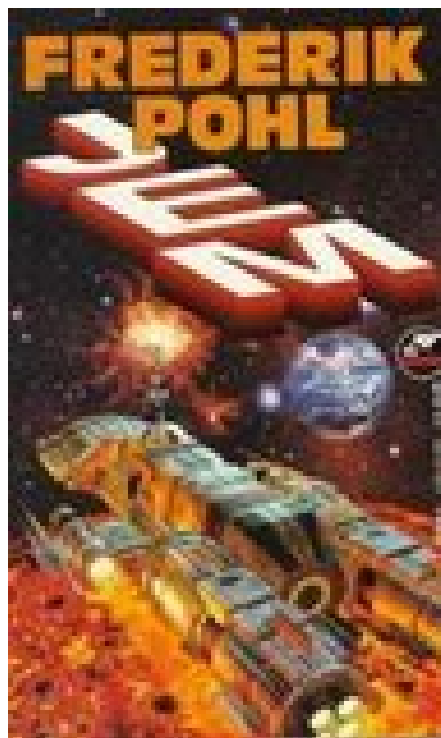




Jem

Frederik Pohl

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En un futuro muy lejano, la Tierra vive un equilibrio precario: la población crece inversamente a los recursos, y una suerte de guerra fría divide el mundo en tres bloques irreconciliables. Con el descubrimiento de Jem, un planeta rico y habitable, surge la oportunidad de empezar de cero. Sin embargo, toda esperanza de renacimiento de la humanidad se desvanece cuando, a través de un juego hipócrita de alianzas con las especies autóctonas, los colonizadores reproducen la arrogancia y el salvajismo que los había condenado, importando el más antiguo producto de la industria y el ingenio: la guerra.

Jem Details

Date : Published August 28th 2004 by Minotauro (first published 1979)

ISBN : 9788445074671

Author : Frederik Pohl

Format : Paperback 364 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction

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Kian says

Jem was written in 1980. In context, the 1980s were the later stages of the cold war, which saw the two dominant super-powers: America and the Soviet Union square off against each other in covert operations and subterfuge. The Soviet war in Afghanistan happened in 1979, and the People's Republic of China was starting to make themselves known on the world stage.

On the back of this, Pohl wrote Jem, a future novel where the world has consolidated into three political blocs: Food, Fuel and People. Each block is rich in one resource, but poor in others. Earth politics are a delicate game of co-operation without benevolence between the blocs, made by shadowy individuals with games of cloak and dagger.

The novel opens with a scientist's desire to travel to another world. Not unusual, and at this point, space travel is a relatively common occurrence. But their target is a world which could be colonised, a new idea. As the story progresses, a race develops and we see the politics, manipulation and cost necessary for the mission to go ahead.

On the planet we find three sentient species of life forms. As each bloc arrives, they each form a relationship to a species, and the delicate balance of the planet is upset as politics and colonial motives overtake the ecology of the planet.

The original idea that mankind could go and colonise a new planet and give humanity a fresh start is explored here in a sobering light, with a good explanation of why humanity may not be ready yet and what may very well happen when we do. The conclusion to the book is not a major leap; but the story, the political wrangling and the motivations of the individuals, as well as the clearly apparent changes to Jem, are an excellent counter-point to the typical "Utopia" story.

Andy Love says

Why do bad things happen? Are wars and genocide the product of the actions of a few hyper-evil people? Pohl's answer in this novel is that major historical events are not caused by single figures of great virtue or great evil, but rather by the small actions of everyday people due to impulse, greed, and misunderstanding, with a large dose of chance. Pohl heaps scorn on the "brinkmanship" philosophy which argued that one can rely on one's opponents to recognize that your actions take things too close to the brink of disaster, and thus that their only reasonable response to to acquiesce to your demands - in the world of Jem, this approach is tried by all sides, and rapidly leads to disaster. Pohl underscores this theme with persistent use of irony; characters misunderstand the actions of others, and their own motivations in ways that are clear to the reader but never become clear to the characters, with the final chapter giving a look at the kind of society the survivors have created - one that those at the top of the hierarchy can describe as being free of coercion and devoted to peace, but which the readers will recognize as practicing slavery and expansionistic policies (and yet, Pohl seems to be saying that the self-serving lies of this society are no worse than those of our society).

It's not a "feel-good" book - but it is a powerful one, with at least one moment when some of the characters attempt to break free of the path that they have been led down, to do something good instead; if more had done so, earlier, the world of "Jem" would have been a better one - and I think Pohl intends the same lesson to apply to our world.

Andrew Breslin says

Pohl is considered one of the big hitters of 20th Century science fiction. He was tireless and prolific, writing and editing great droves of stories and books and founding important SF publications, sometimes cranking out a couple of novels and then creating a new venue for the genre before breakfast. So I certainly respect him and his contributions to SF, even if I didn't enjoy my first foray into his work, which I did not.

I'm pretty sure I "got it." I don't think the deep and important themes discussed went sailing over my head like so many wind-borne balloonists. Yes, people sure do suck. Colonialism sucks. Greedy acquisitiveness sucks. The human potential for both narrow-minded self-destruction and rationalization of its own short-sighted self-interest sucks. We can't stop fighting amongst ourselves even if our very survival as a species depends upon it, and thinking we can leave behind these negative attributes and start over with a fresh clean slate is a delusional pipe-dream. No argument from me, Mr. Pohl, and I appreciate the effort to dramatize it. I just found it very difficult to care.

I simply did not give a rat's ass, or even a Krinpit's carapace, about any of the characters, with the possible exception of Charlie, who was a large bag of gas. When a sentient balloon is more interesting and evokes more sympathy than any of the people in the story, I think that's a problem.

And my nit-picking inner scientist--a real asshole who's ruined many otherwise perfectly enjoyable *Star Trek* episodes--could not help but view with great incredulity the prospect of three very different sentient life forms all evolving on the same planet, and all arriving simultaneously at approximately the same level of societal sophistication, by some miraculous coincidence. They could even communicate with one another using language, whereas the vast majority of human beings on our own planet could not communicate with the vast majority of other people, let alone, say, an orangutan. Or, for that matter, say, a cockroach.

Still, I could have suspended my disbelief in standard notions of ecology and evolution if only I cared more. But I didn't, except for Charlie. I still hold out some tiny shreds of hope that someday, we might prove Pohl wrong and successfully leave behind some of the worst aspects of our human nature, either here at home or, in the far future, somewhere else in the universe, and create some sort of utopian society. I don't think it's at all likely, but I can hope. And I hope there will be balloons.

D.L. Thurston says

What this book isn't: A novelization of the television show of the same name. Which I found outrageous. Truly, truly outrageous. However, I got over it pretty quickly as I kept reading.

What this book is: An indictment of industrialism, capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism. If you don't want to see the darker side of some or all of these -isms laid bare, this may not be the book for you. I have conflicted-at-best opinions of all four, so a book where all four are taken to task was a fascinating read.

It's odd to read a book where it's so clear from the beginning that everything is going to go poorly, can only go poorly, for the main characters without it branching into the horror genre. For some the downfall is by no fault of their own, for others their downfall is so spectacular as to bring down others, including entire

countries, as they collapse. Due to this, I had a little trouble finding the time to sit down and actually finish the book to see what final horrible decisions everyone would make. Finally, I pushed through, and was glad for it.

(view spoiler)

Tina says

This novel deserves 3.5. It was very slow to start and was packed full of racial stereotypes, but the last third was very good and there were some very strong women present throughout.

I didn't like how 90% of the men in the novel were sex-obsessed assholes who badgered women to have sex with them despite the women saying no. I mean, maybe it was just a couple guys, or just Ana's perception of men, but it seemed like everyone but Dalehouse was a pig, which isn't very fair to men. The book was written in the 70s though, so maybe it was Pohl's opinion (+ exaggeration) of the treatment of women back then that caused this common characterization.

I did like a bunch of stuff - the alien races were neat and the not-so-ideal planet was a cool concept that added a lot to the plot. The splitting of Earth into three factions was an interesting idea as well, and the Cold War inspired apocalypse was a nice bonus. I also really liked Margie, as she was tough, intelligent, determined, and didn't take shit from anyone; she was awesome actually, and she made the story for me. Overall, this book started out as a bathroom read*, but by about page 200 I took it out of the washroom and read it "for real". And if that happens, there is something great about it. The last third was that something great.

If you like serious (as in not-campy) 70s sci-fi with a touch of Cold War nuclear trepidation, you'll like this novel.

*Basically it's a novel to read 2-3 pages at a time while you attend to bodily functions

Ian James says

I have probably read this three times now, first time was probably in 1979 or 1980.

The first time I read it, I was 19 or 20 and I was initially very taken by the newly discovered world and its alien species. I was looking for a complete exploration of the 3 species, their biology, culture and their world, but instead I was disappointed that the book focused so much on the humans, and political strife back on Earth.

Reading it again now, I realize that it was really an allegorical criticism of the cold war, the nuclear arms race, the militarization of everything and the MAD ("Mutual Assured Destruction") ideas of the 60's and 70's. The bigotry and racism of much of the dialogue is quite shocking to read nowadays. Other people's from Earth are describes as Paks, Spics, Limies, Greasies, Fats etc. and the aliens are referred to as creepies, cockroaches etc. Really quite appalling to the modern readers, but I guess it was all part of Pohl's critique of

the times we lived in when the book was written.

The book left me quite disgusted and despondent about the human race really, it made me think it would probably be best for the rest of the universe if we don't manage to develop interstellar space travel before we destroy ourselves.

Simon says

Although ostensibly a story about first contact and colonising another planet its real focus is on how the politically rival forces on earth rip each other apart and, exporting such tensions to the new colonisation expedition, how the colonisers nearly do the same to each other there as well.

Initially I found it quite hard to get into and I wasn't particularly enjoying it for a long part of the story. It failed to convey the wonder of space travel and exploration of an alien planet. Things picked up later on and I began to enjoy it when I discovered where the real focus lay.

This book, written in the cold war era and firmly embedded in a cold war mentality, predicts a not too distant future in which a kind of cold war persists but the balance of power has evolved into a precarious tripartite set up; those countries with a surplus of food, a surplus of oil and a surplus of labour. When a remote earth like planet is discovered, the three powers all send colonising parties that are supposed to cooperate but inevitably end up taking the political divisions and mistrust with them. The cost of supporting such expensive expeditions causes much strife at home which escalates tensions between the three powers and consequently between the colonising expeditions too.

This story contains quite a bleak and cynical view of humanity that must have seemed quite a plausible future for humanity at the time although with end of the cold war it does seem now a little less so. There is a bit of a 'phoenix rising from the ashes' up-tick at the end as the author (briefly) describes a new utopian society that might emerge but I found that far less plausible.

All in all it does have its merits but I'm not quite convinced it deserved its place in the SF Masterworks series.

Keith says

My rating probably should be 3.5, but that's not an option so three it is. This one is a slower starter than many of Pohl's titles, in part because there's a lot of info that is conveyed as background and contextual detail, particularly as regards the sociopolitical situation on Earth. Just as that is laid out for us, we are presented with several significant races on a new planet. The perspective changes from chapter to chapter, so it takes a fair chunk of the book up front before the key characters and elements are in place.

As others have mentioned, many of the male characters come off as shallow and unlikeable. However, since this is largely allegorical, I wasn't bothered by this as much as I might otherwise be. The disparate threads do come together as the story progresses, making the story more interesting in the process.

The book was well regarded on release, and it's easy to see why. While some of the political background now seems dated, too much of it is starting to seem relevant again. And while it may not have aged as well as some of his material, I have yet to find a Pohl title that isn't worth reading.

Kate says

It was such a mess. The political blocs on earth didn't make any sense to me and I felt like Pohl didn't take the time to explain them so that they would make sense. So they felt too contrived. The characters were shallow caricatures. Danny Dalehouse was the only likeable character and there was no real pushback to the aggressive winner-take-all mentality even though everyone supposedly wanted to create this utopia. Danny, as likeable as he was, was a weak voice of reason. The whole concept was poorly executed leaving the story with no depth or complexity.

And there are three intelligent species on Son of Klong, or Jem. The krinprits and balloonists live in these little social groups and basically never interact with social groups of their species. Really? Never? OK the balloonists sometimes communicate or maybe join a different group when young, but there are no territorial disputes, no exchange of ideas or DNA – soon they'll be entirely separate species without enough genetic diversity to survive. Really, it's just ludicrous that these two species live so independently of anyone else in their same species. The krinprits are even worse totally ignoring the existence of krinprits from other "cities." The whole premise of these two species in particular is too preposterous for me to take seriously. The third species didn't seem so far-fetched, but maybe that may have been more accidental than through any plan on Pohl's part.

Don't get me wrong, I could perfectly believe the dystopian ending, but that was the only part of the whole novel that really felt believable to me. The rest was too superficial.

I'm giving it 2 stars instead of just one because in spite of the superficiality of it all, the description of Jem and the species on Jem was really inventive and I did enjoy those short little bits.

Stephen says

4.5 stars. Another classic science fiction story by Pohl. Great world-building of a future Earth split into three factions and all vying for control of a new planet (aka JEM).

Nominee: Hugo Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (1980)

Nominee: Nebula Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (1980)

Nominee: Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (1980)

Althea Ann says

Rarely have I read such an apallingly negative view of humanity... that's not a bad thing, but nevertheless, I didn't love the book. It's probably the most interesting work by Pohl I've yet read, however.

Terry Quirke says

Hard to get into but rewarding as the story evolved. I really struggled to get going with this book and was

around 40% of the way in before I started to enjoy it.

The characterisation was over the top but I think that was to help enforce the morals of the story about the perils of rampant capitalism, colonialism and nationalism and the inability of humankind to just get along and share what's needed rather than trying to lord ownership over one another.

If read against when it was written during the height of the cold war it is an allegory but it does that by shouting instead of just telling its story and drawing you to your own conclusions.

Don says

A satire, surely, on imperialism and colonialism as a crisis-ridden, resources scarce planet earth views Son of Kung, the first Earth-like planet within reach of its tachyon technology inter-stellar travel.

Only problem is that Son of Kung - re-christened 'Jem' after the first colonists from the Peoples Bloc are swept aside - already has three sentient races. Pre-technology maybe, and living in evolutionary competition with each other, the populations of tunnel-dwellers, land-crabs and 'balloonist' gasbags are there to be recruited or exterminated in accordance with their potential utility to the rival Food and Fuel Blocs.

The story's viability is driven by the characters of its main protagonists - the scientist Dalehouse, the militarist/politician Marge Menninger, and the linguist Ana Dimitrova - all from the US-led Food Bloc. Amongst the Jemians, Sharn-igon, the bitter, revenge-seeking crab-like krinpit has the strongest identity, seeking, in the end, nothing but death on a large-scale amongst the invading humans. Charlie, the chief of the gasbag people, is incapable of perceiving the existence of enemies of any sort as long as there are songs to sing. This despite the fact that his species is decimated in the course of the conflict between the human groups.

As a story it lacks subtlety and events helter-skelter towards disaster to quickly allow any sense of irony or tragedy to play much of a role in its development. In this it is different from other novels by Pohl - usually so good at combining the epochal with the personal stories à la the Heechee trilogy and Man Plus. Enjoyable enough to make it worth three stars though....

Kelly Flanagan says

I actually finished the book yesterday. But this book made me think very hard and I am still unsure of how I feel about it. It definitely is a 4-5 star book. Yet, because of the strength of the book it also loses a star. It was too true for me. And hence the issue before me. Just because I found the truth of human(ity) too hard for me to comfortably read, does that mean it should be given a star less? Or should I go by the point that the book is so well written, too well written I think. Again Pohl blows my mind. This book should be read by high school kids. The only problem I see with that is the fact you will be bursting a lot of balloons of those that think the world is a much more 'humane' place and that humans wouldn't go to the depths of disparity. The same issues I found with this tale.

So do I score it by my own feelings or by the fact that it is an excellently written and poignant story well worth reading if you can handle the truth.

After having a couple days to really think, well actually couldn't think of any other book than this.

So here goes my rewrite:

The book could be described as interesting. Yet, unfortunately it was depressing. Well written, yet heartbreaking.

What left me unsure throughout the last 3rd of the book and still does now is the probability of most of the evil or non-positive/non-sentimental motives. It was the worst of actions that were most likely to occur. And therefore the worst of outcomes.

Now, I appreciate country musics place in the world, but I don't *enjoy* it. I do have a high regard for those who sing or write it. The same goes for this book. I love Frederik Pohl. But this book is a exception for me. the only really positive thing I can add about the book is that it ripe for a book group discussion.

Katherine says

What an odd book.

This book was published in 1979, a time of oil shortages and famines, still very much at the height of the Cold War. So what feels pretty dated now was incredibly relevant then.

Three world factions, locked in a power struggle, representing those who own the oil, those who can grow all the food, and then a somewhat pathetically portrayed communist bloc. All of the factions are pretty terrible, but they're portrayed as especially incompetent.

Anyhow, they discover a new planet through some handwaving of science fiction principles, and the new factions high-tail it to Jem, to hold a proxy war on a new planet, ruining the native beings in the process.

It can definitely be seen as an allegory of colonialism, how the powers of old plundered the "New World" for their own gains, and with the exception of a few sympathetic characters, nobody looks good in this.

The reason I didn't rate this higher is despite the high concepts and warning for even modern day society, the book feels disjointed. There are random and sudden plot twists that give the reader whiplash, and there's one point where I thought I somehow went into a fugue state and missed a whole chapter, because of a plot development that came completely out of nowhere.

Still and all, this is worth reading if you can get a copy of it. It was nominated for all three big awards in 1980, the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Locus.
