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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

OCTOBER HIGHLIGHT

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND BY ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

A man, born on Mars and raised by Martians after his human parents died at his birth, is brought back to Earth.

Among his own kind for the first time in his life, he struggles to understand human nature, our ways of thinking, and our social mores. But his beliefs and powers are very different from ours, and when a nurse sneaks in to see him and unintentionally binds them in a watersharing ritual, it sets in motion a chain of events that will change Earth forever.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

It's difficult to realize the influence of a single novel on a culture looking back on it sixty years later. Often the ancestry gets fuzzy over time, and we forget that what we may read as a tired trope today was the book that started the trope. We also tend to read a book with our current cultural lenses, not appreciating how progressive certain ideas were in the time the book was originally published. Science Fiction can be particularly divisive, as technology changes so quickly and what authors imagine intersects with reality in interesting ways. Few science fiction novels end up both popular outside of genre fans and standing the test of time: *Stranger in a Strange Land* is one of them.

Considered by most to be the pinnacle of Robert A. Heinlein's career, *Stranger in a Strange Land* was the first science fiction novel to land on the New York Times Fiction Bestseller list, a feat achieved by its paperback run. Much like *Catch-22* fanned a fomenting flame of unrest, *Stranger in a Strange Land* caught on as the defining ethos of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. The novel was actually conceived in 1948, when Heinlein's wife Virginia suggested a new version of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Heinlein created the plot outline at that time, taking the next decade to write it in full. Along the way he wrote many other popular novels, including *Starship Troopers*, *Tunnel in the Sky*, and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

Robert Heinlein, along with fellow fathers of the genre Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, both pioneered 'hard science fiction', which emphasizes scientific accuracy. *Stranger in a Strange Land* is one of his social science fiction novels, a way to explore the human condition through the lens of technological achievement, demonstrated in the way the novel explores its world. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Heinlein uses language as much as technology to explore the alienness of the Man from Mars. A cultural map of sorts can be discerned by studying the language. The number of words that describe nuances in important categories, structures that emphasize hierarchical communication, even syntax that emphasizes different aspects of a sentence. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Heinlein applies the language-to-cultural map to an alien race. The Man from Mars struggles to learn English and the way the human race works. He learns English, but he never thinks in English, always translating from Martian before speaking. His followers must learn to think in Martian before they progress into inner circles of Mike's Church of All Worlds. The best example in this novel is a word Heinlein coined, 'grok', which also ended up in the American lexicon. 'Grok' carries a literal meaning of 'to drink water', but it also carries a meaning of deeply understanding a thing to the extent that one merges with it. In the novel it becomes the shortcode for Mike's Martian-influenced belief system, a placeholder for ideas that just can't quite be captured by American language.

Heinlein consistently pushed back against the belief that the society he depicted in *Stranger in a Strange Land* is how he believed society should be. Instead, he insisted that "I was not giving answers. I was trying to shake the reader loose from some preconceptions and

continued

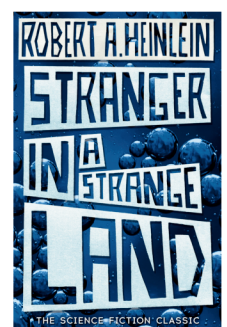
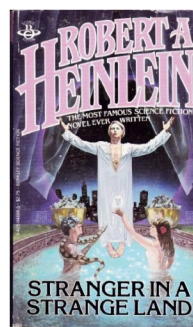
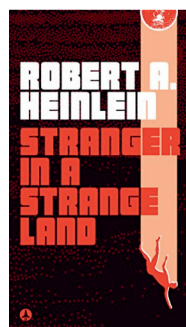
induce him to think for himself, along new and fresh lines. In consequence, each reader gets something different out of that book because he himself supplies the answers ... It is an invitation to think – not to believe.” In many ways, *Stranger* is an uncomfortable read because of that effort. There are layers of contradictions within each character and circumstance. The Martian race is depicted as a oneness, a commune of shared consciousness, but the Old Ones casually ponder the way they destroyed a planet to make better art. Mike's water brothers have love as an ideal, but they operate with many of the hallmarks of cults, the same characteristics that have led to great tragedies. The religious view of sex is declaimed, but the ideal is presented as a purer form of marriage that includes a polygamous group. Characters say they 'grok' a thing when it's clear in the narrative that they do not. Each contradiction leads to another decision for the reader to make: whether to agree with it, leave it behind, or transform with it. Heinlein used Smith's alienness to both point a mirror at our own conceptions of humanity and as a way to present alternative viewpoints. Part of the novel's endurance is related to this questioning: instead of presenting the ideal society, Heinlein asks the reader to think about their relationship to religion, to community, to death, and to money. The questions are timeless even as the technology ages and social mores change.

FUN FACTS

- Heinlein describes a version of a waterbed in the novel; an early inventor was initially denied a patent for inventing the actual waterbed due to the “prior art”.
- Two major editions exist of the novel: a shorter one as published in 1961, and an 'uncut' version of the originally submitted manuscript published posthumously in 1991 by Heinlein's wife Virginia.
- Heinlein became an avid blood donor after an illness which required blood transfusions (he had a very rare blood type).
- The novel's title is taken from the King James Version of the Bible, Exodus 2:22. Other working titles were *The Heretic* and *A Martian Named Smith*.
- Elon Musk named Twitter/X's AI chatbot “Grok” in 2023 after the novel's concept of full understanding.



Robert A. Heinlein, circa 1953



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Were there parts of the novel that made you uncomfortable while reading? Discuss them; is there a consensus within your group?
- What parts of Martian and American cultures are revealed through Mike's language education (both him learning English and him teaching Martian)?
- In Chapter 11, the Old Ones discuss amongst themselves how "surprise disincorporation" might make new styles of art, including whether or not is it something that should be pursued. They also discuss how Martians praise and cherish the races of the 5th planet, which the Old Ones had destroyed. What does this demonstrate about Martian culture? Compare it to the human culture, particularly as described by Jubal thusly: "There was one field in which man was unsurpassed; he showed unlimited ingenuity in devising bigger and more efficient ways to kill off, enslave, harass, and in all ways make an unbearable nuisance of himself to himself."
- Do you think Earth is in any danger from The Old Ones on Mars? Will they ever reconnect to Mike's mind?
- When discussing the Rodin sculptures, Jubal says this about art: "One does have to learn to look at art. But it's up to the artist to use language that can be understood." Does that statement ring true to your understanding of art, particularly modern art? Why/why not?
- Sexual freedom is a significant theme in the book, most frequently promoted by Mike. Yet on Mars, there is no gender differences between life stages (nymphs are all female, adults are all male), so sex doesn't carry weight there. Why does it become so central to Mike's Martian church?
- Mike loves to visit public libraries and devoured all of the books he found in Jubal's extensive library. What was the appeal to Mike? Do you share that belief?
- Though other religions are discussed in the novel, the two main churches are the Fosterites and Mike's Church of All Worlds, with some Islam sprinkled in. Why do you think the Fosterites were chosen to oppose Mike's church? Are there elements of the worship services described that reflect church services you are familiar with?
- Heinlein writes "The country and culture commonly known as "America" had had a badly split personality all through its history." Do you agree or disagree? What evidence supports your stance?
- Jubal explains to Mike that "Democracy is a poor system; the only thing that can be said for it is that it's eight times as good as any other method." Do you agree? What do you think the Founding Fathers would say in response to this statement? (see *The Federalist Papers* for some inspiration!)

SOURCES & MORE

Articles & Websites

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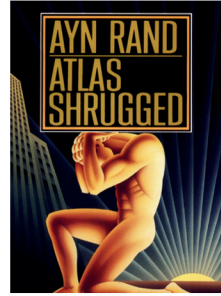
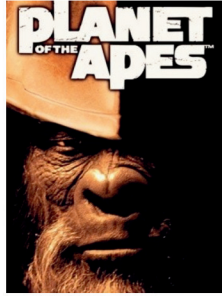
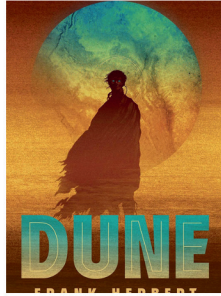
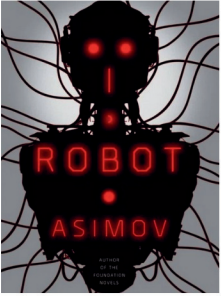
Video

- Great Courses, "How Great Science Fiction Works". 2016. *available on Kanopy*

“SECRECY IS THE KEYSTONE TO ALL TYRANNY. NOT FORCE, BUT SECRECY AND CENSORSHIP. WHEN ANY GOVERNMENT OR CHURCH FOR THAT MATTER, UNDERTAKES TO SAY TO ITS SUBJECTS, "THIS YOU MAY NOT READ, THIS YOU MUST NOT KNOW," THE END RESULT IS TYRANNY AND OPPRESSION, NO MATTER HOW HOLY THE MOTIVES. MIGHTY LITTLE FORCE IS NEEDED TO CONTROL A MAN WHO HAS BEEN HOODWINKED IN THIS FASHION; CONTRARIWISE, NO AMOUNT OF FORCE CAN CONTROL A FREE MAN, WHOSE MIND IS FREE. NO, NOT THE RACK NOR THE ATOMIC BOMB, NOT ANYTHING. YOU CAN'T CONQUER A FREE MAN; THE MOST YOU CAN DO IS KILL HIM.”

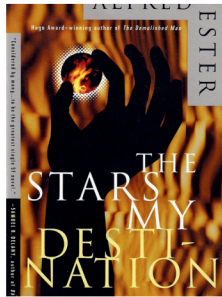
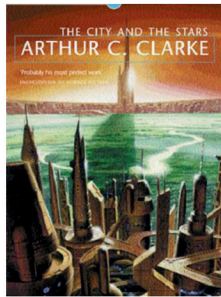
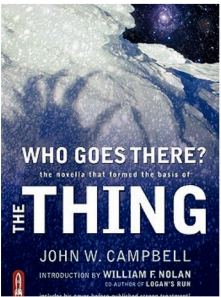
- ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

READ-ALIKES - STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND



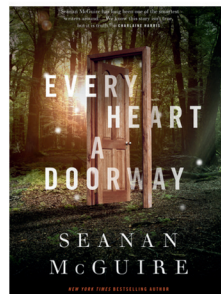
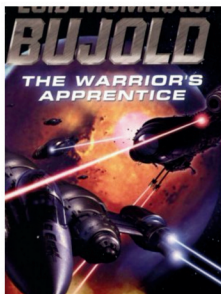
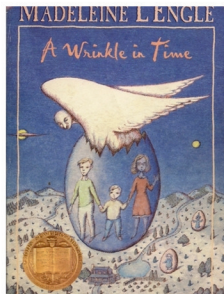
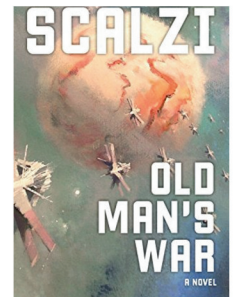
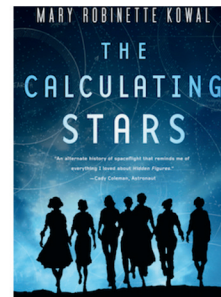
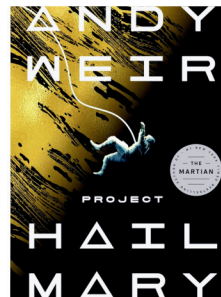
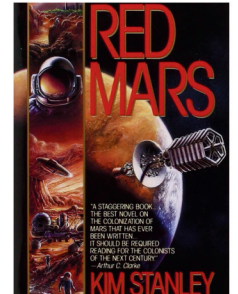
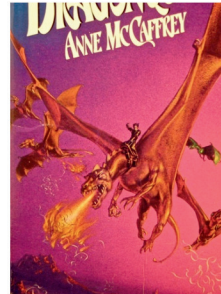
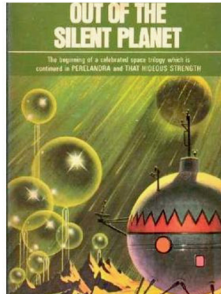
Contemporaries of Heinlein:

- *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov
- *The Stars My Destination* by Alfred Bester
- *Planet of the Apes* by Pierre Boulle
- *Who Goes There?* by John W. Campbell Jr.
- *The City and the Stars* by Arthur C. Clarke
- *The Main in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick
- *Dune* by Frank Herbert
- *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand



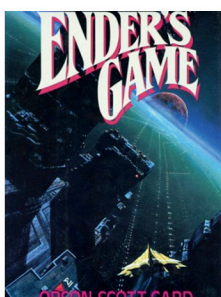
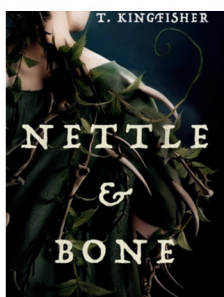
Hugo Award Winners:

- *The Calculating Stars* by Mary Robinette Kowal
- *Out of the Silent Planet* by C.S. Lewis
- *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin
- *The Many-Colored Land* by Julian May
- *Dragonquest* by Anne McCaffrey
- *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson
- *Old Man's War* by John Scalzi
- *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir



For Fans of the Heinlein Juveniles:

- *The Warrior's Apprentice* by Lois McMaster Bujold
- *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card
- *Aurora Rising* by Amie Kaufman & Jay Kristoff
- *Nettle & Bone* by T. Kingfisher
- *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle
- *Every Heart a Doorway* by Seanan McGuire
- *Renegades* by Marissa Meyer
- *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman

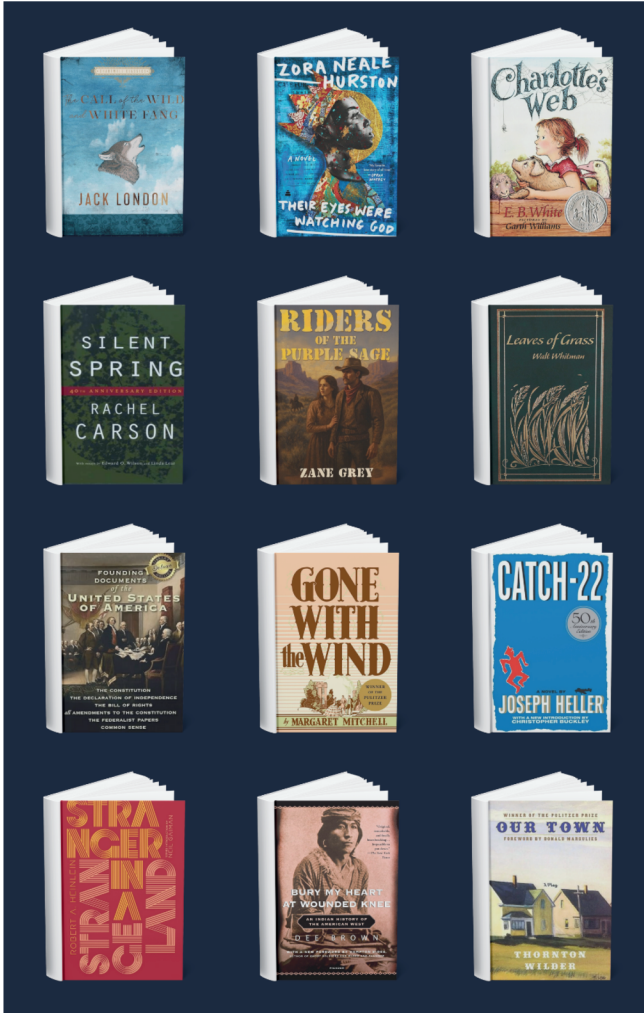


UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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