

Icehenge

Kim Stanley Robinson

ISBN 0-312-86609-7 (acid-free paper)

Read: 2009 August 10 to late September

Reviewed: 2009 September 26

“We dream, we wake on a cold hillside, we pursue the dream again. In the beginning was the dream, and the work of disenchantment never ends.”

Robinson writes magical novels. This one is not part of the Mars Trilogy (Red / Green / Blue), but it shares many of the trilogy’s qualities and technologies. It is good science fiction, meaning that it is good science, but aside from that it is a great drama.

As with the Mars Trilogy, Robinson starts from a civilization that has made it possible for people to live several hundred years (as opposed to several decades) so that they will have time to get anything done in life. Helpful, but there are drawbacks. The people get old and look like turtles, and their hippocampus isn’t adequate for memories beyond a few score years so no one remembers their own past, their own youth, except as it is recorded such that they are able to read about it. Late in the book we meet some people who don’t want to live more than 500 years and kill themselves by pact to achieve it.

This longevity device, nonetheless, allows people to pursue research that can take decades without having to be in a hurry, apart from competition. It allows them to travel among the planets, something that now, and then, takes years, without it really being a problem. For transportation devices, Robinson uses some of the most clever ideas from current futurists.

There is another literary device that the book uses that was a complete surprise to me and which enhanced, for me, the way the whole story worked. If you don’t want this surprise ruined and you know already anyway that you would enjoy another KSR sci-fi thriller, stop now and read the book before finishing this “review.” This technique is reminiscent of the device that opens Red Mars, the very first book of the trilogy. Among the main characters of that book is John Boone, the first man on Mars. In the introductory aside before the beginning of the first chapter, Boone is assassinated. Kill off the main character before the book, indeed, the trilogy even starts. Beat that.

Icehenge begins with the journal of Emma Weil, 2248 A.D. She is stationed on an asteroid miner and some of her shipmates are involved in a revolution. The revolution, in short, is to take over three asteroid miners, reconfigure two of them into a starship, and head out of the solar system for a nearby star which will still be decades or centuries away.

Weil is one of the leading researchers in closed cycle life support systems. Much of the tension in this section is over the problem that, fine tuned as they can be, there are some chemical dead ends in such systems that will cause them to collapse over decades. The biggest challenge of going to the stars will be to iron out these details and make a system work for centuries rather than decades.

Weil is not a rebel herself and isn't in on the mutiny at first, but after adjusting to the rebellion going on around her and some introspection about her own life and goals, does help them out some with their life support research. In the end, she does not go along. An early lover of hers, Oleg Davydov, is among the leaders. They say goodbye and part ways in an enormously profound sense.

Politics are not good on Mars, from where the solar system government and mining operations seem to be run. It's kind of becoming a tyranny. The rebels are rebelling because they think this might be the only chance in history to make a jump for the stars. Civilization might collapse and they'd lose the capability. Sounds like space exploration urgency today.

Of course, the Mars police come looking for them and there is a tense moment when they are hiding these three huge miners behind an asteroid while the police scan through nearby space. Emma does not co-opt her companions.

All those who want to go back to life as they know it are sent on one of the miners on a trip back to Mars, designed in such a way that it can't interfere with the other two ships leaving the solar system. They say their good byes, the *Rust Eagle* is sent coasting back towards Mars. It is within days of arrival when Emma's narrative ends.

In a sense this is a case study in, "actually build something and it has problems, it can no longer be the ideal," a concept I've discovered in every facet of my life over and over, except, of course, for the yet unrealized fantasies.

Turn the page and section II begins. "Hjalmar Nederland, 2547 A.D.

(There are no chapters, just the three enormous sections.)

"What we feel most, we remember best."

Nederland is an archaeologist. He grew up in New Houston under a dome that was destroyed by the rebels in a revolution about a hundred years ago, yes, during the events of Emma Weil's narrative. History has been revised to deny that there was ever a rebellion. As for the stolen miners heading for the stars, this is essentially unknown except for a few unsubstantiated rumors that few care about. As for his youth, Nederland remembers nearly nothing, being something like 200.

But he is rebellious against the status quo and accepted research which, after all, is corrupted by the government, the Committee. An interesting twist is that Hjalmar has a lover on the Committee, a man who steers him to work on disruption of and disproof of the Committee history. It's not self destructive, it's all politics. No matter what is proven or found, they will just make speeches that interpret it all as if the Committee were always right and always in control. Remember 1984 and double-think?

After considerable work by Nederland and his team of grad students, itself a well presented story with rich characters and realistic tensions between the people and the science, evidence is discovered in the New Houston dig of the rebels trying to flee the city during a battle that occurred right around here somewhere during Nederland's own youth .. somewhere around here. In the car that is found under a mudslide are some papers including a journal. It is Emma Weil's journal, the entire first section of this book!

Nederland becomes obsessed with Emma, her account of the trip to the stars and the rebellion. He re-reads the journal many times. He develops an anonymous lover who reminds him of her, perhaps *is* her. (After all, people live hundreds of years.) At the end of his section, he strikes out on his own looking for the rebel base several days drive away in the hills. The terrain gets to where he has to stop the car and hike. He does find the base and he does find Emma, at least a figure in a space suite, at the end of a Martian Chronicles-class struggle. Or did he? Was it a hallucination? He nearly dies on the way back, adding some credibility to the story. He becomes one of only two or three people who has survived a night on Mars exposed.

Earth is kind of an afterthought in all this. The gravity and all there is way too stressing and the politics doesn't favor it much anymore. Visits are made that illuminate the narrative and the ancient history of the characters (and us), including one to Stonehenge.

No, we haven't talked about Icehenge yet.

The third section is Edmond Doya, 2610 A.D. Edmond is a low functioning drifter, a great-grandson of Nederland but they don't know each other much if at all. His mother was a granddaughter of Nederland. They met once in section two. Nederland was rude to her, as he was to everybody, not intentionally but just because he was a general self righteous always correct jerk. Doya's dad kept him away from that end of the eternal family. Eventually the dad moved to earth where he spent the next big portion of his life navigating around the Pacific like the ancients did, by only the stars and their feelings. This reminds us of the ferrels in Blue Mars. People who are going to live for a thousand years doing what they are really made to do, enjoying life at the edges.

... with excellent medical and dental care, of course (as I once heard Robinson say in a speech on such matters.)

We find Doya on the way to Pluto. There is a strange monument there, obviously set by intelligence, at the north pole, an arrangement of dozens of liths of ice. I think the inference here is that an expedition to the stars might have stopped off to commemorate themselves at their last stop in the solar system, Pluto. Indeed, one of the liths has words and the number 2248 carved in it in some obscure earth dialect. Pretty compelling. We suspend disbelief on the point that Pluto would likely be nowhere near an arbitrary escape trajectory from the solar system. (This was written in 1984 when Pluto was still a planet.) But it is romantic, however, to think of Pluto as a last outpost before the “open seas,” as it were, so we continue.

Living in parks on asteroids, washing dishes for a little money so he can afford to get his e-mail and do a little historical research, Doya has become obsessed with the work of Nederland, his great grandfather, and thinks he has another interpretation. Eventually his work begins to threaten the richest person in the solar system, Caroline Holmes. She lives in a space station in a polar orbit of Saturn where she spends her days looking at the rings and doing some obscure science on them. She made her fortune in mining.... She might *be* Emma. She might have owned those ships that disappeared. Or did she? Or did they disappear? Or were there ships?

Where did all that ice in the liths come from anyway? Holmes could have afforded to bring it up from the rings of Saturn. Would interstellar travelers have bothered? Would they have even been able?

Doya visits Holmes at her home, at her great expense, of course. She has some connection to Icehenge and warns him off but ends up supporting his mission to Pluto anyway. Did aliens put up Icehenge, or Mars rebels, or somebody else? She has a connection somewhere, a perfect model of it resides in a locked room on her station. It maps to the stars....

The Pluto mission includes essentially everyone, except Nederland himself, who has ever cared about the monument. Again, characters and their conflicts are highly developed on the ship as they travel outward.

Finally upon arriving at Pluto they excavate the site thoroughly, including an excavation of a monument that Nederland put there on his own archaeological visit sometime in the intervening years. As the dig, the theorizing, and the other work progress, they discover one of the liths is hollow and has a passage leading beneath the surface from the top. They descend into it and find something wonderful. (But, no, it's not “full of stars,” in particular.)

And that is the end. Doya is talking to one of his colleagues, a friend, about what they have discovered and what it could mean. We are left with most of the questions open.

Most research leads to less overall understanding, not more. There is an entropy of knowledge. We answer some questions conclusively, but only at the expense of asking many more than we answered. The known unknowns become known knowns and a whole new batch of unknown unknowns become known unknowns. It's like a disturbance in the Oort cloud throwing a whole

bunch of new hazards and entertainment down into the inner solar system. And that seems to be Robinson's point, rather than closure on each detail of each mystery. The book concludes with the quote with which I opened.

All this being said, I'm sad when I finish a Robinson novel. Maybe I'll look for one of his works that is not set in space. The greatness of the writing is not the science fiction, which he does quite well at nonetheless, it's the human drama, at which he is expert. He is a literature professor, after all. UC Davis.

(c) Courtney Duncan, 2009, 2010