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**Not so clear-cut after all : Rezension: Clareson, Thomas D. / Sanders, Joe,
The heritage of Heinlein : a critical reading of the fiction. Jefferson 2014**

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Not So Clear-Cut After All. Thomas D. Clareson and Joe Sanders. *The Heritage of Heinlein: A Critical Reading of the Fiction*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 232 pp. ISBN 978-0-78-647498-1. \$45 pbk.

Reviewed by Simon Spiegel

There seems to be a renewed critical interest in the works of Robert A. Heinlein. For quite some time, there have been few new publications on the first Grand Master of science fiction, but the last year has not only seen the publication of the book under consideration, but also that of the second and final volume of William Patterson's massive (although too uncritical) biography. Additionally, there are currently at least two more books on Heinlein in the making.

It is curious that so little work has been done in recent years on Heinlein, who is undoubtedly one of the (if not *the*) major figures of golden age sf, and who influenced the genre in its most formative period. Joe Sanders gives at least part of the answer in his preface as he describes Heinlein's enigmatic personality: "He was a rude bully and a generous friend, a thick-skinned pro and a nervous artist" (11). In some ways, these contradictions continue in his writing; many people love Heinlein's juveniles—but are appalled by some of his later novels, both by their content and their lack of formal coherence. It almost seems as if there were a collective shame that the writer who did so much for the genre—according to Joe Sanders and Thomas Clareson, the juveniles "introduced at least a generation of readers to science fiction" (63)—also wrote novels like *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) or *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* (1985).

But literary criticism should neither be about an author's personality nor about the feelings of the reader. In the past, there have been many attempts to distill Heinlein's own position from his fiction. Ultimately such endeavors reveal a simplistic understanding of literature and are not very productive. In contrast, *The Heritage of Heinlein*—which was begun by Clareson and finished, long after his death, by Sanders—tries to concentrate on Heinlein's writing. While it is impossible to completely leave out the personality of an author who voiced his opinion so often and so vocally as Heinlein did, Sanders and Clareson try to stick to what is actually tangible: the written word.

The book is divided into seven chapters and proceeds chronologically. Chapter 6 deals exclusively with Heinlein's biggest success, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Chapter 1 is devoted to Heinlein's first novel, the posthumously published *For Us, the Living* (written in 1938). While it is understandable that no publisher was interested in this rather boring utopian novel, retrospectively it proves to be an instructive first work, since it already contains many elements Heinlein would come back to later: "Besides many aspects of *For Us, the Living*'s world, [...] from specific names to technical and social predictions, readers will notice how [the main character] Perry's education proceeds by methods that Heinlein used throughout his career" (19).

Already present in this first novel is Heinlein's tendency to stop telling a story in favor of proselytization. Clareson and Sanders describe this tendency as "Socratic dialogue" (19). Later, juveniles like *Space Cadet* (1948) are described as *Bildungsroman* (65). Both Socratic dialogue and *Bildungsroman* are didactic forms. As Heinlein wrote in the 1947 essay "On The Writing of Speculative Fiction," there are only three basic kinds of plot, and one is the "the man-who-learned-better." It is not a big exaggeration to say that Heinlein used a variation of this plot throughout his career: the-man-who-already-knew-better. Many of Heinlein's characters are highly pragmatic, slightly cynical men who know exactly how things work (e.g., Lieutenant Raszak, Hugh Farnham, Jubal Harshaw, Lazarus Long). However, they do not necessarily have to be protagonists; especially in the juveniles, the "young protagonists need a mentor who is more worldly and disrespectful" (201).

Much has already been written about these competent men, but, as the authors note, "perhaps not enough has been said about worried men, perhaps even frightened" (60). One point they stress is that Heinlein's stories can be much more ambiguous than they appear. Hugh Farnham, for example, while obviously a "good guy" who does what needs to be done, fails in almost everything he tries to achieve.

Heinlein has often been accused of building up straw man arguments that are then easily wiped away by characters acting as mouthpieces for the author. Sanders and Clareson disagree: "Heinlein is capable of seeing opposing positions, putting them together in the same work, and somehow getting away with neither or both" (120). In personal communication, Heinlein would often express "with absolute certainty whatever opinion he was voicing at the time, as if no reasonable person could disagree" (11), but "his texts are richer in ambiguities than sometimes supposed" (121). An alleged exception is the notorious case of *Starship Troopers* (1959): "it says exactly what Heinlein intended" and "most vehemently treats its readers like

children” (129, 131). In reality, *Starship Troopers* is much less clear-cut than its dumb veneer suggests; the novel makes it clear that only people who are ready to sacrifice their lives for their community are true citizens, but Johnny Rico never really accepts this credo. He explicitly states that the only reason he stays in the army is the army itself and not some lofty thought about the responsibilities of a citizen. Whether this was intended by Heinlein is difficult to say. The fact that Sanders and Clareson do not see this ultimately stresses their point: it is easy to miss how deceptive these seemingly unambiguous stories often are.

Overall the authors do a fine job of analyzing the recurring themes in Heinlein’s *œuvre*. Unfortunately, they do little else beyond thematic assessment. Their reading not only remains almost completely work-immanent but also largely free of theory. The few occasions on which they address theoretical issues (e.g., a few paragraphs on Freud) seem almost naive. The focus on Heinlein’s fiction is also not entirely satisfying. For instance, the themes dealt with in his 1974 Forrestal Memorial Lecture at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, which he took very seriously, resonate throughout his entire canon. Also, one does not need to fall back into simple biographizing to note that General Semantics, a kind of all-encompassing linguistic philosophy promoted by Polish immigrant Alfred Korzybski, was important for Heinlein. Patterson writes extensively about his enthusiasm for General Semantics, and Korzybski’s ideas do indeed permeate Heinlein’s writing. *Stranger in a Strange Land*’s concept of “groking” ultimately takes Korzybski’s concept to its logical extreme.

For a book with the title *The Heritage of Heinlein*, there is also surprisingly little on how the author influenced the genre as a whole. Heinlein is generally considered to be one of the authors who considerably improved science fiction and moved it out of the pulps. He is often praised for avoiding the proverbial info-dump, for example, by unobtrusively working vital information into the story itself, a technique sometimes called “heinleining.” It would have been interesting to learn whether or not this was indeed Heinlein’s innovation and how his stories compared to sf written at the same time. But these issues (and formal questions in general) are hardly discussed. *The Heritage of Heinlein* is a solid and readable study, but it is far from the last word on Heinlein.