Thrillin' at the MacMillan #7: THE SKY IS ALIVE

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[by]

Spider Robinson

"Space Society" is an ambiguous topic, just as "Space Art" was, two months ago.[i] There's more than one way to interpret it.

The easy way out would be to discuss some of the largest of the many organizations that exist to support the study of astronomy, cosmology, planetology and other space-related disciplines, or to encourage manned and/or unmanned spaceflight, or to promote orbital science, industry and/or tourism, or to call for demilitarization of space, or…

But you're already drifting off to sleep, aren't you?

And I don't blame you. If you do develop a burning curiosity to know how many space-related organizations would be glad to have your dues—and I certainly wish you would—you certainly don't need a professional liar to do your research for you. Thanks to the revolutionary principle which has entered the world in recent years, known as GFE[ii], you can do a better job faster yourself. Start by googling the National Space Society…

Next easiest would be to talk about *society in space*. I can say anything I like about it without fear of contradiction, because so far there *isn't* any society in space. But there surely will be, and soon. So much money is being spent on space today that we are sure to start seeing orbital hotels, factories, sports arenas and retirement communities within the next twenty years.

I don't know about you, but I *yearn* to retire to zero gee, where my back and knees won't hurt, where I *can't* fall and break hip or skull, where "normal" physical strength is a useless nuisance and driving skills are a non-issue, where the air and water are always pure…and where my heart, freed of most of its work, might well keep pumping an extra decade or two. If I feel that way, imagine how a rich guy feels—and the older they are, the richer they are, and the more their rich old bones ache.

Space is about to become a *place*. A human destination, where people don't just pass through but hang out awhile, in each others' company. Society will be as inevitable as the smell of farts, and hopefully no harder to endure.

It certainly should be a unique and interesting society. Zesty. Lots of idle rich,

ignorant and quarrelsome. A fair number of white-collar equivalents: scientists, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. And a sizeable number of blue-collar types: construction workers and truck-drivers and plumbers and other maintenance personnel…without whom everybody else dies. And remember, for a long time to come, there simply won't be enough *room* for any of these groups to keep to themselves effectively. I anticipate fun.

My friend and colleague Allen M. Steele in particular has written a number of superb novels and stories about the kinds of social interaction that may result, both in orbit and in the human colonies that will one day circle other stars. No one else I know has written as convincingly and empathetically of the beamjacks: the tough men and women who will actually build and maintain the places in which space society exists, and thereby create the wealth that funds it. And who will probably be as honoured and fairly compensated for their dangerous labour as the men who built the railroads, dug the caissons, mined the coal or climbed high steel.

Think for a moment about the effect it might have on human affairs down here on earth, if our wealthiest humans started doing a lot of their vacationing in spots that once again forced them to associate as intimately with the lower orders as J.P. Morgan or Harry Truman used to do with their fishing guides or safari leaders a few generations ago. These days a higher-than-normal percentage of our wealthy, isolated within their gated communities, suffer from severe rectocranial inversion, a condition which leaves one unable to see anything but the interior of one's own colon[iii]. Forced unplugging for extended periods ("rectocraniotomy") might do a world of good for the world. The only pathology still afflicting the excessively monied would then be rectofossal ambiguity[iv]—which afflicts us all, at times.

But let's face it: if you want to know about the details of human social interaction, past, present or future, once again a fiction writer is probably the wrong guy to ask. If we knew anything about social interaction, would we spend a third of our every day alone in a room telling stories about imaginary people to other imaginary people? If you want real entertainment, both comedy and tragedy on an epic scale, crash a gathering of writers sometime, and watch us being social. And you're talking now with the only man ever to show up at the White House for brunch with the First Lady wearing a Salvador Dali melting-clocks necktie that makes a honking sound when you squeeze it.

No, I'd rather talk about yet another kind of "space society" altogether: the interstellar society of sentient lifeforms. The Intelligent Life Club. Because suddenly, for the first time, it is possible to prove that one exists, and is even now in the slow process of realizing it.

Until a few weeks ago, anything we said about intelligent life beyond this planet was pure speculation—just a theory, and one which had been looking for evidentiary support for a long time without a particle of success. Now, it's in the bag—a done deal—because we have, for the first time, confirmed the existence

of an Earth-sized planet that circles another star within the orbital zone where liquid water can exist on its surface. And better yet, the bugger is only a lousy twenty or so light years away from here—right next door, by galactic standards! The 87th-closest star…out of hundreds of billions.

The star is called Gliese 581. It and its planet, Gliese 581-C, now light up the whole universe for us.

How important is Gliese 581-C? If all you've ever seen in the whole universe is two or three wet, Earth-sized worlds, all orbiting the same star—Venus, Earth, and Mars—maybe they're a strictly local phenomenon. You can't *prove* there are any others like them anywhere in Creation…just hope so.

But once you see *one* more around *another* star, one that close, you can now confidently guess that Earth-type planets occur on the order of once every twenty light years. Even if only one in three is actually habitable and alive, as is the case in our local solar system, that still gives one every sixty light years. I could fill my entire thousand-word essay by simply writing out the number of live planets that yields, just in the Milky Way. Start adding in other galaxies and the number becomes unmanageable well before you even get beyond the Local Group.

Probably the best way to summarize it mathematically, if you'll pardon the brief use of technical language, is this: the sky is alive. For sure.

Living worlds are at least as common in the heavens as living creatures here below—perhaps far more so. If only one in every million living worlds ever develops *intelligent* life, then there are billions of civilizations out there right now, even now evolving to the point where they can feed their families, create their own cities and sitcoms, slaughter themselves in large numbers for no reason, and occasionally stare in wonder and awe at the night sky, inexplicably finding there something that makes them yearn to become better than themselves. Like us—*just* like us, in the things that matter, whether they get around on legs, tentacles, wings, or wheels.

We're not alone anymore. After twenty thousand years of aching solitude, we finally have the first scrap of proof: somewhere out there, there have to be others who share our predicament. If we can just combine our perspective and theirs, maybe we can finally get some serious *wisdom* going on here one day. All the intelligent minds on Terra are presently in the glacial process of organizing themselves into something that approaches a global intelligence, with a central nervous system called the World Wide Web and a memory-kernel called Google. Picture the consequences of combining a few *thousand* such planetary intelligences, each with its own unique history and biochemistry…

By the way, the follow-up studies of Gliese 581-C even now underway are being done right here in Vancouver by Canada's famous MOST telescope http://www.astro.ubc.ca/MOST/ under the direction of my friend Dr. Jaymie

Matthews, who will be among the distinguished participants in my May 26 presentation at the Space Centre about “The Science In Science Fiction.” <http://www.hrmacmillanspacecentre.com/calendar.htm>.

Right now, of course, the most interesting—indeed urgent—question about space society is still the one first framed by the great Enrico Fermi, namely, *where the hell IS everybody?*

We’ve been listening with SETI for a long time, and have detected no information coming our way that looks to us like a structured message. Video images of Adolph Hitler opening the Berlin Olympics have been on their way to the stars at light speed for the last 71 years without apparent result[v]. The first human radio broadcast—Canadian engineer Reginald Fessenden playing Gounod’s “O, Holy Night” on the violin and reading the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke in Brant Rock, MA—has been available for free galactic download for 101 years now, without registering any hits. And surely we can’t be the brightest bunch in the Milky Way—where’s all the free satellite stuff that smarter races must have been broadcasting for millennia by now?

In the novel VARIABLE STAR, Robert Heinlein and I discuss the most pessimistic answer—not because either of us *likes* approaching the unknown that way, but because it’s usually the most *prudent* way. The pessimist wonders if the sky might not be so oddly silent because all the *really* intelligent races are laying up in the bushes, slowly quartering the battlefield with sniperscopes, looking for races dumb enough to stick their heads up and start talking about Jesus. If so we’re chicken in the pot, and can only hope whatever is coming will arrive only at light speed, for our grandchildren to worry about.

But it’s far more likely that we simply haven’t been listening long enough, or hard enough, or to the right things, or have completely missed what we’re hearing. Radio astronomy has only existed since the 1930s, and we’ve only been listening really *hard*, using Very Long Baseline Interferometry, for about the last thirty years. Other races may lack our prejudices about the binary nature of information—or may use an encryption protocol we’re too dumb to crack yet, as a means of keeping their In Boxes from filling up with spam from galactic riffraff—or may simply use some communications medium whose existence and nature we cannot yet imagine. Telepathy, perhaps.

I mean, give me a break. We just this very minute proved that space society exists. Give us a second before you start demanding free cable, okay?

BC writer Spider Robinson's 33rd book VARIABLE STAR, a collaboration with Robert A. Heinlein, is available from Tor Books; for further information visit www.spiderrobinson.com or www.variablestarbook.com .

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[ii] (See Thrillin' at the MacMillan #5: THE BEST UMBRELLA YOU CAN GET <http://www.hrmacmillanspacecentre.com/pdfs/Spider5.pdf>.)

[ii] In the acronym GFE, the G stands for "Google," and the E stands for "Exists." I believe the F stands for "Finally," but at presstime have been unable to confirm that.

[iii] Term coined by Toronto archaeologist Stephen Cox Thomas.

[iv] My own coinage: "fossa" is Latin for "a hole in the ground."

[v] (Unless you believe they explain the alien called George W. Bush.)