



A Case of Conscience

James Blish , Greg Bear (Introduction)

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Father Ruiz-Sanchez is a dedicated man--a priest who is also a scientist, and a scientist who is also a human being. He has found no insoluble conflicts in his beliefs or his ethics . . . until he is sent to Lithia. There he comes upon a race of aliens who are admirable in every way except for their total reliance on cold reason; they are incapable of faith or belief.

Confronted with a profound scientific riddle and ethical quandary, Father Ruiz-Sanchez soon finds himself torn between the teachings of his faith, the teachings of his science, and the inner promptings of his humanity. There is only one solution: He must accept an ancient and unforgivable heresy--and risk the futures of both worlds . . .

A Case of Conscience Details

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From Reader Review A Case of Conscience for online ebook

Chris says

A Case of Conscience focuses on a UN expedition to the planet Lithia, where the opinions of the expedition's four scientists will determine the fate of the planet and its inhabitants. For the physicist, chemist, and geologist, the questions posed by the planet are purely rational: should it be exploited for its natural resources (namely its lithium, key component to nuclear weapons) or should its peaceful natives be quarantined? For Father Ruiz, biologist and Jesuit priest, the question of Lithia is of a theological nature. Lithians are a peaceful race, with an innate sense of morality based on emotionless, rational logic. But they do not have the knowledge or concept of God or an afterlife, and seem to live without any idea of faith or spirituality. Are the Lithians somehow living in Eden, having yet to fall into sin? Or were they a sinister trap laid by Satan to trick mankind?

Of course, Ruiz ends up determining that the latter idea is correct, and that they are a cunning ploy by Satan to cause humans to doubt God; maybe it's because I'm not Catholic, but I must say part of his rationalization perplexes me---it feels like Blish set up a loaded theological argument and picked one he'd rather examine, rather than one of the others, as several of the theological decisions that are made don't make a ton of sense to me (such as the Pope later admonishing Ruiz for heresy by telling him that he should have committed another heresy, exorcism). Blish himself was not religious, and I'm not sure if he considered this a legitimate debate or reasonable conclusion. Personally, I like to analyze it as an example of humans projecting their socio-religious values onto an alien culture, bringing our baggage and limited understanding with us to the stars, whether it was something Blish considered when he wrote the novel.

The second half of the book switches gears, becoming disjointed in the process. Ruiz was gifted a young Lithian embryo as he left the planet, and it develops in a cold, sterile lab environment without Lithia's natural challenges or hazards. The result is Egtverchi, a cunning and charismatic if oddly sadistic Lithian; upon reaching adulthood he begins to attract followers from a civilian society that's been going mad as a result of living in subterranean defense bunkers long after the fear of nuclear attack has gone. While Egtverchi stirs up the stir-crazy populace, inciting them to riot from inflammatory television broadcasts, Ruiz makes his pilgrimage to Rome and must face charges of heresy, while the UN decides that the idea using Lithia to make bombs might not have been such a terrible idea after all. This half lacks the first half's focus, jumping across interesting but incomplete ideas, with some unbelievable developments in the process.

A Case of Conscience is a fascinating but uneven work, a bit dated and clunky, and while its philosophical-theological debates are complex, they don't make for a stimulating read. The first half---originally a 1953 short story---is a pretty good combination of first contact and theological conundrum, while a bit clunky, and it's not a bad choice to win a Retro Hugo. The second half---new content written for the book version of the tale---is kind of a jumbled tangled web that starts to fall apart all too soon. If you are fascinated with science-fictional examinations of religion and aren't bothered by wooden characterization and stiff, expository dialogue, this should go on your to-read list. Fans of '50s SF and those trying to read every Hugo winner should also be interested, but be warned: books that resonated in the genre back in the day don't always remain as impactful or insightful 60 years later.

A Case of Conscience is important for being one of the earliest "serious" SF genre novels to try and examine philosophical/religious issues, though I think it left me with more questions than answers.

Full review, and more classic SF reviews, on my blog.

Bradley says

1959 Hugo winner.

Honestly, I expected to read something quite a bit different than the novel I did get. I almost expected something like a conversation novel between heavily logical Spock-like lizards and a man of the cloth from Earth.

What do I get, instead? A novel with startlingly awesome biology standards, very deep world-building, and a wonderfully surprising argument of Manichaeism. For those not in the know, it's the idea that there are two creators in the world, one is good and one is evil. Father Ruiz Sanchez is convinced that these perfectly rational and nearly Christ-like lizards who are living a perfect life without religion are, in fact, the most perfect trap to throw humanity into perfect chaos and perdition. After all, this is a case of perfection without God, and if the rest of humanity ever "got" it, then it would be the time of Satan's rule over the earth for real. The whole planet was, after all, a Creation of Evil.

How gorgeous is this? Sure, modern readers may or may not care for the religious argument bent, but it is concise and beautiful as hell and it's ONLY THE SETUP.

Move ahead, take the freely offered gift of one of the lizard young back to a future earth gone schizophrenic, living underground in perpetual fear of nuclear holocaust and ready to tear itself apart. Have one of these christ-like lizards grow up knowing nothing but the monstrosity that humanity has become, and because of the peculiar brilliance of his race and his deeply frustrated sense of being as much an outsider as practically everyone else living on Earth, he speaks and breaks all the rules and becomes a pundit much, much worse than anything Trump has to offer, sparking chaos on a truly amazing scale.

Is he the hand of the antichrist, indeed? Or is he only the corrupted reflection of ourselves? Brilliant. And of course, the end... but I won't refer to the end. It's also brilliant, but of a different kind of light.

I have a few issues with the writing, but far, far less than I might have guessed before picking up the text. It's very thoughtful, very smart, and it shifts us with awesome speed between dialectical discourse to the absolute insanity of modern media. Is this modern SF? No, it came out in '58. And yet, I was laughing along with the crazy inventions later on as if I were watching that classic movie *The Network*, back in the 70's. No, no one was yelling from the rooftops, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more!" But the sentiment was there and the chaos of the novel was perfect.

How come wonderful idea novels like this aren't hailed as beautiful representations of classic literature? Is it just because it is SF? So beautiful. :)

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

A great thank you to James Blish and Open Road for the opportunity to read this book and offer an unbiased review.

In the distant future a science team explores the planet Lithia. The team includes the Jesuit priest, Ruiz-Sanchez. They must determine whether the planet is appropriate for Earth's habitation. The team is divided. No member is as decisive in his judgement as Ruiz-Sanchez, however. The planet seems just too good to be

true.

Once back on Earth with prime samples, investigation continues. To celebrate one exceptional specimen, a countess throws a party. I couldn't help but sing, "there's no earthly way of knowing which direction we are going..." It was spot-on Wonka.

As this life form grows in popularity, Ruiz-Sanchez continues to see the seed of evil- "half-naked, commanding money, fathering lies, poisoning discourse, compounding grief, corrupting children, killing love, building armies". It seems a bit excessive. It's like saying freedom of speech is the devil's work. Now I agree violent riots and calls to arms breed death and destruction , which could be viewed as demonic tools. We've all seen this lately with the way people have been acting after the elections. There is nothing that makes sense about that. Basically we have to know when to draw the line-peaceful demonstration or tear gas?

Thank you, Blish, for an obviously timeless story. This has given me a lot to process tonight.

Buck says

I didn't know much about this book before I began. After beginning, I expected something along the lines of *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russel wherein a Catholic priest is an early visitor to another planet with intelligent life (Lithia in this case) and returns to Earth to face inquisition and possible excommunication. (Unlike in *The Sparrow*, I was unable to grasp the nature of Father Ramon's heresy.) Then the flavor of the story changes. If book 2 of this novel had been written by Philip K Dick, I perhaps would have been better prepared for the weirdness of events that occurred after the crew returned (view spoiler)

I really don't know what to think of this novel. It's been on my to-read list for a long time and it was something of a disappointment.

Apatt says

Interesting!

If I was limited to a one-word review (you should be so lucky, dear reader(s) of review*) that is what I would write.

A Case of Conscience is James Blish's 1959 Hugo Award winning novel. In the first half, it tells the story of a four-man expedition to planet Lithia where the dominant species, the Lithians, are civilized, intelligent, peaceful, and just so damned nice. The objective of the expedition is primarily to determine whether Earth should start up a permanent diplomatic relationship with Lithia. After studying the planet and the inhabitants the physicist wants to exploit the planet for its lithium—possibly enslaving the natives—the geologist wants a trading relationship, the chemist is ambivalent, but the biologist, a Jesuit called Father Ruiz-Sanchez, has the most startling recommendation of all. You see, the planet is lush and beautiful, there is no crime, no warfare, no poverty etc. In fact:

*“Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...”*

Yes, all of the above. Unfortunately, Father Ruiz-Sanchez is not a Lennon fan and he concludes that this impossible utopia must be the work of Satan! According to him, it is too perfect, it achieves all the Christian ideals, but that is not OK because there is no religion! This leads him to conclude that Satan must have created Lithia** to disprove the existence of God. Therefore, mankind should shun this hateful evil (but nice and virtuous) planet:

"What we have here on Lithia is very clear indeed. We have—and now I'm prepared to be blunt—a planet and a people propped up by the Ultimate Enemy. It is a gigantic trap prepared for all of us—for every man on Earth and off it. We can do nothing with it but reject it, nothing but say to it, Retro me, Sathanas. If we compromise with it in any way, we are damned."

The four member of the expedition cannot agree on a single recommendation and go back to Earth to report their individual appraisal. A Lithian called Chtexa gives Father Ruiz-Sanchez a parting gift of a sealed jar containing an egg which will grow into an adult Lithian, which looks something like:
, or perhaps:

Anyway, you get the idea, dino looking chaps***.

The second half of the book shifts the narrative to a dystopian Earth, where most people live decadent lives—but underground—just in case there is a nuclear attack. The little Lithian egg from Part 1 has grown to an adult called Egtverchi. He is something of a celeb, with a huge and dedicated fandom who will do anything he suggests on his daily TV show (!). So basically he is ~~Damien~~ the Antichrist. Egtverchi uses his influence to cause chaos, death, and destruction on Earth.

As you can see from my uncharacteristically long synopsis this is one odd book. It is clearly a thought experiment, but I am not sure whether it is an allegory about Christianity. The climactic end of the book seems to point that way, but Blish did leave a wiggle room for an alternate secular explanation.

As a reading experience *A Case of Conscience* is never less than interesting, though if you are looking for alien blasting fun you'd have to look elsewhere. No aliens were harmed in the making of this novel (view spoiler). The aliens are satisfyingly weird, though, especially their biology, culture, and even architecture. The moral or religious issues raised are thought provoking but you would have to come to your conclusion about the meaning of what transpires in the narrative. The first half of the book is more interesting in sci-fi terms, with the world building and depiction of an alien culture. It reads a lot like hard SF, eccentric philosophical argument notwithstanding. The second half is more concerned with the idea of a false messiah, decadence and the gullibility of the masses.

The narrative is thoughtfully and slowly paced, there is very little in the way of action or thrill, not much humour, except for the social and showbiz satire in part 2.

If you are in the market for an intellectually stimulating read, but not necessarily a huge bundle of fun *A Case of Conscience* may be the very thing.

*Hello mom!

** A heretical conclusion for a Catholic to make, as – according to doctrine – only God can create, the Devil's job is to eff things up to the max.

***A Lithian is likened to "a ten-foot reptilian kangaroo" in the book, so the artist must have taken considerable artistic licence.

Selected Quotes:

A theological headache:

“A ringing, splitting ache in the skull of theology; a moral migraine; even a cosmological shell-shock.”

Science vs and Religion:

“Belief and science aren't mutually exclusive—quite the contrary. But if you place scientific standards first, and exclude belief, admit nothing that's not proven, then what you have is a series of empty gestures. For me, biology is an act of religion, because I know that all creatures are God's—each new planet, with all its manifestations, is an affirmation of God's power.”

Alien architecture:

“During the past half-century the Lithians had begun to apply their enormous knowledge of ceramics to house construction. The new houses assumed thousands of fantastic, quasi-biological shapes, not quite amorphous but not quite resembling any form in experience, either; they looked a little like the dream constructions once made by an Earth painter named Dali out of such materials as boiled beans.”

Mike Moore says

People don't write speculative fiction like this anymore, by which I mean several things. First, this is dated. Blish's world of dinosaur-like pacifists living in perfect harmony and communicating with giant trees feels like something out of the golden age of science fiction, and his view of a future earth where the cold war has driven mankind underground (and insane) feels like a 50s dystopia. This is understandable, since the book was written in the 50s, but it calls the applicability of the story for modern readers into question.

However, I think that this book is relevant, precisely because nothing quite like it is being written today. This is a morality tale with such straightforward plot and characters that modern readers (and publishers) will probably be turned off. The cynical atheist, the impotent humanist, the diffident follower and the single-minded catholic priest are not realistic characters. They are rather representative constructs of universal impulses, like what you would see in a morality play. The plot is reminiscent of "The man who fell to earth" or "The Dispossessed" and, like those books, is mostly an excuse for some philosophic musings. Unlike those books, there is tremendous ambiguity as to the meaning of the events in the book. Each character sees the same events but interprets them in wildly different ways. Because the first and last perspective given is that of the priest, there is some temptation to take his view as more correct than the others. I think that would be a callow mistake. It's true that the cynic is very unsympathetic, really downright despicable, but Blish makes it clear that his viewpoint is meant to have a degree of validity (even if mistakes are clearly made...)

In short, it's a book that's very simple to read and somewhat complex to think about. That the interpretation of the final events range from salvation to a horrifying mistake is a clear indicator that there is more going on here than the simple plot and characters which are somewhat offensive to our sophisticated modern palate. The focus on the priest is explained by the title, for it is his conscience with which the book is concerned. Considering his final actions and what he thinks that he has accomplished by them makes the consideration of his conscience as complex a question as anyone could wish for.

Manny says

This review contains spoilers for several of James Blish's novels

I discovered James Blish when I was about 10 (I believe the first one I read was *The Star Dwellers*), and I have returned to him many times throughout my life. I don't think I know any author who is quite as

frustrating an example of Kilgore Trout syndrome. Wonderful ideas, but in most cases terrible execution: for every novel or short story that succeeds, at least three are left butchered and bleeding by the side of the road.

Blish had a clutch of fascinatingly heretical theories about the relationship between Man and the Divine, and if he'd been able to write properly you sometimes feel he could have been another Dante or Nietzsche. In *Black Easter*, a surprisingly good novel about black magic, an insane arms dealer joins forces with a sorcerer to release all the major demons from Hell for one night; the book's terrifying conclusion has Satan appearing in person to announce the death of God. The sequel has another fine idea, but it's ruined by hasty and shoddy writing: it turns out that this is also part of the Divine Plan, and the Devil is unwillingly forced to take God's place.

In his longest work, the four-volume *Cities in Flight*, Blish developed an even more grandiose and imaginative concept. The first volume depicts the Second Coming of Christ, and the concept is once again excellent. Christ confounds the expectations of the world's faithful by incarnating as Bliss Wagoner, the U.S. Senator for Alaska (this was well before Sarah Palin was born, in case you're wondering). He delivers on His promise to give eternal life in the heavens to His people, but does so in an unexpected way, by diverting federal funding into research programs which result in faster than light travel and an immortality drug. One of the most agreeable conceits of the novel is that Christ is not recognized by anyone, and is never explicitly identified; it's only when you get to the book's final sentence that Blish comes clean, and even then he phrases it cryptically. Alas, this brilliant idea is again spoiled by poor writing. And the same goes for the fourth volume: despite coming up with one of the best end-of-the-universe plots ever devised, in which the meaning of God's Creation is triumphantly revealed on the last page, the greater part of the book is boring and flat.

So it should be no surprise that *A Case of Conscience* is more of the same. We have discovered a planet peopled by an apparently gentle and civilized race, the Lithians, who are gradually revealed as being literally a creation of the Devil, intended to delude and ensnare humanity. The protagonist, a Jesuit priest, too late recognizes the Lithian ambassador to Earth for what he is, and is powerless to oppose him; this scenario, it occurs to me now, is rather like that in *Black Easter*. And then, after what everyone here agrees is a fantastic buildup, the whole book falls apart, leaving the reader frustrated over yet another disappointment. It's genuinely tragic.

Poor Blish always seems to have been in a hurry; except in a few short stories, and perhaps in *Black Easter*, he never had time to sit down and get it right. And he died quite young, at the age of only 54. He's probably been sentenced to a few thousand years in Purgatory for all those spectacular missed opportunities. But when he finally gets to Heaven, I expect he'll have figured out how to stop doing it and he'll be able to settle down to his long-term job as one of God's favorite jesters. It's clearly what he was meant for.

I just looked up Blish on Wikipedia and discovered that he's buried near Kenneth Grahame, author of *The Wind in the Willows*. I hope they are now collaborating on a joint project, though I must admit I'm having trouble imagining what it would look like...

CS Barron says

SPOILERS It is difficult to discuss the crux of this book without giving specific details.

This richly imagined story is a complex parable, with characters to symbolize different world views, and it's

ripe for various interpretations by readers. Appointed by the Earth government to assess an alien race on another planet, Ruiz-Sanchez the Jesuit concludes the Lithians are too perfect to be the work of his God because they lack original sin. Nor do the Lithians have religious faith as he defines it, although they live in an innately moral and social way. Ruiz-Sanchez declares the Lithians are the work of Satan. In the process he commits heresy against his Church by granting Satan the power of creation.

This story supposedly continues with Ruiz-Sanchez's doubts about his judgment in this case of conscience. (Fortunately other engaging plot lines appear in the book to keep up the action.) Ruiz-Sanchez didn't seem that doubtful or conflicted about his choice to me. As far as I could tell, he didn't make any obvious mistakes in reasoning from Church doctrine, which appears to be his major concern. But--my opinion--he did make the colossal error of applying finite human judgment to one of the infinite manifestations of God. He assumes that his Church is the one true faith to express the will of God, to the exclusion of other peoples and their way of being. This assumption has profound ramifications for the fate of the Lithians.

Love, which I believe is primary to the best expression of all the world's major religions, is often lacking in the characters of this book. Maybe that's the fundamental problem with these Earthmen and their dystopic world. Forget about the scientist-capitalists, Cleaver and Agronski, and their selfish ambitions for Lithia. Michelis the humanist, a precursor to the Star Trek hero, is capable of personal and concerned love for others yet fails to act. Ruiz-Sanchez the Jesuit feels a dispassionate love, but he is constrained by the orthodoxy of his Church. How each of these men feels love (or not) and defines Good versus Evil depends on his world view. I would challenge anyone who reads this book to define Good and Evil in this story for himself/herself. Ruiz-Sanchez, a sympathetic figure, accepts his role as the instrument of good in his Church's eyes. But is he really good? Neither his assumed sanctity nor the power of science, as represented by Cleaver, come off well in this book, nor do they provide satisfying answers. This is still a conundrum in today's world, isn't it?

Stuart says

A Case of Conscience: A Catholic priest faces aliens with morality but no religion

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

Great A-side, dreadful B-side. This is James Blish's 1959 Hugo-winning SF novel, expanded from the 1953 novella. Part One (the original novella) is set on planet Lithia, introducing a race of reptilians with a perfect, strife-free society and innate sense of morality. However, to the consternation of Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez, they have no religion of any kind. Their morality is inherent, and they have no need of a religious framework to direct their actions.

As a Catholic, Ruiz-Sanchez cannot make heads or tails of this. Without religion, do the Lithians have souls? If so, are they fallen into sin like humans, or still in a state of grace like Adam and Eve? He struggles with this conundrum, as well as the purpose of the expedition to Lithia, which is to determine whether the planet should be exploited for its lithium or quarantined since the Lithians are clearly created by Satan to undermine the need for faith to form the basis for an ideal society. It's very unclear whether Blish thinks this is a legitimate debate or not, and while it's good for the author to let the reader decide (I'd like to see Heinlein hold back on judgment, for example), this Part ends inconclusively with Ruiz-Sanchez receiving an egg from his Lithian friend Chtexa to bring back to Earth.

Part 2

Part 2 must be the most incoherent and poorly-written second act ever in SF. It's about Egtverchi, the Lithian born from that egg, as he grows up in human society. He quickly learns about the world, and starts to

question why humans are living in underground shelters brought about by earlier nuclear conflict. In the process, he causes a massive rebellion among the stir-crazy people of Earth, who are suffering from the psychosis of living underground.

At the same time Ruiz-Sanchez is brought before the Pope for heresy, since his suggestion that Satan created Lithia to undermine God is a form of Manichaeism, a religion that posits a struggle between equally-matched good and evil. The Pope points out that Ruiz-Sanchez may have been deceived by the Lithians (and by extension Satan) and that he should have performed an exorcism of the planet! That wouldn't have been my conclusion, but...

Then the story does another sudden about-turn and we discover that a scientist from the initial expedition has gone back to Lithia and is trying a dangerous experiment that may destroy the planet. As Ruiz-Sanchez performs his exorcism, Lithia explodes. Was it his exorcism that did it, unraveling Satan's illusion, or merely the mad experiments of the scientists who destroyed an innocent and perfectly moral society? The story provides no answers, and furthermore no basis to form an opinion.

Part 2 was so badly-constructed and garbled that I wonder what happened to James Blish when he wrote it. It's just a complete mess and actually got me fairly irritated. I really cannot understand how this book won the Hugo Award that year.

A Case of Conscience is truly dated in every sense, and it would almost certainly never be written or gain any following today. The wooden characters and dialogue wouldn't withstand scrutiny, and a philosophy-centric story almost certainly would seem irrelevant in our information-drenched, hyper-realist world.

While I consider the book a failure as a piece of SF literature, it certainly deserves credit for its unlikely storyline and refusal to wrap things up neatly at the end. However, the deplorable quality of the latter half really makes it hard to take seriously. It's clear that back in the 1950s authors often wrote good short stories and were then pushed by publishers to expand them into less satisfying longer works. Of course the pendulum has swung too far the other way now, since any genre work that wants to be taken seriously has to be at least 800 pages long. But it is unfortunate that some early classics feel poorly constructed, and that reflects the tenuous state of the genre back in the Golden Age of Astounding and Galaxy before full-length SF really hit its stride.

prcardi says

Storyline: 1/5

Characters: 1/5

Writing Style: 3/5

World: 2/5

So you want to write a speculative fiction novel. Great! I like reading them and wish more were available. I charge speculative fiction with exploring the question of " *What if...?*". There are two broad approaches: 1) begin with something presently unobtainable and explore the implications of having it. 2) Work out the details of how to obtain what you want. In the first approach, you don't explain why it is that you have faster than light travel, you simply assume it, and then explore what it means for humanity. In the second, you make the discovery of the mechanics of faster than light travel the source of anticipation and drama in your tale. What it means for humanity is learned in the process of that discovery. In A Case of Conscience we get a speculative fiction puzzle: *What happens when an extraterrestrial discovery threatens deeply held religious convictions*. That is an excellent speculative fiction question. What Blish does then is to conclude that it

would be a very puzzling situation. If that sounds circular, there's a reason for that; his conclusion is a restatement of his question.

At times, Blish seems to employ the first approach to speculative fiction: generate a scientific discovery irreconcilable with religious doctrine. Fine, that is a good starting point to understand what happens to the religious, the secular, the ignorant, or humanity in general. This is what Heinlein did in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (view spoiler) Few of the events in *A Case of Conscience* follow from the premise, however. The quandary for the religious matters little to anyone - including the religious! What little adventure is contained herein is not a consequence of the setup. It has its own sense of urgency and justice, but it was disconnected from the premise.

Elsewhere, Blish clearly wants to employ the second approach to speculative fiction: investigate the inner workings of faith and doctrine and their incongruity with newfound science. Blish, however, doesn't know religion. It is like purporting to write a hard science fiction novel without any knowledge of mechanics or physics. Sure, you can write a novel without science - I like those as well - but it won't be hard science fiction. I could find nothing in any biographies of Blish that suggested he was personally religious. One doesn't have to be personally religious to speculate about being a religious person, of course, but he would have to acquire an expertise in some other manner. My reading of the novel was that he knew very little on the topic. Science fiction author Jo Walton recently took this a step further and asked an actual Jesuit scientist his opinion, and it was far more devastating to Blish's account than my casual criticism had been. The problem for the novel generally - and the religious question specifically - was that the essential elements to make this account believable were entirely missing. The mission parameters of our four original human characters does not make sense. Blish makes only the barest effort to provide a justification, and then gives us a lot of reasons to treat it with suspicion. It only gets worse after that: the identity of our protagonist contradicts itself. He is presented as one thing (view spoiler) only to come to a decision that such a character could never possibly conclude (view spoiler). None of the parts of the novel fit together. The puzzle never generated inferable problems, the setup was never reasonably justified, and character behaviors were inconsistent with their backgrounds. In small defense of Blish, however, the grande finale does resolve the dilemma originally presented.

Except.... There is one exception in which I can see how I am wrong with almost everything written above (and actually, I'll point you to a second exception. Mike Moore's review offers a perspective that is at right angles to mine, depends on a very different idea of how a novel functions, and permits one to redeem a lot more from book. His interpretation is definitely the one to follow if you want to enjoy yourself - and perhaps be correct with your reading. But back to my efforts to make something coherent out of this mess). Everything works quite differently if this was satire. I came to think that it was at several moments in the book: the behaviors were simply too caricatured, the events too bizarre, the connection between scenes so wildly ill-fitting. I found it difficult to believe that anyone aiming for a serious novel could so put together something so burlesque. There were small clues as well that made me seriously consider the satire label (view spoiler). But this did not scream satire from the beginning, so I was reluctant to judge it so after I was deep in the story. It might be worth rereading with an eye to it being satire, but none of the reviews I sought out- across a wide range of times - regard it so. The consensus of professional and lay opinion (of a small and very non-random sample, admittedly) seems to be that this was supposed to be taken seriously. I have real doubts about that but have permitted the masses to sway my opinion. (view spoiler)

I've seen it remarked that this was one of the first speculative fiction novels. I can see how that might have been significant in 1958. I can also see value in this as a sociological book - very Ursula K. Le Guin (and well before the sociological Le Guin) - in sections. The portions featuring Egtverchi were prescient, playing with a scenario Heinlein would make famous only a few years later. I also did like the speculation on the trajectory of the Cold War, with Blish's emphasis on a defense race that entirely overwhelms the arms race. Not without its good moments, it was an awful mashup, however.

Bill says

i am really surprised that this book won the hugo award. i'm a really big fan of some of blish's other books, especially *cities in flight*. this book however, after a very promising start, fizzles out completely. the first third of the book, set on the planet of lithia, 58 light years from earth, is sf writing almost at it's finest. the 4 main characters from earth are introduced and the description of the planet and it's alien inhabitants is very well done.

the rest of the book is set back on earth and just never really gets going anywhere. a lot of philosophy and religious mumbojumbo is thrown around, and there is virtually no action whatsoever to make it more stimulating. the actual ending of the book is mildly interesting, although somewhat predictable given some of the events that took place earlier in the book. altogether, a major disappointment.

Sable says

Read for the 12 in 12 Challenge, the Hard Core Sci-Fi Challenge, and the SF Masterworks Challenge, as well as the Science Fiction Masterworks Book Club here on Goodreads.

This book won the 1959 Hugo Award.

I loved this book! I have noticed a lot of mixed reviews here. In general, the consensus appears to be that the first half, which was a novella, is superior to the second half. I disagree, but perhaps you have to be a person of faith to grasp the implications. I am not a Catholic, which is the faith of the man suffering the theological crisis that is central to the story, but I am a dedicated Pagan priestess, and I can say that if I were in the position of this Jesuit priest, and if my theology were the same, I would see the theological conflict and the signs of affirmation of faith that I'm sure he saw. I might see what he saw; a planet of temptation by the Adversary, an anti-Christ sort of figure, and the fulfillment of God's will as detailed by my faith and my church.

On the other hand, from a purely rational point of view (which I also hold, being a rational Pagan,) this is clearly a situation of self-fulfilling prophecy, and humans are the force of darkness in this piece.

Could both things be true? Perhaps. I believe in contradictory truths in faith. My faith would not have seen the things this Jesuit priest saw. I would share the opinion of one of the other members of the original expedition, which viewed the Lithians as a good example that humanity could use to emulate. There are reasons I am not a Christian; the direct belief in the wrath of God, and the necessity of evil, are among those reasons.

I really don't want to say anything more, because I don't want to spoil the book for anyone. But it's well worth contemplating, and I think something that is worth reading (and extensively debating) in this time when faith so often seems to be in direct conflict to rationality. In Blish's book, it most certainly was.

For those who read the book through the eyes of a rationalist, I would urge you to read the book again with empathy for the protagonist, reserving your moral judgment until after you have seriously contemplated his

point of view.

For those who read the book through the eyes of faith, I would urge you to read the book again, keeping in mind how blind adherence to faith may ultimately have led to atrocity.

If you're a philosopher, I urge you to read it and offer your opinion through a philosophical lens.

Koeur says

<https://koeur.wordpress.com/2017/01/2...>

Publisher: Open Road

Publishing Date: January 2017 (1958)

ISBN: 9781504042444

Genre: SciFi

Rating: 3.3/5

Publishers Description: Father Ruiz-Sanchez is a dedicated man, a Jesuit priest who is also a scientist, and a scientist who is also a human being. He doesn't feel any genuine conflicts in his belief system—until he is sent to Lithia.

Review: An oldy but a goody. Still a meh for me. p.s. Don't read the forward by Greg Bear as it gives the novel away.

UPDATE: Ok, I was asked why I did not do an extended review, so I am back to address my failure(s). The writing was good, the aliens were kind of alien but not, the moral dilemma conceived by one man was not enough to astound or even develop a belief that could shake ones foundations to the extent portrayed. The alien planet was really well done, yet no time was spent delving into it as most of the story line revolved off world with a theologian/Jesuit biologist. The Jesuit's inclinations and thoughtful summaries were plagued with biased world views which was the foundation of the novel. And that's me meh.

Stephen says

4.5 stars. I am a big fan of James Blish. This book is an expansion of the earlier novella of the same name. Part 1 of the book (i.e., the original novella) is a 6.0 star story and is extremely powerful. Part 2, while good, is not as exceptional and brings the overall rating for the book down to 4.5 stars. Overall, still a highly recommended read. [Reread on March 1, 2010:].

Winner: Hugo Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (1959)

Nominee: British Science Fiction Award (Retro) for Best Novel (1958)

Voted to Locus List of All Time Best Science Fiction Novel (1975)

Michael says

This book, written over sixty years ago, struck me as surprisingly “modern” in many ways. It is sci fi with a strong grounding in science, but it is more interested in social and personal conflict than in gadgets, astronomy, or space warfare. It’s a short book, but with surprising depth.

This is the first book I’d ever read by James Blish, but I had heard before that he wrote books that dealt with Christian theology in a sci fi setting and assumed that they would be boring propaganda. This certainly was not the case here. Blish manages to take Catholic (specifically Jesuit) theology very seriously, and to demonstrate a profound conflict of faith in a believer without trying to force his audience to agree with the character. Indeed, we come to see Father Ruiz-Sanchez as possibly an unreliable narrator as the story proceeds, and one can interpret the ending either as the “truth” as he perceives it or just as easily as his delusion. Blish apparently wants readers to decide for themselves, and I respect that.

The basic premise of the book is that humanity has begun to explore space and has found one world, Lithia, with another sentient life form. Lithians are essentially small bipedal dinosaurs, living on a world that is “stuck” in a Mesozoic state, who have considerable intelligence in applying their limited resources. They also have highly logical minds, little intra-species conflict, and no apparent mental illness. Their society is nearly Utopian, with each individual enjoying both freedom and abundance, and acting on what appears to be an innate sense of morality. They also have no religion, or even a concept of God, which is what sets up the conflict for the Priest. Are they pure, un-fallen beings, like Adam and Eve in the Garden? Or are they, as the secular nickname for them would have it, snakes? If they are servants of the Devil, how can this be reconciled with the dogma that Satan cannot create, only deceive?

These questions might not seem all that interesting to a sci fi fan looking for rollicking action, but for those with an intellectual temperament, Blish handles the conflict well. And, you will be surprised at how much action shows up by the climax, though it does build slowly at first. He also projects a future post-Cold-War Earth that still suffers from the neuroses established during the standoff, and shows how those neuroses could create a population ready to accept demagoguery. This seemed pretty relevant in the world of Brexit, AfD, and Trump, but it struck me that, writing in 1956, he was also giving a pretty accurate prediction of the 1960s, especially in terms of the susceptibility of youth to emotional criticisms of an establishment that built a world they never wanted. In all, a very interesting and enjoyable read.

LindaJ^ says

This is another of the the books on the classic sci-fi list that I've been meaning to read. This was written in 1958 and placed in 2050. It concerns a "first encounter" by man with a sentient species on another planet. A 4-member team is sent to Lithia for the purpose of making a recommendation on whether to admit the planet to the League of Nations. The first part of the book concerns these men and the "debate" that leads to their splintered decision.

One member of the team is a Jesuit priest/biologist. He shocks the others by advocating that the planet not be admitted but rather be quarantined, i.e., off limits to everyone. The physicist (Pete) argues the planet should not be admitted but rather be kept a "state secret" and used as a place to develop nuclear weapons. The chemist (Mike) advocates for the planet to be accepted as a full member of the League, marveling at the society that has developed, with its absence of greed and other human foibles and rationally-based morals. Part one ends with a senior Lithian giving the priest a gift in appreciation of his help with a problem -- a beautiful ceramic vase in which the Lithian son is gestating. This part is very good and raises excellent points for consideration.

The second part is focused on the development of the Lithian "child," which takes place in a United Nations laboratory. Eventually, he develops to the adult form of a Lithian, but without having to undergo the hardships of a Lithian infancy. Mike insists on petitioning the UN to have the Lithian declared a citizen so as to allow him to get out of the lab. The Lithian, however, becomes quite a problem once he gets citizenship. He quite easily promotes a revolution -- made easy because of conditions on earth. However, the revolution is quashed. The Lithian, for some unexplained reason, sneaks onto a cargo ship to Lithia. Things come to a head, as Pete has been sent to Lithia to do some experimentation and is about to undertake an experiment that he has been told contains an error in the calculations it is based on, which, if carried out, will be cause devastation. (Missing is any explanation on why the Lithians allow the UN to send Pete to undertake experimentation.) This part is not as focused as the first part and the development of the Lithian child as a character is quite weak.

As other reviewers have commented, there are similarities between this book and *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell. Both raise questions about religion and how to deal with sentient species that may be discovered. All in all, I like this book but it is not nuanced and haunting as *The Sparrow*.

Geoff says

As I read the first part of this novel I really enjoyed the thought put into world of Lithia, the debate between the 4 scientists about how to classify the planet and the deception of one of those scientists. But moving into the second part of the novel Lithia, the relationship of the 4 scientists and the deception is moved into the background. In its place, we follow a Lithian's life (and its oddly growing fame) on Earth. It felt like two completely separate stories, and I would have preferred to go deeper into the first part.

Lindsay Stares says

Premise: In 2050, four men are on a commission to the planet Lithia. They are there to evaluate the planet and its sentient natives, and render a recommendation about future contact with Earth. One man wants to turn the unique geology of Lithia into a nuclear arms factory, another is convinced the peaceful Lithian society could teach humanity a thing or two, one is unsure where he stands, and the fourth becomes convinced that since the Lithians have an orderly society without religion, that they must be demonic in origin. Yeah. If you have been hanging around here for a while, you already know I'm not going to like this guy. In the second half, the plot gets even weirder.

Some books I read on the wrong day. Some books I read in the wrong year. Some books I read too fast because they have to go back to the library. Some books fall victim to all three, so you can feel free to take this review with a grain of salt.

I was never going to wholeheartedly enjoy *A Case of Conscience*, if only because Catholic theology makes my eyes glaze over. As far as I can tell, this is the story of a perfectly nice planet, completely screwed over by idiotic humans, who bring their baggage with them everywhere. Since we follow said humans through many pages of their own internal maunderings, I found the book ultimately pretty boring. The science discussed has not aged well, and it doesn't help that it seems to be recapitulating (pun intended) parts of Burrough's *The People that Time Forgot*.

The larger problem is that I don't really care what happens to any of the human characters. Admittedly, Blish seems to make them intentionally unlikable. Also, there are completely obvious science-fictional explanations for the behavior of the Lithians, and the characters are too stupid to see them.

The first half of the book was originally published as a novella, and is not bad, if dated and melodramatic. But in the second half, it completely switches gears, and turns into a sort of weird cousin to *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The humans are given a Lithian egg to take back with them to Earth. They completely screw up the raising of such (which is not pointed out enough), and he grows up to be an amoral anarchist. Which is kind of what Earth seemed to need in this awkwardly dystopian future, so I'm not sure what the characters are complaining about. There's a rather baroque sex party, I guess to prove the dystopian-ness, or something? Father Ramon whines a lot about his moral failings, and then there's riots.

And then there's the end, which I do appreciate for its ambiguity. Unstated moral: humans wreck everything, and should be confined to their own planet for the safety of others. I don't think that I'm entirely off base with my interpretation, and I don't object to the moral given the circumstances, but ultimately I found this book disjointed and depressing.

Thom says

The first half of the book, originally a 1953 novella, is a very good story of the evaluation of a planet with intelligent life by a commission of four gentlemen with differing goals. This is very well done and ends with a surprise opinion from one of the four, a Jesuit priest.

In this book, as in Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* and Dan Simmons's *Hyperion*, religion plays a major part. As this book arrived first, one can't help but think the others were influenced by this one - and each was quite good. James Blish wrote other books connected with this one, part of a group called "After Such Knowledge", where he continues to explore the religious theme.

The second half of this book follows a path of politics. The world of Earth the commission left from is described for the first time, and it is a bit different from our own - though definitely a likely future from the perspective of the 1950s. Interactions with (and damage to) this world is not as interesting to read and also not science fiction. The closest we have to that is a description of instantaneous communication (and later vision) that predates LeGuin's ansible by 7 years. These bits of sci-fi are needed for the ultimate ending of the book, and feel forced.

The conclusion, without spoilers, is interesting. While I appreciated the combination of religion and politics, the piecemeal nature of this book was jarring. The first half by itself would rate 4-5 stars, but I can't (in good conscience) rate the entire book so highly.

Lyn says

Weird book.

But good.

First of all this is first rate science fiction, reminiscent of Samuel Delaney, John Brunner, Frank Herbert and

Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. All the more remarkable is to appreciate that this book was first published in 1958, before most of the other works mentioned. He was well ahead of his time.

In a nutshell, a Jesuit priest is a part of an advance party reconnaissance mission to scout out whether an alien world is suitable for human colonization. The team will also determine if human settlement is conducive to the pre-existing native life and to issue a recommendation.

The planet is the home of a highly intelligent race of tall kangaroo like lizards called the Lithians. Their world is a utopia of reason with no war and only minor conflict. Their world, and the circumstances surrounding the Jesuit's investigation, presents startling consequences.

And the premise for a damn fine science fiction novel.

The similarities with Mary Doria Russell's 1996 novel *The Sparrow* will make most readers of both realize to what extent Russell patterned her work after Blish's 1958 book. The Christian, specifically Catholic, themes will also remind some readers of Walter M. Miller Jr.'s 1960 post-apocalyptic novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. *A Case of Conscience* also contains mythic symbolism that further deepens the narrative tone.

Finally, this 1959 Hugo Award winner is yet another classic science fiction work that clearly influenced the producers of the James Cameron film *Avatar*.

A must read for sci-fi / fantasy fans.
