that have since become mainstays of science fiction writing. Donald A. Wolheim says of van Vogt: From the first, his stories have concerned themselves with extraordinary powers, with new concepts in science or in mental gymnastics, and he constantly seems to strive to create new systems of thought and mental order which will permit the creation of supermen.

"Fascination with a system of thought— in this case, general semantics—is characteristic of van Vogt's writing," says Jeffrey M. Elliot. It is an attempt to explain the thought process that goes on in a person's mind when a word is spoken or heard. In this novel, Grosvenor has learned a great deal of science by verbal means, through hypnotic instruction and subliminal recordings when he is asleep. He is quite capable of manipulating his crewmates through overt application of words, sounds, hypnotic gases and assorted technology. He is far less effective at affecting his crewmates' behavior through mere conversation or displaying a poster.



There is a strong theme throughout *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, which is reinforced every time the ship meets an alien being. That theme is rejection and hatred of the female.

The spaceship is crewed entirely by men—nearly a thousand of them, all given drugs to reduce their sex drive. This is emotionally unsatisfying, though, and the reader is told baldly early in the book that the men's favorite topic of conversation at breakfast and lunch is to discuss women and sex. They do not describe these women in positive terms, though; as one of the men puts it: "What defenseless woman's character shall we assassinate today?" That is the only time women are mentioned at all during the course of the novel, except when Grosvenor plays a mind-control machine which makes a man remember his mother— a technique Grosvenor discards as too manipulative.

This alone is not unusual for a pulp science fiction novel written in the 1930s or 1940s. But the ship is not referred to as "she." Not only are there no women in this novel, but the aliens are not referred to as female either. Male pronouns are used for Coeurl and Ixtl, and the Riim and the Anabis are called "it." This in spite of the fact that Ixtl is an egg-layer, the Riim reproduce by parthenogenetic budding (reproduction by development of an unfertilized, usually female, gamete [germ cell] that occurs especially among lower plants and invertebrate animals), the Anabis envelops the objects of its desire, and Coeurl is a feline, graceful being actually named pussy by the crew of the *Space Beagle*.

These alien beings have many feminine characteristics, and it is at least in part because of these feminine characteristics that the men of the *Space Beagle* want to kill every alien being they meet. It is only with disappointment that they leave Coeurl's people to starve to death on their planet; the crew would much rather go back and kill them all. The crew is similarly disappointed that they cannot blame the Riim sufficiently for causing insurrection on board the *Space Beagle* with telepathic messages; there really is no excuse to go back and kill them all.

Ixtl and the Anabis are stranded in intergalactic space to starve—only because they are too hard to kill by shooting.

Ultimately, *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* is the story of a boy's clubhouse travelling through space with a metaphorical sign saying "No Girls Allowed" hung from each of the (non-metaphorical) weapons.

Many critics find van Vogt's later work less impressive than *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* and other pieces which he did for *Astounding* in the 1940s. Various stylistic oddities tend to detract from the story line.

The author himself explained to Jeffrey Elliot: For years, until the 1960s, I consciously wrote pulp-style sentences. They have a certain lush poetry in them. In the late 1960s, I began to concentrate on content and even allowed my protagonist to be neurotic, also. However, these current stories don't seem to win the same approval as when I followed the earlier system.

Elliot is not alone in his assertion that there are few science fiction writers alive today who can boast the singular achievements of A. E. Van Vogt, a long-time talent in the field, who has spent his lifetime giving meaning and import to the shape of things to come.



Topics for Discussion

1. Where have you heard before of a ship full of men going into uncharted regions, looking for knowledge?
2. How is this journey different from others you have heard about? Is the futuristic setting the important difference? Is the fictional element the important difference?
3. What do these travellers intend to accomplish on their journey?
4. What is revealed to the reader through the story, which may not be part of the traveller's intended goals?
5. Why does the story focus on Grosvenor rather than the Captain or the Director?
6. What is Grosvenor's major accomplishment during the voyage? Is it overt or subtle?
7. Why does the author tell the reader so little about his characters? Is it hard to guess how these men look, sound, dress or move?
8. How does the crew react to crisis situations?
9. How does Grosvenor react to opposition? How does he behave in a crisis?
10. Can you make any guesses about why half of the interstellar expeditions sent out in the last two hundred years have not returned?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who was Darwin? What voyage did he make? Is van Vogt drawing any comparisons between the journey of his character Grosvenor and the voyage that Darwin made? What were the goals of Darwin and Grosvenor, and what did they achieve during their travels?

2. The process of democratic elections being held aboard the Space Beagle during the course of this novel are more reminiscent of votes held aboard pirate ships in the Caribbean and the South Seas than like the power structure in the ships of the British Navy. Are the explorers on this spacecraft really privateers seeking plunder and personal gain, or are they soldiers on a reconnaissance mission? Explain.

3. Grosvenor behaves as though he wishes to be treated like a scientist and scholar, dedicated to sharing knowledge and learning whatever he can. Does he actually live up to the idealized image of himself which he tries to present? Are his motives as pure as he tries to make them? What disparity is there between his actions and his stated goals?

4. Compare Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Breakfast of Champions* with A. E. van Vogt's novel *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*.

What elements of science fiction are employed by one, or both, of these authors? How important is technology in each of these novels? What is the reader intended by the author to learn about human nature in each of these novels? What is your own reaction to the author's voice in these novels? Do you find the writing style of Vonnegut or of van Vogt to assist in your understanding of the story, or does it interfere?

5. What does the crew of the Space Beagle do each time that it meets an alien being during this voyage? Discuss what this tells the reader about the actions and culture of the crew and its leaders, whatever their stated intentions may be. Is this journey truly a scientific voyage of discovery? Is this journey more like Columbus's than Darwin's?

6. Choose one of the aliens described in *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*. Select two or more passages which describe the creature's physical appearance, usually including external color, limbs, and sensory organs. Draw a picture of the alien as described in one of the scenes. Will you show the alien in its own setting, or on board the Space Beagle? Will there be human figures nearby for comparison? Prepare your picture for display, with the excerpts from the novel.

7. In *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, A. E. van Vogt goes to considerable lengths to tell the reader about the physical appearance of each alien race described in the novel. Yet he makes only minimal references to the physical appearances of the human beings on board the Space Beagle. Also, all of his characters are referred to by male pronouns (except the neuter Anabis), whether they are human, near-immortal non-breeding alien, egg-laying alien or parthenogenetic budding aliens. Some of the aliens are referred to



as "red devil" or "Black Destroyer." Is van Vogt writing a racist manifesto or a pulp scifi novel? How much is racism a factor in this novel? Or sexism? Is van Vogt simply writing in the style common to the genre and period, or is he writing to meet a cultural agenda? What can the reader infer about the author, the magazine he was writing for, and the time and place in which he was writing?

8. Van Vogt writes in this novel that all the interstellar expeditions that are being sent from Earth, as the Space Beagle was sent, are "proving grounds for sociological experiments: Nexialists, elections, split command—these and innumerable small changes were being tried out in the hope that man's expansion into space could somehow be made less costly." Half of the ships sent out in the last two hundred years never came back.

If half of the ships blew up when the engines were first started, engineers would investigate the problem and redesign the engines. What are the sociological problems being investigated, by whom, and how successful does the redesigning process appear to be?

9. Compare Grosvenor's manipulation of his crew mates through verbal means (assisted with hypnotic gas and other technical tricks) with the manipulations done by the linguists in Suzette Haden Elgin's books *Native Tongue* and *The Judas Rose: Native Tongue II*. Why can the linguists have such profound effects upon the emotions of the people with whom they converse, while Grosvenor is comparatively ineffectual in conversation?



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Related Titles/Adaptations

The Voyage of the Space Beagle is credited by James Cameron as being the inspiration for the movie Alien.

The character of Grosvenor in this novel definitely inspired the character of Mr. Spock in the television series Star Trek, produced and created by Gene Roddenberry. There are some overt references to this novel in the Star Trek novels published by Pocket Books, especially the novels which are also derivative of small-press fan-fiction.

The character of Grosvenor was also a clear inspiration for John Brunner's novel called Polymath, featuring characters who are polymaths—multi-talented individuals who have been trained as experts in very nearly every field of human learning.



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