

MANSEED spoilers

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 Sep 1999

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 06 Sep 1999, 21:23

Okay, so the recommended book MANSEED (by Jack Williamson) floated up onto my shore and I read it. It was pretty good, a slowboat colonization of interstellar space deal, with a surprising (for me) twist of Ballard.

Spoilers to follow.

Right. With regard to what I was saying before about the ethical downsides to genetic seedships, MANSEED rates as follows:

The scheme is a hundred or a thousand tiny fusion ships, each sent to a different target star. Upon arriving, the first thing that the ship (a character not unlike a less-abled SHIP WHO SANG) does is the construction of a Defender (called a "human/machine" creature, which sounds like a cyborg, but it is difficult to fathom the "human" element, beyond "software," since it certainly doesn't seem to be biological in any way). Then, if all is good, the ship's kwik-gro-klone-tank (as I'm calling it; Busby's "zoom womb" is faster) cranks out forty adult human individuals, one at a time, one per month: this then forms the initial human colony.

Prototyping (or "what does 90% success mean?"): all happens off screen, so the ethical issues aren't covered (to be fair, that would make it another book).

Parenting of initial human infants: unnecessary, since the clones come out as adults, and fully able to talk, etc. (This is something of a dodge, but it fits in with the overall story, etc. Then again, it continues to blur the boundaries between the quasi-cyborgs and the quasi-clones; robots vs. replicants . . . the humans won't arrive until the replicants procreate.)

(The Defenders have genitals which serve them as pleasure organs, but not as organs of elimination, nor procreation. Which is kinda sorta weird, to give your robots. And another problem: the whole idea of the clones)

Tension between robot terraformers and human colonists: actually there =is= some of this, which is quite nice. The defenders are envious of the humans, the humans are envious of the defenders.

Furthermore, the planet in question was previously seeded by a Manseed ship, its dirt-scratching colonies grown to shiney metropoli, and subsequently destroyed by alien robot space invaders. But then the mysterious alien masters arrive and they turn out to be Manseed-grown humans, too. So Murphy's Rule applies: interstellar waves of confusion, snafu, and fubar. And continuing tension between human and robot.

(The story itself is told in two main, alternating tracks: one case of a damaged ship arriving at its target star and going through the process; and the whole gathering of the specialists back on Earth, trying to hammer the project together from dream to reality. The two tracks work

surprisingly well--separate tension is maintained in both, and issues spill over from one into the other.)

(One weakness: each section reads like a stand-alone story, which may be what they all were originally, but reading it as a novel makes some of the "infontuggets" at the beginning of each part a tad grating. If this is a "fixup" novel as the structure suggests [the publication page fails to mention when and where the elements appeared], it could have been smoothed out a bit for novelization. So!)

(Of course I have all sorts of quibbles with the technology, starting with the fusion drive. But I also believe in not letting technology get in the way of a good story and good storytelling, so I won't belabor the technology here.)

=mantis=

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.