



Venus Plus X

Theodore Sturgeon

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Charlie Johns has been snatched from his home on 61 North 34th Street and delivered to the strange future world of Ledom. Here, violence is a vague and improbable notion. Technology has triumphed over hunger, overpopulation, pollution, even time and space. But there is a change Charlie finds even more shocking: gender is a thing of the past. **Venus Plus X** is Theodore Sturgeon's brilliant evocation of a civilization for whom tensions between male and female and the human preoccupation with sex no longer exist.

As Charlie Johns explores Ledom and its people, he finds that the human precepts he holds dear are profane in this new world. But has Charlie learned all there is to know about this advanced society? And why are the Ledom so intent on gaining Charlie's approval? Unsettling, compelling, and no less than visionary, here is science fiction at its boldest: a novel whose wisdom and lyricism make it one of the most original and insightful speculations on gender ever produced.

Venus Plus X Details

Date : Published October 5th 1999 by Vintage (first published 1960)

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Author : Theodore Sturgeon

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From Reader Review Venus Plus X for online ebook

Lyn says

Theodore Sturgeon published Venus Plus X in 1960, before much of what would be considered the women's rights movement. Many science fiction books from this era were well written and visionary but the science has grown stale and modern readers wince at technological incongruities or fail to appreciate a novel idea when written when the reality has occurred; like driving past a reference to a cell phone from 1950.

But here, the science has not lost its punch, but rather the social commentary. Sturgeon spends a fair amount of time discussing gender issues that are today somewhat passé.

It's still a good sci-fi book, well written and entertaining; and his overall message is still relevant and inspiring. The premise is that a Homo sapiens man has been abducted from his time and place and brought to live in a Lodem society. Lodem – “model” spelled backwards – is something of a utopia and our society is compared with the Lodem's. Interestingly, Sturgeon divides his narrative into two seemingly unconnected plots, one in the Lodem culture and another in the Homo sapiens world.

Reminiscent of his brilliant work More Than Human, I suspect a common theme in Sturgeon's work is evolutionary man. His theological ramblings were also evocative to Philip K. Dick's musings in his The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick.

Amiranus Romanus says

3.5 is more like it, but will go with 4 on this scale :D

I found the author's take on human sexuality and androgyny quite interesting.

It touches on similar topics as Ursula Le Guin's Left Hand of Darkness, so for anyone that liked that book, this is also recommended.

Franco Santos says

4.5

Mi cuarto libro de Sturgeon, y ¡qué sorpresa! Sin lugar a dudas, mi favorito de él. Conmovedor, visionario, emocionante y esperanzador. *Venus más X* explora la moralidad, el machismo, el feminismo, la sexualidad y principalmente lo más duro y vergonzoso que reside en nuestra naturaleza como seres humanos, todo aquello sin dejar de lado, agonizantemente, la posibilidad de redención. Me dejó sin palabras.

(No se dejen llevar por la sinopsis, es *mucho* más que eso).

David says

This is, by any standard, a novel of ideas that pushes the boundaries of what was acceptable in old-style pulp sf. The central premise (a very unlikely one, it must be said) is that someone with a lot of wealth and influence creates a model society (Ledom, get it?) in secret. Ledom keeps the outside world at bay thanks to super-science, like many a Utopia before it. But Sturgeon's basic premise is radical to say the least - that if we eliminate sexual difference by making everyone hermaphrodite, we remove most of the things that mar human affairs.

This is the sort of idea that led to the author being nicknamed 'Steamy Ted', though to be fair there's no actual sex here - probably because no mainstream publisher would have dared print it. Instead there is a lot of philosophising and some fair-to-interesting exposition about Ledom history, culture, education etc. But, as other reviewers have noticed, if you want an actual novel, drama only kicks in towards the end when some cracks in the seemingly flawless system start to show.

Overall, Venus Plus X is a weird, memorable but unsatisfying read. It's proto-feminist in its assumption that eliminating macho aggression would make a better world, but relies heavily on the 'there's a ray for everything' gadgetry of Golden Age sci-fi. It sits uncomfortably between two worlds and ends in ambiguity.

Marce says

Me habría encantado comprender a dónde quería ir Sturgeon con todas las ideas que expuso en el libro. No sé si es una novela o más bien un ensayo sobre la identidad de géneros y las posibles causas del instinto autodestructivo de la humanidad. Es, a mi parecer, un libro profundamente feminista, escrito por un hombre, en 1960, y como tal, tiene mi plena admiración.

Roddy Williams says

‘HE WAS A STRANGER IN THE STRANGEST NEW WORLD EVER...

He awoke to terror. He was in a silver cell and all he could remember was his name: Charlie Johns.

Later they told him he was in Ledom – a country where the people were wise and gentle and kind. They tried to help Charlie Johns but they were... strange. He could see it in many ways – their clothes, their over-developed pectoral muscles, the odd silky sporrans they all wore. But it wasn't until he noticed two of their men pregnant that he realised just how alien a land Ledom was...

‘In a postscript to the original American edition of VENUS PLUS X, Theodore Sturgeon wrote that his aim had been to write ‘a decent book about sex.’ In a genre of writing where a genuinely adult approach to human sexuality has usually been conspicuous by its absence, Sturgeon’s novel is a triumphant demonstration that science fiction can extend the boundaries of human awareness in this problematic area just as it has done for decades in the less ‘personal’ areas of time, space and other cosmological topics. VENUS PLUS X may very well shock and even disturb readers who are not prepared to face up to the complex nature of sexuality and human psycho-biology. That is their bad luck. For the reader with an open mind and questing intelligence, this haunting stimulating and novel moving novel offers richer rewards than most other fiction currently available’

Back cover and interior blurbs from the 1978 Sphere paperback edition

It's hard to imagine what it would have been like, reading this novel in Nineteen Sixty when it was first published. This would have been shortly after I was born and consequently I didn't get round to reading it until some twenty years later, by which time the world had changed.

Its message remains an important one, and I feel it is a classic that will be rediscovered by future generations, but the shock value of its original release has been somewhat diluted.

Charlie Johns is a young American of the late Nineteen Fifties, in love with his beloved Laura and with all his life ahead of him.

Suddenly Charlie is transported through time and space to the far future and the society of Ledom. Astute readers and most people over twelve years old will realise that this is the word 'Model' written backwards. Charlie is told that he can be transported back where he came from, but in return the people of Ledom expect him to study their culture and report on it objectively.

From the outset Charlie is confused by the androgynous look of the Ledomians and eventually discovers that they are a race of human hermaphrodites, each having the sexual organs of both sexes. They are intelligent, peaceful and wise.

The whole idea of Ledom is that Humanity throughout its history has had a legacy, 'baggage' if you like, of teaching its children that they have to conform to stereotypes of male and female roles. Ledom provides a slate wiped clean of any historical contamination and a family life where the parents are essentially the same.

Likewise, Ledom realises the need for a spiritual and moral side to society and so a religion had been devised where what is worshipped is one's own children or The Child as an ***** embodiment of the future.

The narrative is intercut with the lives of two couples from Sturgeon's US of the time, where lives and attitudes both illustrate the ingrained attitudes that Ledom is seeking to wipe away and simultaneously demonstrate how the seeds of Ledom are already at work.

In one scene, for instance, a father hugs and kisses his young daughter as a goodnight ritual while merely shaking hands with his son, and cannot understand why the son subsequently bullies his sister.

There is also discussion of a contemporary cartoon strip which asks the question of how to tell boys and girls apart when they both have long hair. The answer is that the boys are the pretty ones.

The contrast between realistic life and Ledom life is a clever one, since although Sturgeon is painting a contemporary domestic scene, in comparison with Ledom society it comes over as being somewhat primitive and barbaric, which was no doubt the aim.

The novel does have a twist in its tail, however, and although Venus Plus X would have been considered a classic even without the surprise ending, this certainly pushes the book onto another level.

This is an important SF novel since its message is timeless and addresses some of the most fundamental aspects of human society. Sturgeon manages to make us take a long look at ourselves and employ some basic common sense, which at times borders on the profound.

Jose Moa says

A strange sf novel between utopia and sad future of humankind

Ron says

Utopian science fiction in which a confused protagonist comes to consciousness in an enigmatic futuristic isolated community, and mysteriously already knows their quirky language. The most significant quality differentiating the rhapsodic members of this creepy bubble of love and happiness is that they all possess

both male and female genitalia, and they have outgrown or avoided any sort of gender-based expectations.

Written in 1960, the fantasy is probably more interesting and relevant today than it was at the time of its writing. The basic concept holds out so much promise that the book itself becomes vaguely disappointing. It goes from being too confusing to being too pedantic. There are plot twists in the end, though I would sort of prefer to re-write the ending myself and have something else happen.

Still, it gives you a lot to think about and stays with you after reading.

Bryn Hammond says

Guy's a serious gender-abolitionist. I honestly didn't find this outdated. It is a bit of a screed, though. There was an elegant running cross-commentary between the future one-gender humans and daily life at time of writing in Begonia Drive. Crazy, as the book progressed I became more interested in Begonia Drive.

Kerry says

This book surprised the hell out of me. The cover makes it look like it's going to be some pulp scifi and it turns out to be EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE. (Seriously, whomever painted this cover should be sacked, and then the person who hired that person should be sacked.) This book is feminist as all get-out. It suggests the radical notion that men and women have many more similarities than differences -- and it just kind of says this, like, you know, it's probably right, right? And I'm like "!!!" Because it was written in 1960! Which is basically still the '50s! (*The Feminine Mystique* didn't come out until 1963, I just looked it up!) But also "fuck yeah!" But then at the end (view spoiler)

I don't think it sound all that dated, to be honest. I think people STILL haven't come to terms with the basic premise of the book. (Well, men haven't, anyway.)

Anyway, yeah. This guy. Theodore Sturgeon. I can't decide if I should give this book 3 or 4 stars because on the one hand, there's no plot at all (two storylines, but no plot!) and I give Asimov shit for just spitting his ideas at me with no semblance of a story. But I was SO EXCITED as I was reading this and also his prose can be gorgeous sometimes. So I dunno. Man, Theodore Sturgeon. Why is he not more famous. I was talking to Mordicai about this the other day at Book Club and he was like, "he IS one of the greats," and I'm like "yeah, but only among, like, people who know things about science fiction." I think he should be famous to people who don't know shit about shit. He should be up there with Clarke and Dick and Asimov and LeGuin! I don't know, this is only the second thing I've read by him, I should probably slow my roll. But I like the cut of this guy's jib.

Also it cracks me up that the blurb from the front is from Vonnegut, because I can't ever see "Theodore Sturgeon" and not think "Kilgore Trout."

Charles Dee Mitchell says

Badly dated lecture disguised as a novel about possible sexual evolution. Charlie Johns is caught by a time machine and brought to the world of the Ledom, hermaphroditic beings living in a world of bliss. They

escort him around their world, showing him its various aspects, explaining that later they will "want his opinion." The better parts take place in or around the 1960 publication date of the novel, where Sturgeon has fun showing us the lives of husbands and wives who just might be headed in the direction of the Ledom.

I confess I haven't finished this yet. I probably will because I am so near the end, but things have really bogged down into a true lecture that goes on for many pages. I am sure a twist is coming, but I don't much care what it is.

Jason says

I honestly don't know how I feel about Sturgeon's novel. I've been trying to think of it in context. In 1960, the sexual revolution hadn't happened yet. Science fiction novels were often still boring boys adventure fantasies. And the complex unraveling of sex and gender in sf that came with the New Wave and Ursula K. LeGuin's masterpiece "The Left Hand of Darkness" was still a few years away. So I applaud Sturgeon for his adventurous storytelling relative to the time. I also found the novel to be extremely readable, and it only took me a couple of sittings to read it from cover to cover. On the other hand, I found something lacking in the book, and I haven't been able to put my finger on it. Somehow, I just wanted it to be more.

Kalin says

A Platonic dialogue exploring the similarities between the sexes and our stereotypes about sex, many of which sadly persist, more than 60 years after the book was first published. As usual, I'm awed by Sturgeon's courage, insight and warmth. (Although this particular story seemed more clinical, colder than his typical writing.)

My reading notes:

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He remembered a thing he had read somewhere: was it Ruth Benedict? Something about no item of man's language, or religion, or social organization, being carried in his germ cell. In other words you take a baby, any color, any country, and plank it down anywhere else, and it would grow up to be like the people of the new country. And then there was that article he saw containing the same idea, but extending it throughout the entire course of human history; take an Egyptian baby of the time of Cheops, and plank it down in modern Oslo, and it would grow up to be a Norwegian, able to learn Morse code and maybe even have a prejudice against Swedes. What all this amounted to was that the most careful study by the most unbiased observers of the entire course of human history had been unable to unearth a single example of human evolution.

These ideas create a curious resonance with the questions raised by Mikhail Ancharov, a Russian contemporary (and kindred spirit) of Sturgeon's. (E.g. "What sort of evolutionary pressures produced the human brain, this ginormously complicated organ?")

~ Sturgeon's language makes me question everything I know about English. Oh, how my grammar teachers would wail and pull their hair over the word order in a sentence like "In a box was a dried marigold"! And I

just had to check if "There seemed no concept for "payment" or "pass" in the tongue" is a valid expression or a proofreader's mistake. (It is valid: "seem" can also mean "appear to exist." But it's an uncommon use ... I think. But I'm not sure. I ... don't know.)

Yes ... texts like these wreak havoc on my confidence as a translator. :(This is actually the second time I've started reading *Venus Plus X*; the first time, couple of months ago, I felt so stupid, found most of the phrases so impenetrable, that I just gave up.

On the other hand, it's a glorious (and ever rarer) joy to come upon an author who can teach you something new every other sentence. (view spoiler)

~ However, language isn't only extensive vocabularies and Serious Stuff. It's also having fun:

"Hi, bulls!" says Tillie Smith. "What's bulling?"
"Just man talk," says Smith.
Herb says, "Hi, bowls. What's bowling?"
Jeanette says, "Three strikes and I'm out."
"Herb already used the gag," Smith says in his leaden way, which isn't true.
Tillie tops them all: "What's everybody saying highballs for? Let's all have a drink."

Or:

"As Adam said when his wife fell out of the tree—Eve's-dropping again."

~ And it's not merely language you can learn from Sturgeon; it's all kinds of fascinating facts:

He went on to show pictures of other species, to give Charlie an idea of how wide a variety there is, in nature, in the reproductive act: the queen bee, copulating high in midair, and thereafter bearing within her a substance capable of fertilizing literally hundreds of thousands of eggs for literally generation after generation; dragon-flies, in their winged love-dance with each slender body bent in a U, forming an almost perfect circle whirling and skimming over the marshes; and certain frogs the female of which lays her eggs in large pores in the male's back; seahorses whose males give birth to the living young; octopods who, when in the presence of the beloved, wave a tentacle the end of which breaks off and swims by itself over to the female who, if willing, enfolds it and if not, eats it.

~ Haha, Sturgeon also tackled the "Mommy, how are babies made?" story. Starting like this:

"Well then," says Karen abruptly, "we don't need daddies then."
"Whatever do you mean? Who would go to the office and bring back lollipops and lawnmowers and everything?"
"Not for that. I mean for babies. Daddies can't make babies."
"Well, darling, they *help*."
"How, Mommy?"

“That’s enough bubbles. The water’s getting too hot.” She shuts off the water.

“How, Mommy?”

I'll let you find out the ending for yourselves. ;)

~ Sturgeon has the gift of ecstasy, no matter where he turns it. See him dancing about dancing:

It became, for him, a broken series of partial but sharply focussed pictures; the swift turn of a torso; the tense, ecstatic lifting of a fever-blinded head, with the silky hair falling away from the face, and the body trembling; the shrill cry of a little child in transport, running straight through the pattern of the dance, arms outstretched and eyes closed, while the frantic performers, apparently unthinkingly, made way by hairsbreadth after hairsbreadth until a dancer swung about and caught up the infant, *threw* it, and it was plucked out of the air and whirled up again, and once more, to be set down gently at the edge of the dance.

~ How can you tell a swine from someone just fine?

A pig among people is a pig, he tells himself, but a pig among pigs is people.

~ I can't remember where I first encountered (and embraced) the explanation why power structures (state-endorsed/institutionalized religion being only one example) need to denounce sex and the sexual impulse, but Sturgeon may have been among the earliest writers to highlight it. I'm quoting the following passage as a "historic(al) monument":

There are two direct channels into the unconscious mind. Sex is one, religion is the other; and in pre-Christian times, it was usual to express them together. The Judeo-Christian system put a stop to it, for a very understandable reason. *A charitic religion interposes nothing between the worshipper and his Divinity.* A suppliant, suffused with worship, speaking in tongues, his whole body in the throes of ecstatic dance, is not splitting doctrinal hairs nor begging intercession from temporal or literary authorities. As to his conduct between times, his guide is simple. He will seek to do that which will make it possible to repeat the experience. If he does what for him is right in this endeavor, he will repeat it; if he is not able to repeat it, that alone is his total and complete punishment.

He is guiltless.

The only conceivable way to use the immense power of innate religiosity—the need to worship—for the acquisition of human power, is to place between worshipper and Divinity a guilt mechanism. The only way to achieve that is to organize and systematize worship, and the obvious way to bring this about is to monitor that other great striving of life—sex.

Homo sapiens is unique among species, extant and extinct, in having devised systems for the suppression of sex.

~ Charlie's change at the "revelation" was abrupt. Too abrupt; to the point of rupturing my reader's credibility. :(

Kaisa says

This is a SF classic I would like to see discussed more often. Written in 1960, it is vitally relevant to the current transformation in constructing gender and sexuality. If nothing else, it serves to remind us that the change has been going on for quite some time.

Venus Plus X takes an everyman observer to a world called Ledom, where gender dichotomy has been made obsolete. The people of Ledom are neither men nor women: they are both. As in Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, removing sexual difference makes room for speculation about a gender-neutral society. Sturgeon also adds religion as a stabilizing and orienting factor, positing two needs as human universals: the need to love and the need to worship. In Ledom, the ultimate object of both those needs is the Child. Ledom is all about future, all about ridding the culture of historical diseases: violence, exploitation, patriarchal authority.

"We keep before us the image of that which is malleable and growing – of that which we have the power to improve. We worship that very power in ourselves, and the sense of responsibility which lives with it. . . . We worship the child because it is inconceivable that we would ever obey one."

As the everyman observer sees it, all of this functions quite smoothly. Sturgeon does not, however, construct a naturalized Utopia; rather, he explores what techniques and policies are needed to make this culture tick, the ingrained irony within any Utopia. In the end, even the everyman observer is revealed as a construct. This makes *Venus Plus X* an explicitly political novel.

"We are not a Utopia. A Utopia is something finished, completed. We are transients; custodians; a bridge, if you like."

The Ledom narrative is constantly contrasted with scenes from the other world, depicting two contemporary suburban families in the throes of what seems like gender equalization. While the mothers discuss business in a bowling alley, the fathers stay at home with the young, comparing home decors and consumer products. From the face of it, it seems like Ledom is not that far away. Old habits die hard, however. The modern father still raises his children to be Men and Women, kissing the daughter goodnight and leaving the son with a handshake and a laconic "Good night, old man."

Makes you wonder how slowly these things change – and what are the habits you pass on yourself.

Warmly recommended to all interested in feminist SF, trans issues, and the performative aspects of gender in general. Even with all the philosophy lectures, the book is an enjoyable and engaging read – I only put it down once during the five hours of reading time.

Kara says

About 3.5 stars.

It was interesting, a pretty short read, and engaging.

Jurica Ranj says

3.5/5 ali zbog Sturgeonovog stila pisanja, prevalit ?u na 4.

Interesantna knjiga koja ima svojih dobrih i loših strana. Vje?na tema razlika spolova i neumorne ?ovjekove prirode da dominira nad svim. Postoji glavna pri?a o junaku u utopijskom Ledomu i sekundarna koja više služi kao ilustracija odre?enih konflikta i problema, poput svojevrsne nadopune osnovne pri?e koja mi je jasna ali u nekim dijelovima i nepotrebna.

Radnja je spora i pretežno se vrti oko ideja i koncepta do samog kraja, kad dolazi do interesantnih obrata i rješavanja osnovnih pitanja sa samog po?etka pri?e.

Xabi1990 says

Lo leí antes del 92, mis primeros libros apuntados con fecha. Y le cayó 9/10, la mejor nota de los 6 que leí en su día de Sturgeon. A reseñar tb Violación cósmica y Más que humano. Ambos de notable, cuatro estrellas un poco justas.

Sin embargo los afamados Caviar, Las estrellas son la Estigia o Las invasiones jubilosas no me gustaron apenas (5/10).

Jo, ya casi ni me acordaba de este autor. Gracias por recordármelo....

Adam says

Sturgeon is a skilled writer and he has lots of interesting ideas. The problem with this book is its lack of plot. Nothing really happens until the last 40 pages or so. We just get a description of Ledom and some musings on gender issues. It would have been better if he actually put together a story around them.

Sffgeek says

brilliant book in it's day. probably a bit dated now.

Kat Hooper says

3.5 stars. Originally posted at FanLit.

Charlie Johns has woken up in a strange place called Ledom (that's "model" spelled backwards) in what appears to be a future where human beings have evolved. These future humans have some really amazing technology, there's no night, they don't require sleep, they've cured many diseases, and there's no pollution,

poverty, or war.

But what's most significant is that they've abolished gender — humans are now hermaphrodites. Charlie sees men who are pregnant, taking care of babies, and wearing pink bikini underwear. As he lives among these people who have no differentiated gender roles, he considers where he came from and realizes how the little biological detail of sex has had such a powerful affect on human history, society and culture.

If one purpose of science fiction is to speculate about possible futures by anticipating how advances in technology and culture might affect ... Read More:

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