



The Seedling Stars

James Blish

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The Seedling Stars is a collection of science fiction short stories by James Blish. It was first published by Gnome Press in 1957 in an edition of 5000 copies. The stories all concern adapting humans to alien environments. The stories all originally appeared in the magazine Fantasy & Science Fiction, If, Super Science Stories & Galaxy Science Fiction.

Contents:

"Seeding Program"

"The Thing in the Attic"

"Surface Tension"

"Watershed"

The Seedling Stars Details

Date : Published May 2001 by Gollancz (first published 1956)

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Author : James Blish

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From Reader Review The Seedling Stars for online ebook

Nicolas says

J'ai lu pendant mes vacances cet excellent roman qui raconte comment l'humanité a conquis les étoiles en partant sur d'assez mauvaises bases, mais en passant à une humanité adaptée très rapidement. Comme sf.marseille, j'ai été tout à fait séduit par la poésie et la qualité qui se dégagent de ce roman, au point que certains aspects de la quatrième de couverture me paraissent réellement incroyables (le fait que la lecture de Blish soit "ardue", par exemple).

En effet, dans ce roman-mosaïque(1), même si certaines transitions sont assez délicates (le passage des ganymédiens aux petits hommes de la jungle, par exemple), la trame et le thème restent largement compréhensibles. le thème étant, d'une manière évidente, l'acceptation de la différence. Celui-ci est traité avec une maestria et une ironie finale qui font vraiment plaisir à voir pour tous les descendants d'éthiopiens que nous sommes. J'aimerais toutefois pointer un doigt interpellé sur un thème sous-jacent à ce roman, sans doute parce qu'à l'époque de l'écriture, cette question ne faisait pas partie de l'univers des possibles. il s'agit des problèmes éthiques suscités par l'apparition de ces humains adaptés.

Le premier problème est évident : pouvons-nous accepter de créer des enfants dans des éprouvettes qui ne soient pas conçus pour vivre sur Terre ? Est-il concevable pour nous d'envisager l'utilisation d'êtres humains comme outil de terraformation ? Pour ma part la réponse n'est pas vraiment tranchée. Je comprends le but de la manoeuvre dans le roman, et même dans une hypothèse d'ensemencement du système solaire, mais je ne crois pas que je puisse supporter l'idée qu'on crée des humains à ce point différents, et surtout, à ce point dépendants d'un environnement dans lequel nous ne puissions vivre.

(1) Malgré la longueur du débat entre les deux termes, je préfère toujours le terme français, et je considère que la nuance entre ces deux mots est de l'ordre de la querelle d'experts, dont je ne veux pas faire partie

5greenway says

The epilogue-y story was a bit message-heavy, but I liked this a lot. Nice spin on depictions of 'alien'. The tiny guys were my favourites.

Richard says

This is a fixup novel that works extremely well and is also, quite unexpectedly, an argument for diversity in a surprisingly modern sense.

As tends to happen with fixups, the four parts are very different from one another, but each stays true to an overarching continuity that involves humanity taking more direct control over its own evolution and adapting itself in very radical ways to survive on hundreds of planets across the galaxy.

Blish gets a lot done in a few pages, and the writing will seem very dense at first. But stick with it, and you'll probably find yourself enjoyably immersed in the first three stories. The last then wraps things up in a way that may not be subtle but is very effective.

Highly recommended.

Manuel Alfonseca says

Four short stories or novellas with a common thread: the adaptation of human beings to live in very different environments, in the context of the dissemination of human beings all around the Galaxy.

The scientific basis of these stories is negligible. It is, for instance, impossible that a human being reduced to a size of 250 microns can maintain a working brain similar to ours. As impossible as the replacement of water by ammonia in our blood by means of genetic manipulations. The stories themselves, however, are readable as adventures and keep the attention of the reader.

Roddy Williams says

‘You didn’t make an Adapted Man with just a wave of the wand. It involved an elaborate constellation of techniques, known collectively as pantropy, that changed the human pattern in a man’s shape and chemistry before he was born. And the pantropists didn’t stop there. Education, thoughts, ancestors and the world itself were changed because the Adapted Men were produced to live and thrive in the alien environments found only in space. They were crucial to a daring plan to colonise the universe.

The four related stories which make up this prescient and ambitious book include ‘Surface Tension’, widely recognised as one of James Blish’s best, and explore just what it is to be human. Thought-provoking, skilfully crafted and crammed with ideas, drama and suspense, *The Seedling Stars* demonstrates that Blish was one of the most intelligent and visionary of all SF writers.’

Blurb from the 2001 Gollancz SF Collectors’ Edition

One has to admire Blish in that he produces a ‘fix-up’ novel, assembled from other previously published short pieces and thus creates one of the most notable works of SF of the 20th Century.

The central premise of ‘TSS’ is pantropy, a process which today we would describe as genetic engineering. Pantropy is so called because it is a combination of complex processes and can only be effected on those yet unborn.

Blish sets up a political situation in which a future Earth is dominated by the Capitalist policies of the Port Authority, a global concern which derives its income from taxing traffic of any sort. Port has invested much money in research into terraforming, since it will be able to recoup its investment from taxing traffic between worlds.

Meanwhile, another school of thought holds that it would be cheaper to modify Man in order that humanity could live on Non-Earth type planets.

In Book I (first published as ‘A Time to Survive’ – Fantasy and Science Fiction – 1955) Sweeney, an adapted human, brought up in isolation in conditions poisonous to the ‘basic form’ is dropped on Ganymede in order to infiltrate an illegal colony of adapted humans tailored to exist on Jupiter’s moon.

His mission is to capture the adapted man Dr Rullman, an expert in pantropy, for which service Sweeney will be transformed into a normal human.

He learns that all he has been taught is lies and that Port’s aim is to discredit and crush the pantropic movement. So, he helps the Ganymedeans to pretend that he has initiated a civil war, which is actually a

cover for the launch of a rocket to one of the nearer suns, where humans, tailored for life on a different world, can continue the process.

In Book II (First published in IF Worlds of Science Fiction – 1954) we move to a jungle world where a group of monkey-like humans with prehensile tails have built a culture in the canopy of a rain-forest. Some of them are exiled to the surface of the world for preaching heresy, i.e., they refuse to believe that a race of ‘giants’ created them and placed them in the trees.

In Book III (Originally published in vastly different form as ‘Sunken Universe’ in Super Science Stories – 1942, and in part as ‘Surface Tension’ in Galaxy Science Fiction, 1952) the award-winning ‘Surface Tension’ a seeding ship is marooned on the only continent of a waterworld. the continent is flat and marshy, consisting of little more than a network of ponds. The seeding crew, realising that they are likely to die on the planet, decide to colonise the world with copies of themselves, transmuted into minute specimens of pond-life.

It’s one of the classic shorts of the Twentieth Century, rich with detail and texture, and forces us to challenge our own perceptions about the Universe, since the ‘humans’ think of their pool as a world , and eventually design and build a craft capable of travelling above the ‘sky’ and into the next world.

the point of the entire novel, which Blish underscores in the final piece, is that although appearances may differ from environment to environment, we are all essentially human.

In Book IV (Published originally as ‘Watershed’ – IF Worlds of Science Fiction – 1955) a seal-like ambassador is aboard a seeding-ship crewed by ‘basic forms’ who show a marked degree of racism toward him.

The ambassador points out to them however, that the barren planet they are about to re-seed is the birthplace of humanity, Earth, and that ‘basic forms’ (if indeed the Rigellian are still basic forms) are very much the minority among the diverse species of humans now occupying the galaxy.

Perhaps today we see Blish’s idealism as a little naïve. His premise was that adapted humans would retain human emotions and values and still be essentially human despite their shapes or sizes. The ambassador points out that they do not seed (for instance) gas giants since that would be too great a departure from the human mind-set and besides other life-forms which have evolved within gas giants may want to pantrify their own species and colonise such worlds.

One could argue that a vastly different environment (such as a pond or the surface of Ganymede) would automatically alter one’s perceptions and that evolution would, in any case, continue in humans who were living within primitive societies. natural selection would take over and the species may well take a different course.

One might also argue that Blish (despite his attack on xenophobia in the final piece) places such importance on the integrity of the human mind that he is, in his own way, being as xenophobic as the system of thought he is attacking.

Metodi Markov says

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Florin Pitea says

I read this collection of interconnected stories back in the 1980s and it blew my mind with its vision of populating other planets with people redesigned to fit the environment. Recommended.

Manny says

Another interesting example of Blish examining God's relation to Man. (Why isn't this author more well known?) Here, we have four novellas about men travelling the Galaxy and casually creating new humanoid species adapted for different environments.

Surface Tension has become an SF classic. Evidently, it's impossible: there are dozen reasons why you couldn't shrink people down to the size of unicellular organisms and still keep them more or less human. But the story really works, and the image of the tiny spaceship laboriously crawling the few feet from one puddle to the next is just terrific. Funny that it hasn't been filmed. Maybe James Cameron has it on his list, or Pixar?

The Thing in the Attic isn't as good, but it also has some fine moments. Here, monkey-like humanoids live in the treetops, while huge saurians roam the forest floor beneath them. Tradition holds that the whole monkey race was created by the mysterious Giants. But, as in Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* , sophisticated people have begun to doubt the existence of the Giants. Evidently, they're just a fable or allegory...

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Seedling Stars, so I tracked down a copy on eBay a few years ago – with, of course, the Foss cover art – and stuck it on the TBR. I had a feeling I might have read it before – certainly, ‘Surface Tension’, the penultimate story in the collection wasn’t new to me, although I’m not sure where I’d previously read it. But the other two novellas and one short story didn’t ring any bells. All four are about “pantropy”, which is genetically engineering humanity for environments rather than terraforming worlds. In ‘Seeding Program’, Earth has sent an agent to infiltrate a colony on Ganymede created by the leader of the pantropy movement and whose inhabitants have all been engineered before birth to survive on the Jovian moon’s frozen surface. It’s not in the slightest bit convincing, and the plot could just have easily been translated to any random Earth location. In ‘The Thing in the Attic’, the theocratic society of the gibbon-like humans of Tellura is causing them to stagnate, but when one freethinker is exiled he and his companions trek over the mountains and discover a starship of humans who have come to see how the colony is doing. Solid nineteen-fifties science fiction, perhaps a little preachy in places, and not especially memorable. ‘Surface Tension’, however, is memorable. In this novella, tiny humans have been seeded in a series of ponds on the one small piece of land on a water world. Again, a freethinker (male, of course) persuades his fellows to build a special vehicle to explore the world “above the sky”. The sentient amoebas are a little hard to swallow (so to speak), but it’s a fun setting and Blish makes good use of it. The final story, ‘Watershed’, is very short and takes place on a starship heading for Earth. The crew are baseline humans and the passenger is an engineered human from another world. The crew are also hugely racist toward their passenger. Who points out that baseline humans are now the minority among the colonised worlds. I suspect I would have enjoyed this collection a whole lot more if I’d read it back in the early nineteen-eighties when I read all those other Blish books...

William says

Several short stories which share the premise that man must adapt to the stars rather than the stars to man, were we to expand beyond the Earth and into the galaxy. I disliked the pacing and the assumptions of knowledge and skill with which the protagonists were provided. Several times I felt the entire idea beyond absurd, but what do I know? Perhaps in a hundred years it will not be so. At the very least it's awakened a need for some good, solid space sci-fi which I haven't had in quite some time.

Joe Santoro says

This was a weird one... the book claims (as you see on the cover) to be about 'men like spores seeding the universe'.. well, it's not. What it is, is 4 short stories. The first one sorta fits that description.. it's kinda the opposite of Heinlein's 'Roads Must Roll'. The various state turnpike authorities basically take over the world, and will only do HUGE science projects that cost lots so they can charge tolls and fees and make money. Thus, despite faster-than-light drives and the ability to mold humans to different planets, humans are stuck trying to terraform.

One small rebel band of scientists is trying to send out Adapted Humans to the stars, and manages to get one ship off with a few children suited to different types of planets.. the end.

The next one is a fun world where Lemur-like people live in the trees and are waiting for the 'Giants' to return and teach them how to tame the planet floor.. it's got the usual thought provoking James Blish stuff in it, with several of the people 'banished to Hell' (the ground) for Heresy... they have a 'book of laws' that is basically instructions from the people that dropped them off. Those people come back to find 2 of the

banished people managed to survive on the ground (it's a dinosaur world), and tell them they should be in charge of claiming the planet. Fun story, good moral.. sorta connected to the first, but not really.

Next, is 'Surface Tension', which I reviewed WAY Back when I read the Sci Fi Hall of Fame book... still a great story. The prologue is a bit different so as to fit with the theme, but it's otherwise the same. Glad to have a copy of this in my collection.

Finally, is a very short story about some Adapted People going back to Earth after many, many generations. It's almost a filler... only a few pages, and nothing of much interest... a bit of a moral about accepting those different than you, but meh.

Overall, a good book (1 great story, 2 good ones, and 1 meh), but not at all a novel as advertised... I hate it when they do that!
