



Tunnel in the Sky

Robert A. Heinlein

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A classic novel from the mind of the storyteller who captures the imagination of readers from around the world, and across two generations. The final exam for Dr. Matson's Advanced Survival class was meant to be just that: only a test. But something has gone terribly wrong...and now Rod Walker and his fellow students are stranded somewhere unknown in the universe, beyond contact with Earth, at the other end of a tunnel in the sky. Stripped of all comforts, hoping for a passage home that may never appear, the castaways must band together or perish. For Rod and his fellow survivors, this is one test where failure is not an option....

Tunnel in the Sky Details

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From Reader Review Tunnel in the Sky for online ebook

Jim says

This is not the correct edition. Mine is an OLD mono rip from cassettes done probably 20 years ago or more.

I'm 2/9 of the way in & quite impressed (no, not by the sound quality) by all the things Heinlein's managed to pack into the beginning of this novel. It's not just the neat new way of traveling to the stars, but the whole way he's done the colonization idea. The contrast between low tech pioneering & super high tech travel is economically & socially feasible.

I have to say, sending mules & steers across makes absolutely no sense & undercuts the point for using hay burners that he just made, though. A few to get started - maybe - but if the economics are tight, varieties that can breed make a lot more sense. Last I heard, mules are the sterile offspring of a stallion & a jenny, while steers had their jewels stolen.

Oh well, his point on guns was very well taken & demonstrated. I loved the way he put it too. The family circumstances are quite a good, poignant point, too. All in all, I don't when I've last liked the setup to an entirely new world so well.

Like most of Heinlein's juveniles, this one has a lot of lessons to teach, but some are more apparent than others. Rod, our hero, is black according to Heinlein. He wasn't allowed to say so, though. There isn't anything to point out his race one way or the other, mostly the clues are in the lack of descriptive elements. While others get sunburned, Rod never is nor is his skin ever described as being tanned. Kind of cool that he slid this one through. He has some very strong, smart women, too.

The book has its problems, but I think they're overwhelmed by its good points. Rod isn't a perfect hero, but he's pretty much a perfect adolescent male & firmly plants his foot in his mouth more than once. Didn't we all? But he's basically a good guy who does a lot of growing & never gives up, so he gets what he wants eventually. Love it. Lot's of fun with a great many things for kids, teens, & even adults to aspire to. What boy wouldn't want adventures of this sort? (I still do!)
;-)

Michele says

Classic sci fi from a classic sci fi author -- gotta love it :) Best part is the plethora of kickass female characters, starting with the main character's sister who is a commander in an advanced military division known as the Amazons. She didn't need to be for the story to work, which makes it even better. Not deep or epic or philosophical, but an entertaining story well told.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Survival stories are frequent in YA literature, and Tunnel in the Sky was probably one of the first, originally published in 1955. It is referred to as one of "Heinlein's Juveniles," and is a great tale of adventure with a life-threatening scenario. Rather than making a statement, as some of Heinlein's works attempt to do, this

book is just danger and kids using what they have learned to create a new society and survive on an alien planet. Anyone who enjoyed The Hunger Games or Ender's Game would probably also enjoy this story, as it has similar themes. The time period of its original publication is evident in a few moments, but not to the extent I am used to when reading Heinlein.

I'd probably say 3.5 stars, but that rounds up to 4.

See my longer review on SFF Audio, including information on the audiobook by Full Cast Audio.

Jeff Yoak says

Robert A Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* is fairly typical of his juvenile novels. It has a fast-moving plot, interesting child characters (though a little older than is typical for him) and a fantastic speculative setting.

Rod Stewart is precocious enough to be taking *Advanced Survival* in high school instead of the more typical college timing. The final exam requires spending 2-10 days on a raw frontier planet, transported there through a trans-dimensional gate. Accident causes the gate to stop functioning and leaves Rod's class of 20 and three other classes stranded on the planet for longer than had been expected.

In addition to interesting brushes with nature, the children have to learn to live with, as Heinlein typically puts it, the most dangerous animal known to man -- each other. They form together as a group and eventually are drawn to the vice of government. The interactions between the kids make as much of the story as the struggle to survive in an alien and strange world.

2011: I started this one a little early because the audio was poor on the old one I have and there is a new one available from Full Cast Audio. I like this recording rather more than the older one.

2014: I found that I loved this one more reading it with the kids than I did reading it on my own. It really clicked with them, probably second only to *The Star Beast*

Lyn says

Very original and entertaining Heinlein adventure.

This was one of my favorite Heinlein juvenile books and concerns a Stargate type of portal (did this influence the later films?) where colonists are sent out into the farther reaches of the universe. But before a band of colonists would attempt to settle a planet, adventurous types would go out first to provide reconnaissance and determine if the habitat was livable.

Many of Heinlein's later ideas are revealed here, and his hard scrabble libertarianism blossoms. Many scenes anticipate his later work *Time Enough for Love*. I also think about Philip K. Dick's novel *The Crack in Space*.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Tunnel in the Sky is an underappreciated gem of a Heinlein juvenile. In the future, an overpopulated Earth expands into space through wormhole gates. Any job in the Outlands, as the other worlds are called, requires passing Outland Survival. The final exam is being dumped on an unknown planet, and surviving a few days until recall. Rod Walker is a high school student facing such an exam.

We meet his family, and get some cool hints at the expanded setting. A new religion called Monism has joined the big three Semitic faiths. China has conquered Australia and irrigated the outback, but population continues to rise. Rod's sister Helen is an officer in the all-female Amazon space marines. We see pioneers going through the a gate with horses and Conestoga wagons, because 'grass-burners' make their own replacements and resupply will be rare until the colony can export food or Uranium back to Earth. Rod's parents are facing a hard choice as well, a 20 year wait in cryogenic stasis while his father's rare metabolic disease is cured.

We get some useful advice on survival, "don't carry a gun, your job is to be a rabbit and live", and then we're off. Rod does fine the first few days, but then someone knocks him on the head and steals everything but his back-up knife. Worse, as days pass and the gate home fails to appear, it becomes apparent something has gone very wrong. The survivors of the 100-odd high school and college students have to settle down and figure out some kind of long term solution for survival. Rod's is pushed aside in favor of a smooth talking college kid, who's early attempt at democracy becomes mired in committees and social niceties, like building houses for newlyweds rather than a defensive wall. The colony is well on its way to becoming a stone age society, when a seasonal migration of 'dopey joes' turns a previously harmless species into a vicious killer. Rod is vindicated, and becomes mayor of their colony for a year, when the gate reopens and suddenly he is no longer an independent leader on a frontier world, but a kid again, with all that that entails.

There are lots of hints of ideas that Heinlein would develop in later works. The themes of power and responsibility in *Starship Troopers*, the frontier space colonies of *Time Enough for Love*, and the survivalism of *Farnham's Freehold*. Heinlein has lighter touch on these topics, focusing more on the coming of age of his protagonists. There are some missteps, the characterization is a little thin, and who stole Rod's survival gear is a dropped thread. Heinlein's attitudes on gender and race are progressive for their time, but they haven't aged very well. His female characters (Caroline, Jack), are the equals of the men, but it takes Rod some time to get over his prejudices against women. Even so, men hunt and women cook. The 'yellow hordes' bit in the beginning is not great, but according to a letter from Heinlein Rod is canonically African-American, which is solid for a book published a year after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Mary Catelli says

One of Heinlein's juveniles. Though you've got to notice that it starts with a college course that has a final of being dropped on some planet -- and surviving. And bright kids can take it in high school.

Rod Walker just learned with the rest of his class that it's the next day. Sees some of his world, filling us in, and has some conflict with his family, but ends up going. His military sister talks him out of a gun but gives him an additional knife.

When he arrives -- the title tunnel in the sky refers to the transportation means -- his first sight of another candidate is the corpse of a classmate, whose missing gun clearly reveals he was murdered. He faces thereafter a night chorus of wailing beasts, someone found in a tree and injured, trying to take shelter in a cave, a wild guess that they are still on Earth, the discovery of a serious problem that has the candidates

having to band together, elections, and much more.

Stephen says

3.5 stars. A good, solid Heinlein "juvenile" SF about a group of young adults stranded on a distant world during the final exam of an "advanced survivor" course. I really liked the first half of the book in which the world is introduced, the concept behind the "tunnels" is explained and the effect that the tunnels have had on the form of society. This part is top notch Heinlein and I would have given 4 to 5 stars.

Once they find themselves stranded, I thought the story became less interesting and turned into a standard survival story. It was still a decent read and Heinlein does a good job showing the difficulty in arriving at a group consensus for important decisions, it just was not as compelling for me as the first half of the story. I am a big fan of interesting world building and what I call "explanatory SF" meaning the backstory of a science fiction universe. I am less intrigued by the action scenes in science fiction stories (chase scenes, battles, etc). Thus, once the students became stranded, the most interesting parts of the story were over for me. That said, this is a good read and fans of Heinlein will certainly want to read thus one.

Brad says

I'm in that place again where I went back to the well of my teen reading loves and found the book wanting.

Is this, I wonder, the form a mid-life crisis takes in the literary minded? We go back to the books we loved in the past, the things we held fond memories of, and destroy that love once we wonder how on earth we, the people we are now, could have ever loved something so [fill-in-the-blank].

Tunnel in the Sky is just such a book for me. I listened to an audio version this time, after rediscovering it on a random browse afternoon on Audible. The cover popped out at me and I instantly recognized the picture from that tattered paper back I had pulled from my junior high library novel rack and devoured in one or two days at age 11 or 12 or 13. The fact that I am a guilty Heinlein fan made a re-listen impossible to resist. I wish my resistance hadn't been futile.

Most of the time I listened to this audiobook (and I have to acknowledge that the uneven "full cast" performances added to my cringing), I was suspended in one big, "Ugh!"

Tunnel in the Sky is, essentially, a more positive, more culturally and sexually inclusive, Sci-Fi Lord of the Flies -- published one year after William Golding's masterpiece. Sounds good, right? When I was a teenage boy in the 80s, it was.

But now, as I listened to the tale, as I followed the half-baked creation of a working (nearly utopian), adolescent society, all I could do was ugh my way through the inherent sexism (more on this in a minute), the intentional Heinlein dumbing down of his juvenile titles, my dislike of pretty much every character -- especially the protagonist, Rod Walker -- and my deep disdain for the "pioneering spirit" and colonialism that Heinlein trumpets. It was tough to take. I probably should have stopped listening right away, but I was compelled to keep going out of morbid curiosity, all the while knowing I was destroying a childhood memory.

So now to the inherent sexism. I am not one of those who believes that Heinlein was consciously a sexist or a

misogynist. I've never read any bios of the man, never spent any time getting to know his opinions beyond his novels and short stories, nor have I heard any of his recorded interviews, but I am a fan of his writing and I've read plenty of his fiction, which is the sole basis of my opinions concerning his sexism and/or misogyny. I think he not only loved women but respected women and believed them capable of vastly more than his male contemporaries did. I also think he went out of his way to try and showcase his positive beliefs throughout his fiction, which means that now, for today's readers, his views on and of women and portrayals of women remain for all to see, whereas many of his contemporaries didn't rate women at all, so their opinions never saw the light of day (and, thereby, they escape the sort of criticism Heinlein's writing invites). But even so, Heinlein was a product of his time, and there is only so far a person, shaped by the time and culture in which they move, can go.

Heinlein's views on women (and men) -- for all the ways in which they were progressive and positive in his day (Heinlein's "day" was the fifties and sixties) -- don't fly with audiences today. We (or many of us) can't help seeing his work as sexist and misogynist by today's standards. He engages in classically patriarchal, binary driven gendering, and for readers sensitive to such things, every instance of these issues forces a bigger and bigger "ugh."

I have changed as a reader over the years. I know this. I have changed just as the times have changed, and cringing at Heinlein's outmoded ways of thinking in a fifties' story that foresees the future is as much my issue as a reader as it is Heinlein's as writer -- and maybe moreso because the man seemed to be truly trying to create strong female characters. But I have changed, and despite the strength of Jack and Carol and Rod's sister, Heinlein's women still end up gendered into classic "feminine" roles to greater and lesser degrees, and I found it impossible to set my annoyance aside.

Now some of that is probably the fault of Heinlein's "dumbing down," as I mentioned before, of his juvenile books because I can much more easily overlook similar issues in Heinlein's more adult fare, such as *Starship Troopers* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*, but mostly it is me and our culture.

I feel I am rambling now, so I should end this by saying that I think people should give Heinlein a chance regardless of our feelings today about his opinions in his. Heinlein's work did give us strong and intelligent women when other Sci-Fi writers couldn't be bothered, which was an important step in the opening up of Sci-Fi -- to Sci-Fi's future inclusivity. But we run the risk of missing this step in Sci-Fi's evolution and the importance of Heinlein's work if we let our own biases only see Heinlein's work through our lens. Should we point out how sexist Heinlein's work is in terms of today's sensibilities? Absolutely. It is one of the ingredients for healthy discourse. But another important ingredient is that Heinlein's work was progressive in his time, and his progressiveness inspired others to be more progressive still.

Simon says

Humans are colonising the galaxy, thanks not to rocket ships capable of taking us to remote star systems, but gateways through hyperspace that allow us to travel anywhere in an instant. But before people are allowed to start a new life in a frontier world, they must take survival classes which culminate in a test in which students are dopped into alien environments and must survive or die.

Our protagonist is takes his test and is sent to an alien world (along with many other students) only to find himself cut off and stranded after something goes wrong. He soon realises that he is better off finding others and living together than remaining on his own although it then becomes apparent the the social problems of living in a group can be trickier than anything else.

While the initial premise of the book is gripping and entertaining, it is what happens when things go wrong and the students are forced to agree their own social structures that things get more interesting and thought provoking. As more and more stragglers turn up the problems of coordinating their efforts to ensure everyone is safe and gets fed become trickier. Eventually they find themselves to having to establish some form of government in order to impose effective discipline; as one character comments: "Government is the art of getting along with people you don't like". And the problem of what to do with unsocialable individuals who just won't tow the line manifests itself too.

This is also a form of coming of age tale for the protagonist as the harsh realities of survival and later responsibility turn him from a youth into a man.

Whilst this is one of the better Heinlein novels I have read, it was still not perfect. Flawed characterisation with often irritating and pointless exchanges permeated the story but then I've come to realise that characters aren't his strongpoint and the story and handling of ideas generally more than made up for this.

Doug Turnbull says

Copyrighted in 1955, *Tunnel in the Sky* is the 9th of the Heinlein juveniles and it is noteworthy in several respects. First, while it is set in the future and on another planet, the bulk of the novel isn't really science fiction at all, it is more of a survival tale. Second, while some of the story involves Robinson Crusoe type details on improvising basic technology, a major portion of it is social and political commentary made through the actions and statements of the characters. And third, the protagonist, Rod Walker, is black. In this future, the Ramsbotham Jump has made interstellar travel as simple as passing through a doorway: on one side you are on Earth, step to the other side and you are on another planet in another star system. This is how Rod Walker and his classmates travelled to another planet for the final exam of their high school course in survival. What they didn't know was that a fluke in the form of a stellar nova, short-circuited the gate they had just passed through and left them stranded. A trip that should have been several days long, lasted for two years. Heinlein turns how Rod and the others survived their stay on this strange planet into a fascinating tale.

While the clues are often subtle, this is probably the Heinlein juvenile with the most social commentary. Sex and race are irrelevant to the job of surviving on this dangerous planet and Heinlein treats them that way. After having spent several days alone, and after having been ambushed and robbed by an unknown assailant, Rod met Jack Daudet, who allowed Rod to share his own shelter in a cave. A few days later while hunting, they met Jimmy Throxtton who joined them as well. It is after Jimmy was there that Rod discovered that Jack was really Jackie: a girl. Heinlein uses this clever plot twist to drive home the point that men and women are equal, and particularly so in this extremity.

Gradually their colony grew with students similarly stranded until it reached a population of about 75. They constructed a village with a stockade to keep out predators and Rod emerged as the ex officio leader of the group. At this point it was decided that they needed some sort of government so the group elected a mayor for the settlement. The mayor-elect was an older student who proposed holding the election in the first place. Heinlein uses this micro-society to explore the advantages and disadvantages of democracy and those of the very concept of government itself, while Rod discovered that politics trumps ability every time.

Heinlein treats race, sex and ethnicity as irrelevant in this book. While this is a diverse group, the surnames of the characters are the only clues we have to place any of them into an identity group. One character, Caroline Mshiyeni, has a clearly East African surname and was seen by the other members of the group as natural girlfriend and possible wife for Rod. In the context of 1955 society, the implication here is clear: Rod must be of African descent himself. At that time, what was termed miscegenation, or interracial marriage, was not only frowned upon by the society that would be reading this book, it was illegal in about a dozen

states. Therefore, looking through the lens of the mores of the mid-1950's, the implication is that Rod is black. To drop a subtle clue like this is typical of Heinlein. He could not state that his main character was black. His editors would have rejected the story out of hand. But he could imply it to the readers sharp enough to pick up the clues. Similarly, as I noted earlier, while he could not state that men and women were absolute equals; with the Jack to Jackie transformation he could show it to be true.

The story also depicts how the young people strived over the two years or so that they were stranded on that planet to build a decent society and civilization. They dealt successfully with outlaws and crime, made the tools and equipment necessary for life, planted and raised crops, hunted in an organized way and married. They formed a government, however imperfect and dealt successfully with an environmental threat that could have consumed them.

This book moves right along and has the constant tension created by the "man on the edge of survival" situation Rod and his fellows find themselves in. Tunnel in the Sky is an optimistic book about the strength, resilience and basic decency of human nature. While there were villains and low life characters, they were a minority and were ultimately killed or exiled by the strong and decent majority. It is telling that at about this same time William Golding's Lord of the Flies was published. His book placed a group of young people in a similar survival situation, but with much less exemplary results: they degenerated into predatory animals. Naturally, Golding's dark book was a success among the cynical critics. On the other hand, if you are looking for an upbeat page turner for the weekend, this is your book.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPT3V2...>

Bradley says

Stargate! Minus all the gods and the missions and the ascension crap.

Add survival, walls, and GOVERNMENT! Wooooo.... um... well at least the survival bit was fun. :)

Seriously, this YA is still a very can-do Americana book, with a seriously heavy Liberterian bent, but I have no issues there. I love that crap.

Still... I think I prefer Miles Vorkosigan's conception of the most important survival tool better. Tipping the invisible hat was one of Bujold's greatest inventions. But Heinlein had the same idea. Screw guns or even shoes, the one thing that any hardscrabble colony needs is the concept of a politics where people can actually work together, and that's what this book is really about.

YA? Sure, more like New Adult in today's classifications. Are you civic-minded enough?

As an adventure and a straight story, it's pretty great all the way to the point where they start voting, then my attention started wandering a bit. Still, some other crazy goes on and we flash forward to see how they all turn out and we even get a complete wrap up, so it's not like the tale went nowhere. It just didn't really do all that much for me. Plus, even though the women were all pretty strong and as can-do as the men, I didn't quite like how the old stereotypes came out in conversation... EVEN IF they were slapped down by a woman right in the group immediately afterward. I just hate the idea that women have to pretend to be men to be treated like men. It's just a sign of the times kind of story, unfortunately, but fortunately, there was very little of this kind of crap and Heinlein's stance on it is pretty egalitarian and equal rights and equal responsibility, so it's more of a me thing hating older cultural trends than a "I blame Heinlein" thing. Petty jealousies and toxic

encounters in a closed group, indeed. Of course, she turned it right back and said the same thing about men in any closed group. It may not be clever, but it's true.

I loved the whole stargate survival business and the worldbuilding that led up to it. That was pretty great. :)

It's just the other stuff that made me knock it a star from my original review. Let's Vote! *blech* :)

Valerie says

When Gene Roddenberry was pitching the original Star Trek to skittish network executives, he used the phrase "Wagon Train to The Stars".

That might actually have been a working title for this book, since the society it's predicated is based on LITERAL wagon trails to the stars (? or alternate universes? It's not really clear...) via stargates.

The basic conceit ('survival' courses for high school seniors, with a final practicum 'graded' so that you pass if you survive a set period in an unfamiliar environment) is an old one. It's not really practicable in the circumstances posited. Granted, the environments are not really novel. The students are not sent to unsurveyed lands. They're sent to places that have already been scouted, but haven't yet been cleared for colonization. But the basic premise (that these people COULD become scouts and learn to vet new environments for settlement, while living off the land) is nonviable. Heinlein's failure to recognize that an environment dominated by vertebrates and vascular plants is not only not true on Earth (invertebrates are far commoner, and bacteria commoner yet), but that Earth is highly likely to be an exception--the ancestors of vascular plants and vertebrates were not common among early multicellular life, and were far from being the most successful and plentiful. Savvy speculators would not have bet on them. The explorers who set up the stargates would likely choose environments that were similar to Earth's--but those would be WAY harder to find.

One point I've always found disturbing about Heinlein is his ruthlessness as regards local life. He cavalierly dismisses apex predators, arguing that it's not only acceptable but preferable to exterminate them (?replacing them with humans?). When the life is clearly sapient, he argues in favor of open warfare against the locals by the invading humans. No attempt at communication or negotiation is anticipated or undertaken--and there's certainly no proposal to interdict planets with native sapients--their interests are regarded as trivial compared to the need for humans to expand, helter-skelter.

In this story, I knew from the beginning that the warning 'beware of stobor' was a generic warning, and had no specific referent. I knew this because of my reflexive habit of reading words backward. I leave the rest to the student. Why should I have all the fun?

Manny says

After reading Brad's review just now, my fingers, as far as I can tell entirely of their own volition, googled "strong female characters in Heinlein". They knew what they were doing! Within a few seconds, they'd found us this interesting article.

Well, all I can say is that I'm ashamed. I like to imagine that I'm an independent thinker who goes where the data takes him, and I find I'm just another herd animal. Convinced by the first two examples that popped into my head (okay, one of them was Eunice Branca from *I Will Fear No Evil*), I just swallowed that whole argument about sexist Bob without checking any of the fine print. But as soon as I looked at D.A. Houdek's carefully researched piece, I realized how wrong I'd been. The three most egregious items, for those who can't be bothered to click on the link:

- LummoX in *The Star Beast* is female. How could I not have remembered that?!
- The only worthwhile characters in *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*, *PeeWee* and the *Mother Thing*, are both female.
- The one I really feel bad about is *Podkayne of Mars*. I'd completely forgotten that her mother was a "Master Engineer, Heavy Construction, Surface or Free Fall", who rebuilt Phobos and Deimos. I'm so sorry, Podkayne! I misjudged you. I see now that you were just a normal teen going through a phase of revolting against Mom. Later on, I bet you also went into space construction and remodelled Ganymede.

Mea culpa! I tell you, I'm *that* close to rereading the entire suite of Heinlein juveniles to show how sincerely repentant I am.

Lynda Engler says

I thoroughly enjoyed this classic YA novel. I always knew it was a "lord of the Flies" type story but the way the teenagers interacted and the way they faced situations was so well done that's its clear why Robert Heinlein was one of the masters of science fiction. Although written over 50 years ago, the book isn't dated much at all. A few turns of phrase that aren't in vogue today, but basically, it is such a good view of the human condition that it is timeless.

Nathaniel says

MILD SPOILERS AHEAD

So, Heinlein novels can be broken down into two (maybe three) categories. The first category are the Heinlein juveniles published between 1947 and 1958. These were primarily YA-targeted books like *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, *The Rolling Stones*, and *Starman Jones*. The characters are usually young (high school age), the plots often revolve around family, the endings tend to be upbeat, and the moral lessons are (for the most part) non-controversial.

All this changed with the infamous short story *All You Zombies* that Heinlein wrote in one day in 1958. This is a dark story about a person who is their own mother/father/son/daughter. (Time travel and a sex-change operation are involved.) After that, Heinlein entered his adult phase, which is where most of his most famous/influential novels are from: *Starship Troopers*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and of course *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Some folks have a third category for his late novels, but they are a subset of this second

category, so really you've got two: the kids books and the grown-up books.

Tunnel in the Sky is from the middle of his juvenile period (1955), and--broadly speaking--it fits the mold. But what I found most interesting as I read it were the echoes of the darker themes of his later works. Although "All You Zombies" makes it relatively easy to break his novels into two categories, there are definitely similarities that bridge the gap. Farnham's Freehold comes from the adult period (it was after Starship Troopers and Stranger in a Strange Land but before The Moon is a Harsh Mistress), but the family-centric plot and the fairly straight-forward moral message (it was intended as an anti-racism message) make it very similar to his juvenile works. Except, of course, for the cannibalism and the incest.

If Farnham's Freehold was an adult novel with a lot of juvenile echoes, Tunnel in the Sky is the opposite: a juvenile novel that foreshadowed a lot of his adult themes. Although the book tends to take the cheerful and optimistic approach in most cases, all of the ingredients for a much, much darker work are present, and it's impossible to ignore them if you've read the later Heinlein stuff. For example, much is made early in the book of how the most dangerous creature that the survival trainees will face is not a wild animal, but rather the other survivalists. And the main character sees one or two other trainees who were killed by a human and is even ambushed himself. So far so dark. But here's the thing: after serving its role of increasing the tension and removing the main character's supplies, the murderer drops out of the book completely. We never find out who it was, and the characters stop talking about it entirely. A potentially very dark showdown never happens.

Meanwhile, where Farnham's Freehold goes straight for the father-daughter incest approach, the castaway survivalists in Tunnel in the Sky are all chaste until marriage. Their society revolves around constitutional debates, communitarian concerns, and square dancing (thanks to the Mormons).

Finally: Tunnel in the Sky has an ending that seems happy at first glance, but ends up being about as ambiguous and conflicted as you can imagine. The final scene is triumphant--placing the novel firmly in the juvenile category at the end--but everything up until that point is tinged with the complexity, darkness, and taboo-violations that would typify Heinlein's later work.

So, did I *like* it?

Well first: when I'm writing a review of a book that's more than a century old and that is from one of the leading figures of the sci-fi genre, I'm going to be more focused on contextualizing the book within the genre and/or the author's body of work. So, that's just something you should kind of expect from me.

But secondly: yeah, I liked it. But it's not my favorite of the Heinlein juveniles. The beginning was very strong in particular. It lost me a little bit during the middle section, and then the ending introduced a ton of loose threads that got left dangling at the end. I wanted to know more, but the story is not part of Heinlein's Future History or the continuous setting used for the rest of his juveniles, so we'll never really know what happened to Roddy after this book closes.

And I want to know, enough so that I might doodle with some possibilities on my own one day, just for fun.

Mike (the Paladin) says

One of Heinlein's youth books that stirred my imagination more than most. I really liked this book and read it

many times in my youth. A class of young "survivalists" (college and high school students taking survival classes in school) are sent to a distant un-colonized planet to survive...and are lost. They then have to survive on their own with no way to get home.

As I said as a "youth" I loved this book. Rod Walker's teacher is worried about Rod taking the final exam in the survival class (being left on a planet to survive) because as the teacher puts it, he's a romantic born in a romantic age. Had he not been born in a romantic age he'd have had a mundane job and dreamed what it would have been like to be in a romantic age. I suppose that was me.

Good book interesting and enjoyable.

Update 9-4-12:

I read this book first long ago (the 1960s). It has stayed with me and I still held scenes from it in my "imaginary memory". I just reread it and I must say that as is the case with many of Heinlein's works (though sadly not all) this novel holds up and read from a more adult point of view has facets that a younger reader may miss.

Tunnel in the Sky is one of what are usually called Heinlein's youth or teen books. The protagonist (Rod Walker) is a young man in his last year of high school readying himself to take his "solo survival" test. The characterization and plotting are both good. while geared to a younger audience it holds up very well for an adult readership. I can highly recommend this one.

(view spoiler)

The way things are laid out and played out here sets up a story that I wish Mr. Heinlein had built on with further stories, but he didn't. I believe that for some as with me this book will stir imagination in a way that will stay with you...and now I'm an old guy.

Highly recommended, enjoy.

Deborah Ideiosepius says

In this classic science fiction novel Heinlein is takes us through the experiences of a young man, Rod Walker, who as part of a final exam (high school, no less) on a survival course must complete a period of a few days on an alien planet, surviving on his own.

The 'Tunnel in the sky' actually refers to the method in which a future society has developed to colonise far worlds. Heinlein remains coy about the date, so all we really know is that it is a future Earth and future society. Once on this unknown alien planet something goes wrong with retrieval and Rod, his classmates and a number of other classes are all marooned, possibly forever.

This is a really fun story; I first read it back in the 80's and it remained with me just well enough that I kind of remembered the story but never was quite sure what was about to happen. Re-reading was heaps of fun.

A few things struck 2017-Deborah that 80's Deborah didn't notice. There are some similarities with Starship Troopers (the book, not the movie) in that the main character is young, has a somewhat antagonistic relationship with parents, and the society seems to bear some similarities.

Heinlein really REALLY does like a particular older-mentor-know-it-all type character. In this novel it is Rod's sister Helen, but whenever she said anything I kept thinking I was 'hearing' Lazarus Long. Very odd sensation.

Written in the 1950's it bears clear signs of the fact; the fifties by our standards was violently sexist, racist and had a value system that has not, generally, aged well. For the most part Tunnel In The Sky is unaffected by having been written more than half a century ago, but there are a few glaring moments, especially in the sexist attitude of the main character where it is clear this was written historically. Heinlein, like all the best sci-fi writers was using his genera to explore the boundaries of society, point out the idiocies of it and open the readers mind to a different viewpoint. Thus, there are females in combat (but they have their own squadron, they are not integrated) , the main character does not want to team up with girls (though the author proves him wrong) and other similar examples. It seems clear to me that Heinlein was trying to open the minds of his readers, but to a modern youngster it might not seem that way.

Well, too much seriousness! This is a fun adventure, with a pretty likable main character and several good secondary characters in survival mode on another planet. The plot and world building are very readable, there are adventures and problems to be overcome and it is a hell of a good read!

Dominick says

I'd like to give this book a higher rating, because it does do some things very well, but I just can't. Things it does well include excellent world-building, a very good record for coming up with interesting or surprising (or both) takes on the situation, at least acknowledging alternat epoints of view (rare for Heinlein), and a relatively unpredictable plot--in a juvenile, this is especially noteworthy.

Unfortunately, Heinlein's virtues often go for naught, and that's largely true here, though perhaps less so than in some of his other books. There's far less hectoring of the reader than you get in some of his books, for instance; Heinlein can be very reluctant to just tell you the story without also telling you what you should think about everything under the sun. However, whatever credit he deserves for arguing that "girls" can be just as capable as boys at conventionally masculine tasks, for instance, is esadicated by the fact that he is nevertheless amazingly condescending about it, given that inevitably for these girls, doing so is basically just a stopgap until the right man comes along, and that despite the theoretical equal competence of the girls, they are nevertheless still treated as weaker vessels that need protecting when things get tough. And then there's the sexual creepiness. The more Heinlein I read, the more I have to think this guy had serious issues. It's pretty much subtextual here, but incest once again lurks in the shadows.

Even worse, though, is Heinlein's "man is the greatest thing ever" ideology (with the gender-specific pronoun apropos, I'd argue). I love manly action stories and stories about conventional testosterone-factory guys, but Heinlein just manages to go way too far with the whole thing. When a key point in the book involves our protagonist insisting on facing what ought to be virtually certain destruction (it isn't, of course) because, hey, we're MEN, and MEN will *never* let any lesser creature drive them out, well, the temptation just to throw the book away in disgust is hard to resist. . . . And when you consider that this book was intended for adolescents, that's simply a reprehensible message.

Michael says

For years, a good friend has been recommending Robert A. Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* to me and for years

it's sat on my to-be-read shelf, silently accusing me of neglect. One excuse I'd used was I was part of a sci-fi/fantasy book group that read a novel by Heinlein to start the year and I figured we'd eventually get around to *Tunnel*.

But the book group became extinct and the book just kept sitting there, expectantly. So, I finally dusted it off and cracked the cover.

If you follow my reviews, you know that I'm not a huge fan of Heinlein. I know he's an influential writer in the science-fiction genre, but I find that I enjoy less of his output than most people do. Part of it could be that my first entry into the universe of Heinlein was some of his later works, which I've come to understand aren't the best entry points or examples of what makes him so well regarded.

I will also say that I find his "juvenile" novels to be far more entertaining and readable than some of his novels intended for more "mature" readers. And that's the case with *Tunnel in the Sky*.

With Earth exploring the universe by a series of gates, young Rod Walker wants nothing more than to leave Earth behind and explore a new horizon. Signing up for a survival course, Rod and his classmates' final assignment is to take a trip through the gate to an unexplored, unknown world and survive for up to a week. Encouraged by his older sister (who is a member of the military and took the course during his school years), Rod sets out on the assignment, but soon finds something has gone wrong. Cut off from Earth and hopes of returning home, Rod and his classmates set out to not only survive but also to create a society for themselves.

Tunnel in the Sky is a tale of two halves. The first half that chronicles Rod's desire to travel through a gate and his fascination with them as well as the first steps toward surviving on this unknown world are fascinating, compelling and page-turning. It's one Rod and his classmates realize that they're stranded and they have to begin creating their own society and structure that things come to a bit of a halt and the second half of the novel feels like it's a bit more of slog to get through. Part of this is that the action from the first half slows down as Heinlein's characters engage in philosophical debates about the nature of government and its role in the group's survival. It's not quite as eye-rollingly bad as some other Heinlein installments, but it still made the second half of the book seem a bit less entertaining and interesting than the first.

I will say the final chapter or so makes up for this with some interesting developments for Rod and company. To say more might ruin the novel for those of you who haven't read it yet, so I won't do that. I will say the novel ended on enough of a high point that I walked away fairly satisfied with the book as a whole and recalling more of the fondness I had for the first half than the pitfalls of the second.

Once again, a Heinlein juvenile proves more mature than some of his later, longer works that are targeted more at adults. I will admit I've missed my yearly visits with Heinlein (whether good or bad) and I may have to try visiting him again sooner rather than later.
