

THE MAN WHO WRITES THROUGH TIME

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

In 1973, science fiction grand master Robert Heinlein stood before the midshipmen at his alma mater, the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and delivered a James V. Forrestal Memorial Lecture. He started his speech by asking how many of the midshipmen in the audience were aspiring writers. When a few hands went up, he responded by outlining "a sure-fire formula for getting anything—anything at all—published." With light humor, Heinlein recited the formula that has contributed to his phenomenal success as one of this century's most prolific American writers.

Heinlein's "Five-step Approach to Getting Published" seems ever so simple, but he swears that not following these rules is the chief reason that aspiring writers fail. "First," Heinlein told the graduates, "you must write. Second, you must finish what you write. Third, you must refrain from rewriting except to editorial order. Fourth, you must place it on the market. Fifth, you must keep it on the market until sold." Heinlein added that all five rules must be followed or not at all. "These rules work in a series, not in parallel. If you bilge one, you bilge completely—and your writing will not be published." He added, with a note of encouragement: "If a manuscript has merit, it will sell."

Heinlein, now 78 years old, is a giant in the world of science fiction, a man awarded the title of Grand Master of Science Fiction and the winner of four Hugo Awards for Best Novel—an unprecedented feat. His books have also broken the sci-fi barrier, to be read widely by a general audience. He has published nearly 50

books in 28 languages, and although nobody knows for sure the number of books he has in print, it is close to 50 million. If the sheer numbers are remarkable, so is the fact that every one of Heinlein's books is still in print.

A *New York Times* reviewer recently summed up Heinlein's work: "He has his last three books on the best-seller lists and is gradually being recognized as one of the most influential writers in American literature. This is, in part, because the readers of his early novels—which were erroneously identified as fare for young people—are now coming of intellectual age." The reviewer went on to favorably compare Heinlein's writing to that of past greats: "A story with dialogue as witty as Oscar Wilde's, action as rollicking as Edgar Rice Burroughs's and satire as spicy as Jonathan Swift's."

Although his work is filled with spectacular fanciful leaps, ingenious solutions and inventive vocabulary, Heinlein is a visionary whose imagination has been brought to earth by hard work and considerable determination.

Robert Heinlein and his wife of 37 years, Virginia, live perched 1,600 feet above the crashing Pacific Ocean in the hills north of Santa Cruz. Their house is perfectly round, doughnut-shaped, designed by Heinlein

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Photography by Ed Kasht





Best-selling science fiction author Robert Heinlein is still going strong at 78, bringing his otherworldly visions to earth.

himself more than twenty years ago. The Heinleins have no children, but share their house with Pixel, an orange tabby cat, whose portly stature and contented nature indicate a long life of indulgent treats, human adoration and feline leisure.

The Heinleins have rounded up Pixel for a cameo appearance. Virginia Heinlein explains that the cat, who sits on the coffee table squinting his eyes and purring loudly, is the inspiration for her husband's latest best-seller, *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls*. Sure enough, there is an illustration of a cat looking very much like Pixel perched on the shoulder of an attractive heroine on the cover of the book. In the novel, Pixel walks through the walls of an anthropomorphic spaceship—a spaceship with feelings and the ability to report to the humans on board that it tickles to have a cat walk through its walls. While Virginia Heinlein reports the fictional Pixel's feats, the real Pixel settles into a snooze.

As Robert Heinlein talks about his life and his writing (which he doesn't often do—he has been reclusive for the past 25 years, agreeing to very few interviews) he reaches for Virginia's hand and says that she is his "indispensable editor, as well as my legs." (Heinlein suffers from severe emphysema, which makes walking difficult.) He is as proud of the dime-store trophy she gave him with the inscription "Best Husband" as he is of the numerous literary awards for his novels or the accolades he has received for his recruiting of blood donors on a national scale.

Besides emphysema, Heinlein has been beleaguered by other health problems for a good portion of his life. He's undergone fourteen major operations, and for a time in 1982 came close to giving up writing until restricted blood flow to his brain was corrected through delicate surgery.

Still, Heinlein looks and acts younger than his 78 years. Though he describes himself on occasion as a "sick, tired old man," his presence is forceful. He vigorously pursues his craft, often working sixteen hours a day. He says that *The Cat Who Walked Through Walls* took 123 days to complete—off the pace of his thirteen-day record elapsed time in writing *The Door Into Summer*, but still an impressive feat for any writer.

"Writers don't know how to retire," he says with a smile. He claims that he sticks with science fiction rather than trying another genre because he's good at it and because it sells. "The bottom line," he says—and his smile widens—"is 'pay to the order of...,' with the right figures in the blanks. That's the most important measure of a writer's work. Freelance writing is free enterprise."

In 1961, Heinlein published *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which has since sold five million copies and is one of the most famous science-fiction novels ever written. The book developed a cult following in the '60s, most likely because of the activities of the book's central character, Valentine Michael Smith, a human raised by Martians and possessing special powers. Among other things, Smith confronted traditional values and religious beliefs with a philosophical menu of his own that advocated universal love, nudity and a

denied one because Heinlein's best-selling book had established the idea in the public domain. When the first waterbed was put on the market, the manufacturer acknowledged the source by sending the author a complimentary one.

Although he has also been credited for predicting the coming of the Moral Majority (in *Sixth Column*, published back in 1940, and in *Future History*, 1941); Three Mile Island (in a 1940 short story called "Blowups Happen"); and the landing of a man on the moon (in his short story



Heinlein and his wife, Virginia, and (right) the cover of his latest bestseller.

Heinlein is as proud of the dime-store trophy his wife, "Best Husband," as he is of all his literary award

great number of sexual encounters. By "grokking" (intuitively understanding) "wrongness" in authority figures (usually cops), Smith dispassionately "discorporated" (made to vanish) those whom he "grokked" as a threat.

In the course of inventing imaginary worlds, vocabulary and gadgets in his fiction, Heinlein has surprised himself as well as his readers on a few occasions. Besides his invention of the verb "to grok," at least two other concepts that Heinlein conjured up—the term "free fall" and the idea for the waterbed—have made their way into common usage or reality. He floated the bed idea in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and likes to tell the story of the waterbed manufacturer who attempted to get a patent on the product, but was

"Requiem," 1939), Heinlein has no pretenses about the crystal-ball aspect of his genre.

"Science fiction is fantasy writing," he says, smiling. "No matter how you cut it." When something he has written comes to pass, it's just "happenstance," he says. But his work typically rests on solid scientific foundations. "It helps," he admits, "if you are well-grounded in science, so you can operate with plausibility." Heinlein is: He did graduate work in math and science at UCLA in the '40s and maintains many ties to the scientific community.

Heinlein has also forecast some aspects of human behavior. His character Valentine Smith foreshadowed a number of real-life Smiths of various stripes who surfaced in the '60s and '70s. Heinlein

admits he was a bit ahead of himself. "I had to wait for the mores of America to change," he says now. "I saw them changing and my timing was right."

Robert Heinlein in the flesh is in many ways just as affable and irascible as Lazarus Long, the centuries-old but ageless leading character in Heinlein's 1958 novel, *Methuselah's Children*. Long traipses through a number of Heinlein's books—including the most recent one—falling in love, philosophizing and

"I brought him back because it seemed appropriate," says Heinlein, "except that I may kill him at any time if he doesn't suit my purposes anymore."

Unlike many shoot-em-first, one-dimensional, gadget-cloaked science-fiction characters, Long and Heinlein's other protagonists are likeable, prone to delivering crisp, witty nuggets of wisdom. Their speech sounds more like that of the late longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer than the usual banal pontifications of sci-fi heroes.

There are those who think that Heinlein is Lazarus Long, and although the author politely refuses to discuss to what degree his beliefs are expressed by his characters, Long does appear to voice a healthy dose of Heinlein's own cynicism about what makes mankind tick. For starters, says the author, "The creative virtues are greed and selfishness." In different centuries, under different names, with different wives and lovers and on different planets, Long has carried the Heinlein banner.

Lazarus Long: "Never appeal to a man's 'better nature.' He may not have one. Invoking his self-interest gives you more leverage."

"One man's theology is another man's belly laugh."

"A whore should be judged by the same criteria as other professionals offering services for pay—such as dentists, lawyers, hairdressers, physicians, plumbers, etc. Is she professionally competent? Does she give good measure? Is she honest with her clients? Is it possible that the percentage of competent whores is higher than that of plumbers and much higher than that of lawyers?"

Heinlein's willingness to serve his readers philosophy along with action has not sat well with everyone. His work has been lambasted, mostly by critics allied to the political left, who have intermittently condemned his books as glorifying war, as sexist, even as fascist. Heinlein smiles and shrugs off most of this criticism: "A prerequisite to being a critic should be the ability to read and understand. Clearly, most of the criticism I've seen is an admission by the critic of his political alignment rather than an understanding of my work."

The "fascistic" controversy swirled around Heinlein's Hugo Award winner, *Star Ship Trooper*. The tale is about a futuristic foot soldier who is dropped into enemy territory where he blasts, burns and dismembers the enemy (highly organized, fleet-footed subterranean bugs) with a myriad of powerful weapons. Published in 1959, the book was never formally reviewed, although Heinlein received plenty

of negative mail charging that the book glorified the military.

"I hope I accomplished that," Heinlein says ardently, leaning forward to make his point. "The poor, bloody mudfoot, the infantryman who for centuries has put his frail body on the line for home, loved ones—and for critics who often outlive him—needs some glorifying. That's the least I can do."

Patriotism has been a recurring Heinlein theme. In his 1973 Naval Academy speech, after he'd finished with the advice to would-be writers, the author posed an unsettling question to his spit-polished audience: "Why would anyone want to become a naval officer? In the present dismal state of our culture, there is little prestige attached to your country," he said. "It can't be the pay. Working conditions? You'll spend half your life away from your family."

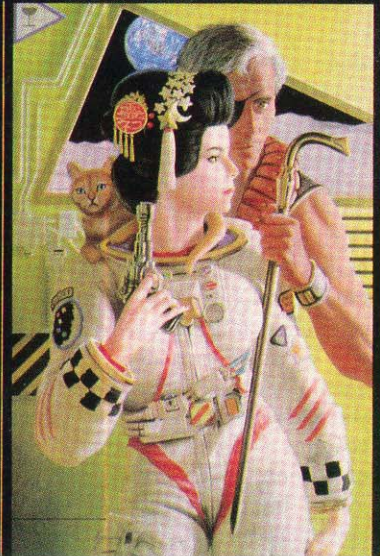
He appeared to digress by launching into a description of how young male baboons vigilantly stand sentry against danger, prepared to die fighting any leopard that dares to penetrate the troop and snatch a female or young baboon. "The next level of moral behavior higher than that exhibited by the baboons is that in which duty and loyalty are shown toward a group of your own kind too large for an individual to know all of them. It is called patriotism." And that, explained Heinlein, is the reason for being a naval officer. To Heinlein, it is all very basic: "A man who is not patriotic is an evolutionary dead end."

Typically, Heinlein's characters are strong individualists, often citizen-soldiers akin to the pioneers of the nineteenth century. They fight to exercise free will and practice free enterprise against governments or forces that inhibit these freedoms. Along the way, Heinlein doesn't mind satirizing everything from organized religion to governmental bureaucracies, challenging taboos ranging from cannibalism and incest to non-monogamous marriage. In *Expanded Universe* (1980), he suggested handing the nation's legal system over to women for 150 years, reasoning that men had controlled it for 200 years, allowing it to evolve to its present dismal state.

But what about criticism that Heinlein plays to men's sexual fantasies, overemphasizing women's exterior attributes? He looks at Virginia with a grin. "First of all, I'm a strong heterosexual," he says. "Second, I learned a little trick from Homer in describing beauty. Helen of Troy was supposed to have been incredibly beautiful, but can anyone tell me how she looked?"

(Continued on page 40)

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN THE CAT WHO WALKS THROUGH WALLS



*gave him, inscribed
and accolades.*

blasting his way through assorted situations. When it suits him, he assumes aliases, such as Corporal Ted Bronson, Proscribed Prisoner No. 83M2742 and His Serenity Seraphin Above.

Unlike his mortal creator, Long has been endowed with good health and an endless life expectancy—barring a violent death—due to favorable chromosomes, the advantages of rejuvenation and advancements in cloning. His good sense has allowed him to pioneer new planets, survive a half-dozen wives and live through a dozen wars among the stars. Having woven Long through such books as *Rolling Stones* (1952) and *Methuselah*, however, Heinlein put the character away for several volumes, reviving him in 1966 in *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*.

REVISIONS

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Image Magazine's 1986 Amateur Color Photography Contest

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Image now offers that challenge to its readers as the 1986 Revisions Amateur Color Photography contest gets under way. We'd like to see your "revisions" of our landscapes, seascapes or cityscapes. Please clip the rules and read them carefully before sending any photographs, and don't forget to enclose a self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage if you want us to return your photographs.

CONTEST RULES

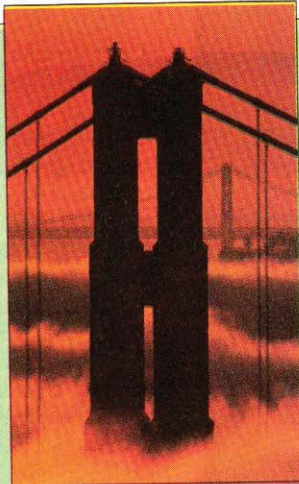
Who can enter: All amateur photographers, except employees of the *San Francisco Examiner*, the Hearst Corporation, *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco Newspaper Agency and all agents of the *San Francisco Examiner*, as well as members of their immediate families ("immediate family" refers to parents, spouses, offspring, brothers and sisters, whether residing together or not). An amateur is anyone who earns less than five per cent of his or her total income from photography.

What to enter: Color photographs: slides (either 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" or 35mm, but not in glass mounts); or color prints mounted on heavy cardboard (no less than 4" x 6" and no more than 5" x 7"). All nonconforming entries will be disqualified. Pictures must have been taken within the past five years. They should be scenic views of northern California—landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes or aerials. Entries may also include active shots of people or animals in outdoor settings, but not portraits.

If color prints or duplicate slides are entered, the negatives or originals must be available for reproduction on request.

Number of entries: No more than five entries will be accepted from any one contestant. All entries from a single contestant must be mailed in the same envelope.

How to prepare entries: On each slide mount or picture back, print the



following:

- ✓ Your name and full address (including zip code and daytime phone number).
 - ✓ Place and approximate date photograph was taken.
 - ✓ Make of camera and kind of film used.
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Deadline: March 31, 1986. No entries postmarked after midnight, March 31, 1986 will be accepted.

How pictures are judged: Entries will be judged by a panel consisting of the editor-in-chief, editor and art director of *Image*, plus two professional photographers from the Bay Area. Entries will be evaluated on the basis of photographic skill, content and general appeal. The decision of the judges will be final.

Please note: Image reserves the right to require a release and consent to publication by any person or persons who appear in the photograph.

If you are a winner: All award winners will be notified no later than May 1986, and the winning photographs will be published in a June 1986 issue of *Image*. Before receiving his or her prize, each winning contestant must sign a sworn statement that (among other things):

—He or she is not now and never has been a professional photographer.

—He or she took the winning picture and is sole owner of all copyright rights in the picture and has full authority to, and does, grant complete worldwide copyright rights in the picture to the Hearst Corporation.

—The winning picture or any picture closely similar to it by the winning photographer has never been published in any medium of communication; also, it has not been, and will not be, entered in any photographic contest prior to publication in *Image*.

HEINLEIN

(Continued from page 21)

Beauty is often in the eye of the beholder. So why ruin it with too much detail?" He claims that he has created many heroines from the raw material of his wife. Though Heinlein often undresses his heroines in ways that would appeal to most male readers, he rarely goes further than alluding to curves and firmness. He never describes a sexual act.

"One weird thing about America," he says, "is that nudity in itself is considered immoral." He lets on that the nude beaches on the Santa Cruz coast would have been "immensely attractive when I was younger, but I've had a bout with a sailor's disease—skin cancer—so I must watch my exposure to the sun."

Robert Heinlein didn't start out to be a writer. It was bad health that led him to it. Born in Butler, Missouri, he grew up in Kansas City. At the age of sixteen, in 1923, he set his sights on the U.S. Naval Academy. He launched a mighty campaign to get there, urging friends and acquaintances to write letters on his behalf to Missouri Senator James A. Reed. Heinlein is still proud of the accomplishment. "When I contacted the senator's office, they said they had 100 letters—50 in my behalf, and one each for 50 other candidates. My father had no political clout. I promoted myself by myself."

He was serving as a gunnery officer on the U.S.S. *Roper* in 1934 when he contracted tuberculosis and was forced to retire. He moved to Los Angeles, failed in a bid for a seat in the state legislature and found himself short of funds to make a mortgage payment. He read an advertisement that offered \$50 to the winner of a short-story contest. He wrote the story, "Lifeline," and instead of entering it in the contest, sold it for \$70 to *Astounding Magazine*, after first being rejected by *Collier's*.

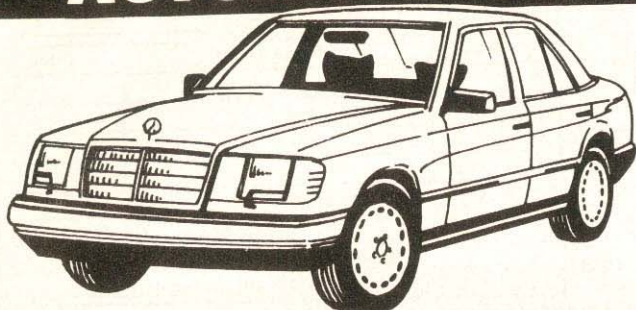
Heinlein says that a writing course he took at Annapolis in "order writing" was valuable for his fiction. "Its emphasis was on clarity," he explains, warming to the subject. "A midshipman had a few minutes to study a situation and construct an order on the blackboard. If someone could find a way to misconstrue that order, his mark for the day was zero. Otherwise, he got a perfect score."

When the subject of choosing the right word arises, Heinlein brings up his late friend, author Ted Sturgeon, who was noted as a stylist. "Mark Twain said the difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference

Grand Prize — Australia A ten-day vacation for two with Qantas, the Australian Airline. Qantas will fly the grand prize winner and a guest round-trip from San Francisco to Sydney and Melbourne. Hotel accommodations for five nights in each city will be provided by the Southern Cross Hotels. The Australian Tourist Commission will offer personal assistance in planning the trip, as well as a cruise of Sydney Harbor and tickets for the Sydney Explorer, a popular tour of this attractive Australian city. **Second prize — Alaska** The winner and a guest will spend seven days and six nights in luxury accommodations at the Anchorage Hilton, where they will receive V.I.P. treatment including dinner for two at the hotel's Top of the World Restaurant. Round-trip air travel between San Francisco and Anchorage will be provided by Alaska Airlines. Alaska has more daily flights to Seattle from the Bay Area than any other airline. **Third prize — Palm Springs** The winner and a guest will enjoy a relaxing weekend for two at Marriott's Rancho Las Palmas Resort, the only five-star resort in California. The prize includes all meals and round-trip air travel. **Fourth prize — Napa Valley** A weekend for two at the Meadowood Resort Hotel in St. Helena, with all meals and a selective wine-tasting tour. This prize also includes a hot-air balloon ride furnished by Once in a Lifetime of Calistoga, the only Napa Valley balloon company to provide a champagne celebration in the elegant atmosphere of the historic Mount View Hotel. **Fifth prize — San Francisco** A delightful weekend for two at the fabulous Fairmont Hotel atop San Francisco's famed Nob Hill, including dinner, dancing and top entertainment in the hotel's elegant Venetian Room. The next evening, there will be a luxurious dinner-dance cruise aboard Hornblower Yachts' M/V *City of San Francisco*. Also includes a Deluxe City Tour in a chauffeured limousine, by Gray Line Tours of San Francisco. **Ten runner-up prizes — KODAK disc 4100 Camera Outfit**, including camera, film and built-in electronic flash. **100 Special merit prizes** *The Joy of Photography*, the world's most popular photography book, by the editors of the Eastman Kodak Company.

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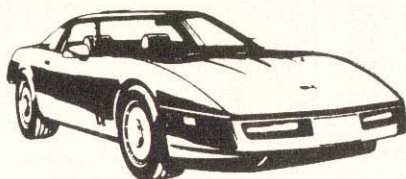


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IMAGE MAGAZINE

Source: The Scarborough San Francisco Market Study, 1984.

HEINLEIN

between lightning and the lightning bug," says Heinlein. "Ted Sturgeon did not deal in lightning bugs."

Heinlein has taught other writers a few things himself. Former *Los Angeles Times* book reviewer and author George Warren, whose novels, set in prehistoric times and written under the pen name Peter Danielson, have sold two million copies, says, "In effect, Robert is everybody's pappy in the fantasy book writing trade."

Warren corresponds with Heinlein, although the two have never met, and he adds, "I learned from Robert that there are times in the story when passion is more important than control. I learned that when you get an idea worth pushing, lay it on thick. I learned the importance of creating societies and settings that the characters fit. I learned that the ingenuity in plotting is in keeping the characters under stress."

Robert Heinlein has reached an enviable status as master of his craft, giving him leeway to have a little fun in his novels, even to poke fun at himself and the writer's trade. In his latest novel, *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls*, Heinlein indulges in a bit of satirical self-assessment that, one guesses, is written to amuse his wife as much as the reading public. In the book, Heinlein describes writers as a cantankerous, hopeless bunch: "There is no way that writers can be tamed or rendered civilized. Or even cured. In a household with more than one person, of which one is a writer, the only solution known to science is to provide the patient with an isolation room where he can endure the acute stages in private and where food can be poked in to him with a stick. Because, if you disturb the patient at such times, he may break into tears or become violent. Or he may not hear you at all...and if you shake him at this stage, he bites."

In the course of the story, one of the book's characters suggests a formula for reviving the tired writer: "Pick some new pen names...change the body lines a bit...file off the serial numbers...switch over the state line and it's yours—that's the secret of literary success."

At the book's end the characters are dying, and at the final juncture, Robert Heinlein, the Grand Master of the Imagination, toys with his own writerly omnipotence a bit, letting his creations express what's on their minds. "Who's going to write our story?" they ask. "Is he going to let us live?"

They'll find out soon enough. □