



## Retief: Emissary To The Stars

*Keith Laumer*

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## **Retief: Emissary To The Stars** Keith Laumer

The Groaci peril: They're nasty little five-eyed sticky fingers who want the galaxy and will stoop to anything to get it. But when they try to sabotage one planet and use another for their garbage, it's time for Retief, that cunning and courageous emissary from Corps Diplomatique Tewrestrienne to smash in.

And smash in Retief does, in an extraordinary series of adventures that take him from gambling to gunplay, from the blue lagoons of the most coveted planet in the solar systems to the aid of one of the loveliest women in the galaxy - and ultimately up against the fiercest and most destructive beings in the Universe!

### Contents:

The Hoob Melon Crisis • (1975) • novelette

The Garbage Invasion • (1972) • novelette

An Excerpt from Retief & the Warlords (Excerpt) • (1968) • shortfiction

The Troubleshooter • (1975) • novelette

The Negotiators • (1975) • shortstory

## **Retief: Emissary To The Stars Details**

Date : Published December 15th 1986 by Baen (first published 1975)

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Author : Keith Laumer

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## From Reader Review Retief: Emissary To The Stars for online ebook

### Al "Tank" says

This is supposedly the 8th in the Retief series. Although quite enjoyable, it's a bit long on numbered facial expressions, etc. An occasional "...what did we ever do to you, Flith?" Magnon inquired in tones of Injured Innocence (84-r)..." is humorous, but that shtick got beaten to death in this book.

Also, there's a scene where two of the alien bad guys keep wandering in and out of the area to no apparent purpose for the plot line, except to make way for the other to talk to Retief. One wanders off to have a dalliance with a female of his species, and arrives back, with the selfsame female, after just a few paragraphs of dialog with the other character (who's now left the scene). Somewhat confusing (or the species "dallies" in just seconds).

That aside, it's the usual hi-jinks as Retief saves his superiors from being conned by smarter, grasping other races (mostly the "sticky-fingered" Groaci). The implied promise of a scantily-clad, sexy maiden never surfaces, but she's not needed. It's pure Laumer at his second best (which is better than most people's "best").

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### Ann Dulhanty says

There's entertainment value in how dated these stories are. Very dry satiric wit.

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### Valerie says

Retief is a character of short stories--the closest he ever comes to a novel-length story is when there's continuity from one story to another in an anthology.

That's not true here: but since all the Retief stories take place in the same universe, there is continuity, even so. For example, the Groaci word for 'garbage' resembles the English word 'eggnog' in the arabesque script of Groaci Prime--and this was first established in one of the earlier collections.

I must admit, this is one of the few books I've seen that is dedicated to the author's agent.

Contents:

(1) The Hoob Melon Crisis: Hoob Melons are a Groaci delicacy, but Groaci tastes must be different from those of most Terrans. They're described as tasting like cornmeal mush (?with or without cream and sugar?). The crisis comes from the fact that gribble-worms, imported to produce clothing (they shed their gorgeously-furred shells annually--must be a bear to stitch them together, though), like the Hoob Melons as much as the Groaci do--and breed a lot faster. Then Ambassador Magnon (Retief's immediate superior) discovers a sulfurated lining...

(2) The Garbage Invasion: Laumer's delight in weird language never attracted me when I was a teen: I was as fond of word play then as I am now, but I lacked some important context. For example, the 'Basurans' (who

have literally eaten themselves out of house and home--being able to digest rock, they've eaten their homeworld down to the magma) take their name from an Romance language word meaning 'garbage' (literally, 'that which is thrown down')--so the litter deposited on planed Delicia is literally hijacked by 'garbage men'.

(3)An excerpt from "Retief And The Warlords": Whatever for? I already have the full book, and the arena excerpt is one of my least favorite parts.

(4) The Troubleshooter: These stories become more violent from here on. I like solutions that are 'win/win', so I don't care as much for the later stories.

(5) The Negotiators: I highly doubt that humans are the only terrestrial animals left on Earth by this time. Making such an environment livable is not within the scope of the most highly developed technology, EVEN WITH continuous imports. Furthermore, the oceans are NOT uninhabited, even if you discount the intelligence of cetaceans, cephalopods, etc. If only technological species are defined as occupants, shouldn't we include corvines?

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### **Redsteve says**

Less impressed with this one. Too much bureaucratic nattering and not enough derring-do.

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### **Charlie says**

Seven stories where Retief saves the day. Easy and fun.

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### **Leif says**

Oh Retief. Always a good, entertaining read, and with just enough critical edge to give it the spark of energizing entertainment.

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### **tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says**

review of  
Keith Laumer's Retief: Emissary to the Stars  
by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - April 13, 2015

This is the 17th bk I've read by Laumer & I'm only just now getting to the character that's apparently his most well-known one: Retief. Retief's being the most well-known & popular doesn't mean I'd like him.. but I do. Retief is doomed to a lowly position in the diplomatic hierarchy largely b/c he's the one who's not out to succeed in climbing it. Instead, he sees clearly thru the bullshit & comes up w/ efficient & imaginative solutions to world-shaking problems. I like that in a fictional character. In my notes for this review, I marked

the following passage as "very immediately funny":

""Get ready," Magnan whispered. "Here it comes."

""Oh, Magnan," Earlyworm spoke in tones of Lofty Kindliness (a modified 203-C). "If you've information to impart which you feel is of more value to the staff than the little announcement *I* have for you—pray rise, and share the intelligence with us all."

"Magnan swallowed a small tennis ball which had somehow lodged in his throat and smiled a glassy version of a 217-F (Sublime Confidence, Enhanced by Consciousness of Virtue).

""Now, Ben," Earlyworm soothed. "I hardly think even so sickly a 217 as yours—a subtle expression, and one you've never mastered, as I've pointed out repeatedly in my quarterly assessments of your career potential, and of which due note has been taken in high places; thus your glacial advancement through the ranks—even a sickly 217, I say, hardly represents an appropriate attitude for an erring junior to assume under mild and justified rebuke.["]" - pp 12-13

Laumer was reputedly an officer in the USAF & a US diplomat so a series about an interstellar diplomat is bound to be an exaggeration of his own experiences & of types of experiences he's heard of. Given that my own experiences w/ bureaucracy demonstrates that, just like w/ politics, the scum rises to the top, I get pleasure from Laumer's lampooning. Retief is often the only character in the diplomatic corps who just wants to take care of business & move on.

Having not really pd attn to the series, I don't know if this is the 1st of the Retief bks or even if Retief was originally intended to be the main diplomat character. I see on the Summary Bibliography provided by the Speculative Fiction database ( <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?211> ) that it's not the 1st. Instant answers! One might think he's somewhat marginal since he's still a bit of a side-character by pp 38-39:

""Staked out in the sulphur pits of Yush on Groac!" Magnan cried half an hour later, reeling back from the rank of stern-face judges who gazed down at him with expressions of mild curiosity. "You call *that* clemency? What would you hand down as a stiff sentence?"

""Easy, Mr. Magnan," Retief cautioned. "Don't tempt them.""

The Groaci are one of the main villain species &, of course, they're duly exaggerated - in this case as polluters: ""It's an outrage," Anne repeated, "that those sticky-fingered little Groaci should have the temerity to even make application to GROPE to have Delicia declared an authorized disposal area."" - p 49

This, in a story called "The Garbage Invasion". Even the 'good guys' are a bit suspect in the ecologically-conscious area: "The newly arrived vessel was indicated by a point of green light approximately a quarter mile distant. Retief noted the coordinates and punched them into the guidance console, the pressed the ACTIVATE button." (p 52) A quarter-mile away & they're *driving*. But at least there's time for opera, eh?!: "Anne activated the car's tape system and a Puccini aria emanated from the quad speakers." (p 52)

& even tho Retief [last name] is a new arrival to the planet where Anne [1st name] is in charge, Retief immediately feels free to expect Anne to be the food & drinks provider ['womanly duties'] at his beck & call:

""Why don't you take the car back, Anne? I'll escort Mr. Magnan over and we'll meet you at the office. It will give you time to mix us a couple of tall cool ones, and to punch in a nice dinner to celebrate Mr. Magnan's visit."

""How does *fried chicken Sanders* sound?" she asked." - p 53

Not too unusually, the cover of this bk has a fully dressed guy, presumably meant to be Retief, holding a gun [yes, phallic] in an erect position next to a blond woman wearing a bikini that barely covers her presumed pubic hair [wax job anyone?]. Maybe someday publishers will just have the women completely naked w/ their vaginal opening distended from recent entry & w/ some sperm dripping down their legs & on the tip of the gun. I'll make sure to request that if I ever write a SF novel for publication.

In a recent comment exchange between myself & Michael Grutchfield, a GoodReads reviewer whose reviews I respect, Grutchfield wrote about Laumer's similes thusly: "I tend to think of Chandler as the one who (over-?)relied on similes, not Hammett, although his would tend to be more refined than the above examples, so in a way there is something Hammett-like (or even Spillane-like) about the Laumers." ( <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> ) I like Laumer's similes & their frequency just adds to the humor of them for me:

""By all means," Magnan replied. "Unhappily, at the time of my departure, the GROPE docket was crammed with over one hundred urgent appeals from member worlds facing ecological breakdown due to the accretion of waste products both biological and industrial. For some curious reason Chief Ecological Coordinator Crodfoller allocated seventy-nine of these applications to me for solution, a task approximately equivalent in complexity to rescoring an equal number of Groaci nose-flute cadenzas for a steel bands, Jew's harp and comb." - p 55 [ok, it's not quite a simile but you get the idea]

&, as we all know, no pop culture can be w/o guns & tits:

""You don't have a gun, do you, Anne?" Retief inquired of the girl.

""I surely do," she replied. "No real lady would allow herself to be found alone on a planet with six big old rangers with no means of defending her honor." With a deft motion, she extracted a slim-barreled 2mm needler from her *décolletage* and handed it over.

""Amazing," Retief said. "I wouldn't have thought there was room in there for anything else." He tucked the gun into his belt." - p 59

Is there room between his erect penis & his belly for it to be held there?

Yes, pollution is a "time-honored institution" or, at least, one might think so if one were to listen to the proponents of 'free trade': "["]But seasoned veteran of the interplanetary conference table that I am, I'm fully aware that GROPE's function is a purely conversational one, for all their brave talk of attacking the time-honored institution of environmental pollution and of unnatural interference with inscrutable nature's weeding out of the unfit by ecological pressure, the history of galactic diplomacy assures us that no act so direct and effective as the use of force would be contemplated for a moment by that huddle of aging bureaucrats.["]" (p 69) One might say that it's to his credit that Laumer wrote this story sometime between 1966 & 1975 when concerns over pollution may've just started reaching a wider audience.

A sidenote here is that when I write notes for these bk reviews, I write them on the inside front cover in pencil, usually w/ inadequate lighting & no desk-like surface underneath the bk. That means my notes are often barely legible to me afterward. This is both efficient, since the circumstances of the note-taking are more comfortable & easy than sitting at a desk I don't have, & inefficient insofar as the resultant scribble is hard to navigate. The point here being that most readers, myself included, are not going to take into consideration the potential for error & misunderstanding that can be invisibly present in the circumstances of writing.

Retief is a sensible negotiator - even under gladiatorial stress:

""You there, fellow! I have a proposition for you. When the dire-beast makes his first charge, you step in and trip up this renegade crony of yours. While the carnivore is busy worrying his remains, you can enjoy a few extras seconds of joyous existence at his expense, while I'll net a pretty profit by backing the underdog. What say? How does the scheme strike you?"

""I've got a better idea," Retief said. "Slip us a couple of power guns and we'll confound the bookmakers by shooting up the menagerie, and bagging a few assorted customers as well."" - p 85

I haven't really pd attn to how Laumer's generally critically rc'vd so I don't know if I'm in a crowd or on my lonesome here but I always delight in the shoe-on-the-other-tentacle imagery: ""That whiteguard!" Harrumph croaked furiously, goggling his immense eyes at the Terran. "*Inth* is a mosst puissant alkaloid. Already I feel a quickening along my gloob conduits. No telling what it will do to a non-Haterakan. How do you feel, Bully?"" (p 88)

& some patriotic froo-froo lives on into future worlds: ""Well, golly," Magnan burst out. "Naturally I know all about the grand story of Furtheron—about the cherry tree and all, and all about the 'one if by rocket and two if by transmitter'; George just didn't happen to mention that part. All he said was about some Poor terry Trash, like I said."" (p 101)

"["]Now, what we at ACHE demand is that an end be put at once to this disgraceful planet-grabbing, like out of Furtheron." She placed her knobby fists on her lean hips and stared challengingly at Undersecretary Crankhandle.

""A commendable program, madam," he said smoothly. "Unhappily, the planet-grabbing is being done by another species, not by us; thus we find it difficult to terminate the outrage as briskly as desirable."

""I ain't no madam, you!" the lady interjected sharply. "You just keep a civil tongue in your head!"" - p 121

Sadly typical of such 'man's-man' adventures as Laumer's, the sympathetic women are conventionally sexualized & the unsympathetic ones might have "lean hips" [not good for breeding]. Laumer's activists, like all of his characters, tend to be spoofed so they're as ignorant as the spin doctors like them to be portrayed in 'real life'. While that might be too often the case, it's not *as often* as foes of opposition to business-as-usual wd like the general public to believe.

Anyway, the ACHE activist here, as an Ignorati, takes offense at the word "madam" as something suggestive of a woman running a whore-house. I'm reminded of a story from my own life (surprise, surprise): I was working a job where I wanted to park a truck in a parking space conveniently near the doorway where we were to load in our gear. A woman was about to move her car from the parking space we wanted.

My coworker asked me when we'd be able to get to work & I sd something to the effect of "as soon as that lady moves her car.' Now the woman was 50 ft or so away & my comment was a blasé answer to my coworker & not directed at the woman but she overheard it & shouted at me to the effect of 'I'm not a lady, don't call me that!!' to wch I replied 'I'm sorry, what wd you like me to call you?' & she replied: 'Anything but lady, call me sir!!' Apparently, in her circles, calling a woman 'lady' is something that marks her as old. But, to me, this was typical Ignorati arrogance - she took it for granted that she had the *right* to tell me how to speak - even tho I was obviously trying to be neutrally respectful. Don't fuck 'em all, let Somebody-Else's-God sort 'em out.

Retief uses whatever means he finds necessary & expedient to work for what he considers to be the better good - including sabotaging a warlord's spaceship:

""We might," Retief said. He took from his pocket a small metal cylinder and tossed it up and caught it.

"While I was looking at the emergency boost gear," he said casually, "the auxiliary converter solenoid sort of jumped out and landed in my pocket."

"Gracious! Magnan said. "Won't that prove awkward for Ambassador Honk when he tries to shift into hyperdrive?" - p 125

Retief has a wry wit, or, perhaps when he's drinking alcohol, a rye one:

""That comment has a rather cynical ring to it, Mr. Magnan—how can you turn our luxurious facilities imaginary, when you've seen the actual programming documents which call for construction to begin within six months of funding the project, which will no doubt take place within a year or two of the submission of the CDT construction program, which I'm sure will rank high on Ambassador Fullthrottle's agenda—as soon as he achieves full Embassy status or the Mission here on Sogood."" - p 146

It's absolutely not important for you to read these stories, even tho I'll give them a 4 star rating. I'm sure we both have better things to do. Nonetheless, if you feel the need to 'escape' this bk will help you do the job maybe better than a candy-bar wrapper embedded in concrete & it'll be better for yr teeth.

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## **Curtiss says**

Retief is possibly Science Fiction's most humorous, and also invariably triumphant, recurring character; embodying the intelligence and machismo of Superman (without the superpowers) and the wit and behind-the-scenes manipulation of P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves.

Pick up any Retief novel or short-story collection and you're in for a rollicking "Good Read"! So uncork a bottle of Bacchus Black or Bacchus Red and toast the skewering of any number of Groacci foes (rhymes with whacky) accompanied by a repast of toasted Gribble Grubbs and sliced Hoob Melons for dessert.

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## **Michael says**

I'm not a big sci-fi (or is it SyFy?) reader. As I mentioned in my Conan review, I was more into fantasy or sword 'n sorcery. I bought this book a few years back, began reading it but stopped fairly quickly. I bought it because I was attracted to the description of a character who is a member of the inter-galactic diplomatic corps, cleverly getting the universe out of jams. As I re-started the book, I remember why I soon stopped – it was tough to read. Not that it is complex, but the phrases and sentence constructions are written in a way that forced me to think a lot to grasp them. The author tries too hard to find interesting adjectives and words that are not common. Also, the way the sentences are written are just odd enough to make one think about what they mean, rather than gaining meaning on first reading. In other words, this is no "In Cold Blood" that was very well written with language and phrases that lent themselves to ease of reading. Part of this is may be because the author chose to make the characters, who are diplomats to the extreme, speak in a way that what is said is not what is meant. The author likely modeled the characters after stereotypical notions of weasel-worded diplomats who use language to say one thing but mean another – or perhaps mean nothing. By using flowery, imprecise, and roundabout ways of saying things to each other, I had to slow down to read the prose.

I re-started the book (actually a collection of stories, some of which were published elsewhere) and finally got acclimated to the writing style, although it still required my attention. I enjoyed it more this time, but in

the end it is just ok. While it is supposed to be funny, it is really more cute, and maybe too cute by half.

In the first two stories, the approach is set – the diplomatic corps is a useless growth on the galaxy (universe? I don't know the span of the stories). The characters engage in banter with one another that is highly evolved. Many of their expressions are categorized as number and letter combinations that don't need to be articulated. For example, one character may give a 56-K, which might mean a "vague disdain for the other," while the recipient will reply with a 201-R, "mild surprise at the attack but with knowing detachment." The language and style take some getting used to.

The diplomatic corps appears to exist so ambitious people can work within a bureaucracy for their own self-aggrandizement, enrichment, and promotion, rather than to advance a diplomatic mission. All except Retief! Although he does think in these terms, he likes to get stuff done by using his wits and his knowledge of how the systems works. He manages to actually accomplish things, partially because the other diplomats are lazy, vain, stupid, or ridiculous. But I understand, it's not sci-fi in the end, but humor.

Overall the stories are cute and a nice change of pace but I'm not sure I would seek out the rest of the books in the series. I think this is a one-trick pony and there is no need to see the other ponies unless you are madly in love with this style. In the end it's the kind of approach that would have been more appealing to me when I was a teen because it takes this adult, seemingly sophisticated world of the diplomatic corps and by highlighting the ridiculous behavior of the participants, strips away its mystique. The highly respected diplomats are brought down to a common, self-interested level by their real actions, in opposition to the image of high-minded diplomats using their education and intelligence for higher purposes. In taking this approach, we see that they are not superior to us, just more clever. We can now feel better about ourselves. To a teen, the diplomatic corps is a stand in for the adult world that they experience and are soon about to enter. The adult world is viewed as serious, complex, and terribly hard to fathom to a teen. These stories show that the adult world is not that way; that in fact it is silly and adults are not a source of authority simply based on their existence and words. Now that I'm an adult and know how the game can be played (using language to mask intention – that what is said is the opposite of what is meant), the stories and approach are more cutely humorous rather than subversive and insightful.

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### **Alan says**

I had read some of the Retief stories when I was in my teens and enjoyed them. They haven't aged well. I stopped after the first 46 page story.

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### **Curtiss says**

Retief is possibly Science Fiction's most humorous, and also invariably triumphant, recurring character; embodying the intelligence and machismo of James Bond (Retief's portrayal on the cover art of some of the books is rather reminiscent of James Coburn as Derek Flint from the Our Man Flint movies) and the wit and behind-the-scenes manipulation of P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves.

Pick up any Retief novel or short-story collection and you're in for a rollicking "Good Read"! So uncork a bottle of Bacchus Black or Bacchus Red and toast the skewering of any number of Groacci foes (rhymes with whacky) accompanied by a repast of toasted Gribble Grubbs and sliced Hoob Melons for dessert.

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## **Tracey says**

Retief is an interplanetary diplomat, of low enough rank to be able to do the right thing, if not the diplomatic thing. He's not above a bit of scheming and scrapping to do what needs to be done, even if it's his bureaucratic superiors who get the credit. Written in the mid-to-late Sixties - it's easy to see the Cold War references, but there are light touches as well.

The aliens are well-written (supposedly their names are some sort of in-joke), with both heroes and villains, though they're usually on the "primitive side". I can see Retief, Lazarus Long, Samuel Vimes and Gil Hamilton sharing stories at a smoky bar somewhere between the worlds of SF & Fantasy.

If you're looking for some action-based, science fiction short stories with a touch of sly humour - I recommend this collection.

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## **James says**

I had to give up on this one after a couple of chapters. The story, such as it was, was mostly dialog-driven, and that dialog got a little too cute for me. Most of the characters have cartoon personalities, and while I'm a fan of silliness, this book finally crossed the line into irritating.

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## **Chris says**

This was the first Sci-Fi book (Between Planets was my second. Man, did I start reading Sci-Fi with a bang)) I read as a child and it was my favorite for years. After recently rereading it Retief is still probably my favorite Sci-Fi book. Not having read it for 20 years I was shocked by what an impression it left on me and affected my own work.

I still love Heinlein's between Planets but Retief is at the top of my chart.

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## **Bradley says**

Political satire wrapped up in science fiction. Not too shabby. This book is a reread that just did not excite me this time through. I pass this one on to my wifie to dispose of.

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