



In My Good Books Citizen of the Galaxy

by Robert Heinlein
Available free on epubbud.com

BY NEIL ELLIOT

I recently spent two weeks in England, and needed some holiday reading to get me through the trauma of travel. When I found a collection of old science fiction novels available for free download, I was delighted. But I was most delighted when I found this book. It was like finding an old friend, and as I turned the digital pages on my smartphone, I found myself in familiar scenes and plot lines.

As I was growing up I had a long phase of reading science fiction. As a genre it is ideally suited to teens, maybe particularly to teenage boys. It does not have (generally) the highest calibre of literary merit and the plots can be simply fast-moving brain-candy, but some writers fill out their plots with philosophical discussion. Some writers use the medium to explore not the limits of big guns and



fast ships, but the limits of human nature. Good science

fiction is ultimately about what it means to be human,

here and now, not what humanity might become given technological advances and genetic mutation.

Citizen of the Galaxy was a book I read and re-read through my adolescence. My copy had lost its cover long before I threw it out. Why this book? Because more than others it inspired me. The plot concerns a slave boy, bought for a few cents by an old beggar on a world a long way from Earth. Neither the boy, nor the beggar turn out to be what they seem, and the plot takes us on a tour of the universe as Heinlein imagines it.

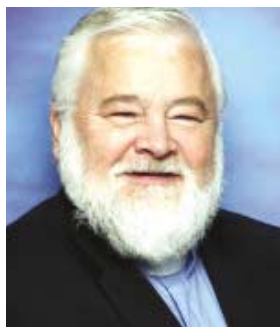
The theme of the book is slavery and its place in human civilization. But Heinlein is reflecting not just on slavery in the future, or even in the past; he is reflecting on slavery now. He sets up contrasts between those who have freedom, and those who do not, even when they have the appearance of freedom. In this, the book can be taken as a critique of the freedom of the USA in particu-

lar and of western society in general.

Heinlein was a controversial author. His politics were often reactionary conservative, and the most ideal society in this book, as so often in Heinlein, is that of the military. But the book tells a story and leaves the readers to make up their own minds. That is the beauty of good stories, they can be bigger than the authors intent. And that's why Jesus told stories.

I am not necessarily commending this book to you. Rather I invite you, as we start a new year, to look back at your childhood and adolescence, to re-visit the books which inspired you. As you re-read them you will find both the familiar, and you will find new insights. You will see things you never knew were present in the book. Most significantly I hope there will be new insight into yourself, into what has made you who you are.

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A prayer for the New Year

BY YME WOENS DREGT

We are into a new year in the life of the world. I normally don't make New Year's Resolutions. I know myself well enough to know that I won't keep most of them, at least not after the first few days ... or minutes. But it is an opportunity for me to make a fresh commitment to walking in the way of Jesus.

I was channel surfing recently, and I caught a television preacher. He finished his message by advertising a "ticket to heaven." Proudly, he lifted up a blue credit-card sized piece of plastic, embossed in fancy script, "Ticket to Heaven." "Write to me," he said. "I will send you this ticket and you can put it in your wallet with

all your other cards. It will be a powerful witness to your faith in Jesus Christ; that you are going to heaven after you die."

I didn't write away for one. For me, Christian faith is not about getting to heaven. It's about how we live here on earth. Everything Jesus did and said pointed to God's passionate love for the world, and our need to respond to God faithfully. To live in the "kingdom of God" is to imagine what life would be like on earth if God were in charge. We seek to live here as people who are loyal to God, learning to love what God loves and value what God values.

So we live here as people who are loyal to God, who trust God deeply, and who seek to love our neighbours. We strive to be compassionate,

welcoming the stranger and protecting and caring for the weak and marginalized people in our society. We work to protect and safeguard the integrity of creation.

Recently, someone sent me the following prayer written by Dolores Kozielski. Let me share it with you.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will take one person and feed that person, and that person will take another person and feed him; and before you know it no one is hungry.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will take one woman and laugh with her and that woman will take another woman and laugh with her; and before you know it every woman is laughing.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will take one child and teach

that child loving-kindness, and that child will take another child and teach loving-kindness; and before you know it all children are loving and kind.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will take one man and show him compassion, and that man will take another man and show him compassion; and before you know it all men are living with compassion.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will tell one woman that she is indispensable and that woman will tell another woman that she is indispensable; and before you know it every woman is indispensable.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will nurture one boy and set aside time for him, and that boy will nurture one girl and set aside time for her; and before you know it every child

is nurturing and caring for each other.

"Today Lord I have a plan. I will be at peace with all humankind, even though all humankind is not at peace; and before you know it my thought is the spark of knowing."

I wish you a happy and faithful new year.

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The Editor