

# Episode Sixteen – *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein

## **Brandon**

Welcome to My Dog Ate My Book Report, a podcast where two weirdo thirtysomethings take turns introducing each other to a formative book from childhood the other has never read. This one's a pick from me today, and I'm Brandon (he/him).

## **Wren**

I'm Wren (they/them), and I would like to know more.

## **Brandon**

You know, I picked this thinking maybe we won't be inclined to go over our recording time substantially with this one. And I think I was probably incorrect, but we're gonna try and do this on the bounce. So this time we are reading yet another white dude sci-fi novel: Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*.

## **Wren**

This one I think is going to be interesting because, while I have never read this book, the movie adaptation in the '90s is one of my favorite movies.

## **Brandon**

I think this is the first one we've done where the person who hasn't read the book is like pretty familiar with an adaptation. Like I'd seen the *Pet Sematary* movie before we read *Pet Sematary*, but I saw it like one time 20 years ago.

## **Wren**

Yeah, and I watch *Starship Troopers*, like, yearly. I can quote it, I can...yeah.

## **Brandon**

I imagine the two of us could go on for hours just about that adaptation.

## **Wren**

Yes. And my goal for this is to not make too many references to the movie and how it is different from the movie. I figured I could give myself three. And then after that, like you're like allowed to mute me or something.

## **Brandon**

So you've already done one.

## **Wren**

I did?

**Brandon**

Yeah. You said you wanted to know more.

**Wren**

That is not fair. That was part of the preamble. That was...fine.

**Brandon**

We have a pretty decent list of content warnings on this one. It is a war story, so there are all the things you might expect there. There is a death, war, physical violence, serious physical trauma. There's some ableism in there and associated ableist slurs. There's corporal punishment. There's a lot of themes of fascism, maybe, depending on who you ask.

**Wren**

I don't think that it's a maybe depending on who you ask. I think it's glorifying fascism.

**Brandon**

We can talk about that more, because it is a debate that continues about this book.

**Wren**

Oh, of course it is.

**Brandon**

I can offer some of the common counterpoints. I tend to think that this book is also fascist. But, you know,

**Wren**

This isn't really a content warning, but this is like a, you know, looking out for my fellow queers: this book is aggressively heterosexual.

**Brandon**

Yeah, there's not a ton of like, relationships in it of any kind, but when they do exist, it's very cishet normative. There's almost no female characters in the entire book, though, so you don't really have to deal with it. It's probably one of the reasons this is the Heinlein book I like best, and that's...not a high bar.

**Wren**

It amuses me very much that you refer to them as female characters, because I spent a really long time adjusting my language as somebody who, you know, is in the sciences, moving away from referring to, you know, males and females of the human species as males and females because they don't like that. And this book definitely, like, shunted me back into the habit a little bit. Like, oh, yes, that female over there, that male...oh, no, wait, I'm supposed to say man and woman. Crap. So you just said females and so I was like, yeah, it happened to Brandon too.

**Brandon**

Yep. Heinlein, at least, definitely thinks that male and female are meaningful in this way.

**Wren**

Well, so for folks who have not read this book or seen the movie, you want to give us a little synopsis?

**Brandon**

Yeah, this will be easy, because there's not really much of a plot. So Starship Troopers is the story of, at some indeterminate point in the future, young Johnny Rico who, after graduating from high school, decides to enlist in the military. He lands in the mobile infantry, which are the guys who go on spaceships to fight on other planets. He spends about half the book in boot camp, and the other half of the book recounting philosophical debates, and then about 5% of the book fighting bugs.

**Wren**

I think that you're doing it a little bit of a disservice.

**Brandon**

Okay.

**Wren**

He spends about 60% of the book in boot camp 30% of the book in officer boot camp. Now you can keep going, sorry.

**Brandon**

Officer boot camp is mostly an excuse to like, turn the book just into philosophical debates.

**Wren**

Yes.

**Brandon**

Which existed prior to that, but not as often. It was like, let's have a little bit of philosophical debate, and then let's go learn about how to use our power armor. And then the officer boot camp was like, no, it's...you know how to use your power armor. We're not talking about that anymore. We are all about talking about why corporal punishment is good for our society.

**Wren**

I found it just just so amusing how often the narrator would say things like, "I'm not going to tell you about this conversation or this event that sounds so interesting." But he's all like, because it doesn't matter. But then he will spend an entire chapter on the inner workings of his power armor. And I'm like, but wait, I want to hear about that other thing!

**Brandon**

You know, I present this the synopsis a little bit facetiously, because there really isn't much of a plot. But the backdrop of everything is that humans, who have spread out to other planets to some not super specified degree, are fighting a war against a species of giant alien bug. And that's the war that Rico goes off to fight. He's not there at the beginning of the war. The war is not over at the end of the book. They don't even really do anything especially momentous as far as the war is concerned. Rico just has experiences, which I think is partially on purpose, because I...you know, on some level I think Heinlein is trying to avoid writing the war story where the main character is like, at all the important moments, and their story is like neatly concurrent with the events of the war. And that's a decision that I see some merit in.

**Wren**

Yeah, I think that's not a terrible way to go about it.

**Brandon**

Yeah. But if you go into this book, hoping for something that fits sort of a traditional war story, plot structure, you're not going to find that.

**Wren**

I think that we have a really...I need to find it...

**Brandon**

Well, while you're trying to find it, I realized there was one more content morning that I neglected to add at the very end, because I thought we were getting through it without really much of this. But there there is at least one racial characterization near the end of the book that I'm not entirely sure sensitive. But I also am not sure. So I'm just going to add like, maybe a little bit of racism.

**Wren**

That's fair. I found it. So, our editor, Derrick, in addition to being, you know, a wiz at audio is really knowledgeable about insects. And so I messaged him, and I said, "We're currently reading Starship Troopers right now for your bug enjoyment!" And he laughs and he says, "Ha! Yeah, as if there are bugs in that book. It's just 700 pages of military theory and formations." And I thought that was funny.

**Brandon**

To be fair, the book is a lot shorter than that.

**Wren**

Oh, yes. It's like 274 pages.

**Brandon**

Yeah, it's actually kind of a short book. Also. Also, um, actually they're pseudo-arachnids.

**Wren**

I do want to say, off the bat, even though I've been ribbing it a little bit (and you), I actually really liked this book. Even though I do understand that it is absolutely military propaganda, and I don't agree with the messages of this book, but I thought it was a very enjoyable read.

**Brandon**

Heinlein is actually surprisingly adept at making this kind of thing pretty readable. Because there are lengthy stretches that...to call them philosophical debates, that's not an exaggeration or a joke. That's what they are.

**Wren**

No, yeah, it's absolutely like an entire chapter in a classroom where they discuss the merits of corporal punishment.

**Brandon**

It's just characters talking at each other, like having a discussion about all of these ideas.

**Wren**

And it's so funny, because that one that we're talking about right now was actually done in a flashback. So it was, like, really, I don't know, just like stretching, you know, when you read a book, or at least when I read a book, I'm sitting there, and I'm trying to like, stay in it. And then like, you know, it does a flashback, and it's like, Okay, I gotta pull my brain to like, know that this is a flashback within the thing. And then it got very deep in the weeds into this flashback. And I just, you know, that sort of thing, when there's like that much in a flashback, it sort of feels like it's like pulling my brain. Like, just like stretching it. I don't know, maybe it just makes me tired, I don't know.

**Brandon**

The timeline of the book is also kind of wibbly because the first chapter is a raid on a planet belonging to the Skinnies, who are not the Bugs, but are who told the Bugs where Earth was. And so that is like, the first thing that you get is a chapter of...Rico is trained, he's at some measure of command, he is in his power armor. He's got flamers, and nukes, and all kinds of tech, and a bunch of dudes also are there. And they're doing all this stuff. And then at the end of that chapter, we flashback to him in high school, figuring out what he's going to do when he graduates, deciding, basically because his friends did, to enlist, and then go through boot camp for a while. A little past the halfway point, we catch back up to where chapter one happens and continue forward. But then after continuing forward, there continue to be a lot of flashbacks to high school. So it's sort of hard to pin down, like, the order of things in the book unless you're like really paying attention. It's not super important, honestly, what the order of things in the book are.

**Wren**

No, but I found that to be like a really...I don't know, like narratively well done framework, because - and here's ding ding ding alert for Wren References The Movie #2 - the movie also starts off like this, the movie starts off in the middle of a battle with Johnny, and then goes back to high school, and then goes forward. And then the battle that happens in that very first scene happens like about two thirds of the way through and then it goes on. So yes, movie. Yay, A+. But also...so the very first chapter is in this,

you know, battle where it's mostly like, just Johnny in his head on a planet fighting, issuing commands and things. But then the very last chapter is also the same exact thing. It's a different battle. But it's Johnny in his suit on a planet, very tense. It was bookended very elegantly, I think.

**Brandon**

Yeah, Heinlein kind of treats the actual action of military stuff as just rote repetition of the training, and so he focuses on being trained to do things and then just kind of is like: 'And then once you're out there for real, you just do the thing that the training told you to do, so I've already told you what happens and you really helped me to hear about how we just keep doing those things over and over.'

**Wren**

I suppose as just like my final like, general note about this before we start getting into it a little bit deeper and personal thoughts and things...I also found that just you know, military theory and structure and stuff is not something that I really know anything about, and so I think that just because of the fact that I was going into this as someone who's very new to even like military content at all, it was really interesting to learn some of this stuff even though I know some of it's, you know, future sci-fi. You know, I started this book thinking, oh, gosh, this is a lot of military stuff; this is gonna be so dry. But he really like put a lot of heart into some of these characters. And even though it was so much boot camp, there was there was a lot of like...I don't know, humanity there. I just thought it was really strongly written book.

**Brandon**

Yeah, Heinlein...Heinlein's is good at that. He can walk this line really well, often between, you know, characters as people and characters as mouthpieces for ideas. And not all sci-fi authors can do those things.

**Wren**

And I definitely want to, you know, just put out there because I don't want to be singing these praises irresponsibly: I don't know anything about Heinlein. But every person that I've said that I'm reading this book to has said, "Oh, God, he's such a creep." Like, so I understand that you're probably about to tell me a bunch of really problematic things about this guy. And so I don't want to give him any like free passes. I don't know if he's still alive. You're gonna tell me.

**Brandon**

No.

**Wren**

So I do want to say that, like, my enjoyment of this is not an endorsement of any of the things in the book. I enjoyed it, despite a lot of the the clearly propaganda stuff in it. And I obviously did not enjoy some of the ableism and slurs and that sort of thing. I thought that was gross. But yeah, so I just wanted to put that out there.

**Brandon**

Yeah, Heinlein's a complicated dude. There's definitely a reason that people react to his name in that way. Though, I also think that sometimes my feelings on Heinlein as an author have shifted a bunch back and forth over the years. I think sometimes he gets a little unfairly dismissed. But also, there's very good reasons for why people feel that way about him.

### **Wren**

Well, I want to bop back to, you know, your personal history with this book, and you know, when you first read it, how old you were, that sort of thing.

### **Brandon**

I read this in high school. I don't remember exactly when; it was probably like my sophomore year or so. I had, at that time in my life for a few years, a huge military sci-fi kick. That's an entire genre, an entire ecosystem that's just military sci-fi. You could read only military sci-fi books for the rest of your life, and you would still have lots to read. And while *Starship Troopers* was not the first one I read - and I saw the movie several times before ever read the book - it definitely is like, while not the first thing, of course, that could be referred to as military sci-fi, definitely, I think, the template for what military sci-fi as a genre is even still today. So it kind of made sense to eventually read it. I liked it a lot at the time. That's about what I've got to say, I suppose. Like I said, I'd already seen the movie several times. So part of the experience was to see how the two differ. I probably got into that genre via like *Star Wars* and *BattleTech* books, which are military sci-fi also; *Star Wars* only some of the time, but a lot of the ones I like best. And I was doing like a lot of tabletop wargaming at the time and stuff. There's also a lot of things that are derived from *Starship Troopers* there. So you know, at the time, while I was probably less critical of the ideas in the book, there were definitely some that I just never found especially compelling. Like, kind of the thing that Heinlein is doing with this book, philosophically, is examining the notion of who should run society, and how you measure like value of a person to a society. Because in this world, in the world of *Starship Troopers*, Earth is unified under a single government. And it's sort of democratic, but to have voting rights, you have to serve in federal service for at least a certain amount of time. It kind of implies that the military isn't the only way to do that, but the military is one of the main ways to do that. And so when Rico joins up, it's partially because he wants to be able to have the right to vote. And Heinlein clearly, I think, is of the belief - and I'll preface this by saying, of course, that somebody putting an idea, a philosophical idea or a political idea or something in a novel does not inherently mean that they believe that it's accurate - that society being driven specifically by people who have given some amount of their time and possibly well-being to the state is one of the ideal ways to build a society. Because that way, the people with the ability to vote are people who have proven they are willing to put the well-being of the society above themselves. I think Heinlein thinks that this is proof. I don't think that it's a compelling argument. Serving in the military, for example, is a thing that people do who sometimes aren't particularly selfless. It's not a compelling argument to me. But Heinlein just kind of makes the the assumption from the get go that if you join the military and aren't busted out during training, you are therefore a good person. Basically, it's a self selecting group who will filter out all the bad eggs, leaving only the people whose judgment is such that they are worthy shepherds of the voting rights of society. And he just assumes that's true. He doesn't really argue that point very much. He argues the point of, assuming that's true, here's why they should be the only ones who get be in charge.

**Wren**

Yeah, I did find it interesting that he made the point that you still don't have those voting rights while you're in the military. It's not until you're done. So at a certain point Johnny made the decision to go into the officer track, which meant that he was probably like, never going to be able to vote until he was retired, which I thought was interesting, like, in terms of the people who make the decisions aren't like out there in the field making the decisions based on their personal feelings about being currently in a war, which is an interesting thing to think about.

**Brandon**

Yeah, I think Heinlein believes that he has set up a situation where you will filter out the people who aren't, like, dedicated, you know. That there are measures in his conception of this society to make sure that, you know, again, like only the ones that Heinlein considers, like, the worthy ones will actually get to the point of being able to actually exercise their right to vote.

**Wren**

So I'm curious if this is the first time you've ever reread it.

**Brandon**

I think so. This was the first Heinlein book I read, and I've read several others since this one, but I don't think I've reread this one.

**Wren**

So that would put it at, you know, a good 20 years between readings.

**Brandon**

Yeah, yeah, I'd say at least 20.

**Wren**

So what was it like reading it again?

**Brandon**

It had less war in it than I remembered. I had kind of braced myself for the fascist overtones to be even more significant than I remembered, and I don't think that I found that to be true. In some ways, it was a little more measured than I recalled. I was kind of prepared for the possibility that it was just like, really aggressively preachy, but not very well thought out, and I think there are definitely logical fallacies in his thinking. But I don't...I don't think it's bad faith, you know?

**Wren**

That's fair.

**Brandon**

I think he just overlooks things that he takes to be sort of universal assumptions that just aren't.

**Wren**

I think that I thought that I was going to hate it. I had heard...darn it, I'm about to use up my third...my third box and I don't want to. I thought that it was going to be...shoot. I was told - I'm trying to weasel my way around this - I was told that it was going to be very different than it was. So I was surprised about that. And I was bracing myself to be holding it against a standard that would prevent me from enjoying it, and I was able to not do that.

### **Brandon**

I think that a lot of the time, this book has now been sort of shelved on a just very like, "this is a fascist book" shelf. And the popular perception of it is that it is a lot more straightforward in those ideas than it actually is. Because, yeah, the society is run by the military or by veterans, at least. It's not very kind to the people who do not choose to enlist. They're not like, mistreated in any obvious way, aside from, you know, not having the right to vote. But I don't think that Heinlein looks on them very well. They're not characterized as particularly virtuous people, the handful of times we see them necessarily.

### **Wren**

Now that's very clear. There's a whole, you know, underlying thing where Johnny Rico's parents really disapprove of his desire to go join up and they essentially sort of disown him. And his mother ends up dying in a military attack on Buenos Aires, so she doesn't get a redemption arc from how she cruelly abandoned her son for doing his civic duty. But the father gets a redemption arc because his father realizes that he was wrong to want to be a civilian, and that the reason he disowned Johnny was because he was actually really guilt-stricken about the fact that Johnny was doing something that he hadn't been brave enough to go do. He gets a redemption arc because he ends up joining the military. And as much as I do not agree with the whole message of the only way for the father to redeem himself from cruelly abandoning his son was to, you know, go put himself in freaking danger, the whole reunion scene with him and Johnny definitely tugged at my heartstrings a little bit, even though it was bullshit, philosophically.

### **Brandon**

Yeah, well, and you know, it's one of those things that his father kind of begins the book as a bit of a straw man. He's like Mr. John Businessman, who is concerned with business and thinks that business is the most important business and business is what Rico should do, because business. In that character, I see Heinlein working out some things he doesn't like about capitalism, because he didn't like capitalism very much, at least at this time. He doesn't have a lot of thoughtful critiques about capitalism in this particular book. But Johnny's father is definitely like, this is a person who is totally bought into this bad economic system. To Rico's credit, and I think Heinlein's credit, there's not like shaming of Rico's father, for like, not being ready to enlist until, you know, his wife dies and like the Bugs sort of make it personal on a certain level. There is kind of this sense of like, being ready to make the sacrifice is noble, and it's not necessarily less noble, because it takes you a while to be ready.

### **Brandon**

But it's still really like the only way to be noble, really.

### **Brandon**

Oh, yes, yes. Yes. We don't really get a lot of a look at the other forms of federal service that might give you your your voting rights. Johnny did not intend to enlist in the mobile infantry, he just didn't pass the test for anything else.

**Wren**

Yeah, Johnny's really just like Heinlein's vision of military wonderful utopia, as told through this aimless rich kid who's not good at anything. But the military makes him awesome at everything.

**Brandon**

He is shaped into a great man, capital G capital M, which is very much an archetype Heinlein uses a lot. But Johnny does initially enlist because his friend Carl is enlisting, and Carl has more of a direction and tests well and goes into military intelligence. And we never see him again. He dies off screen. And Johnny's girlfriend - I don't think she's actually his girlfriend in this...

**Wren**

No, she's not.

**Brandon**

...but she is a girl who is his friend.

**Wren**

And they go on dates later.

**Brandon**

...also joins up, because the space navy is mostly women, because Heinlein asserts - and this is not scientifically supported - but Heinlein asserts that women are just like, way better at the spatial math required to effectively pilot a spaceship, and so most of the navy is women.

**Wren**

I'm so weirdly torn on his characterization of women in this book. On the one hand, I feel like my gut feeling was wow, it's actually like really slightly progressive that he would put forth this future where women are just actively better, like reflex and stuff wise at piloting, that they are the majority of the pilots in this navy. But on the other side of how women are treated in this book, they are not in the mobile infantry. There's no women there. And for the most part, when women are referred to, it's like, as this concept of the reason why men fight, and pretty things to look at, and there are very few women characters in this book. You know, one being the mother who was wrong, until she died. And the other being, and I'm gonna quote Heinlein here, "little Carmen." Two thirds of the time that the Carmen character, who is not his girlfriend but sort of turns into like a casual date partner later, he refers to her as a "little Carmen," and I just cringed every time. Why? Why are you calling her "little Carmen?" It's so weird. So yeah, like he gets points for being slightly progressive. But then I feel like all those points get lost because he's so weird about women in every other way.

**Brandon**

Yeah, that's the Heinlein experience. None of Heinlein's books that I've read since this one I like anywhere near as much as this one, and I think that is largely on the back of the fact that all the other ones I've read have much more prominent female characters, or women characters.

**Wren**

I'm gonna give myself - this gonna be checkbox #3 - it was contrasted very strongly in the movie where there are women characters in the mobile infantry and they're just sort of integrated. They shower together. It's very weird and '90s, naked shower scenes. But I loved that when I watched it, that there were women in the military, and it was like not even a thing. Gender-swapped (as it turns out) Dizzy Flores is one of my favorite characters in...is probably my favorite character in the movie.

**Brandon**

I can't imagine that Dizzy Flores is anybody's favorite character in the book.

**Wren**

But so that so that was a point of disappointment for me in going into the book because I was expecting there to be women in the mobile infantry as well.

**Brandon**

Heinlein's women have some consistent problems. They are often very competent at whatever it is they do. They also almost always will give up whatever it is they do when it becomes time to be a mother. And I find most of Heinlein's women so intolerable, because like, they often begin as very competent individuals, and then somewhere in the middle, they are romantically involved enough in, generally, the male protagonist, that they're just like, finally, I am ready to become a mother as was my destiny. I don't have to do science anymore because that's not really my purpose, it's just what I've been doing. So for that reason, I'm kind of glad there are no women in the mobile infantry in the book, because I think I would hate it.

**Brandon**

One of the things that Heinlein is somewhat notable for is that he was, in many ways, one of the earlier major authors to use sort of hard sci-fi premises. And he does spend a lot of this book talking about some of the technology, especially the powered armor that the mobile infantry wear.

**Wren**

Can you back up for just like half a second? You say hard sci-fi - is there like a concept of hard sci-fi and soft sci-fi?

**Brandon**

Yeah. In a nutshell, it's sci-fi that like adheres to actual science more often than not. So for example, common things with hard sci-fi are like: if you want gravity on a spaceship, it has to be rotating. If there is faster than light, it's relativistic. So, you know, you might experience a week or so traveling to a place, but when you get there, four years have passed, because that's how lightspeed works. And stuff like that. Hard sci-fi goes a little more for like, trying to adhere to science as far as it is known at the time, and also often as a result kind of digs into some of the things that it's doing. But like the notion, for

example, that piloting a spaceship is an extremely mathematical process is a very hard sci-fi process. Because it's, it's the thing that like women characters do, and Rico's not good at, he doesn't talk a lot about the nature of that, but I think it's pretty clear from sort of the context in this book that ships get around according to actual physics, right? And not like magical Star Trek or Star Wars moving through space physics. But consequently, he talks a lot about, in particular, the powered armor, and all the things that the powered armor can do, and like tactical nuclear weapons that they carry around, because why wouldn't...you know, I guess? And often, the main thing that people point out when they're talking about the differences between the movie and the book, is that the book has power armor an the movie has, like, helmets. A lot of the boot camp stuff that is kind of interesting is all of the talking about how all of the power armor systems work, because he goes pretty deep sometimes, like there's many pages about all of the different like jaw movements you need to do to adjust to your different radio frequencies so that you don't have to use your hands to like switch between communicating with your superiors versus your squad versus like just your sergeants or whatever. It's it's a whole thing.

**Wren**

So tell me more about Heinlein. Why does everyone think he is terrible?

**Brandon**

Well, you'll have to be more specific. So Heinlein was born in 1907 in Missouri. He went to the Naval Academy, graduated in 1929, and was in the Navy for five years before being discharged for pulmonary tuberculosis. So he was discharged for health reasons and did receive a disability pension for at least some time from the Navy thereafter. His time in the military, you know, obviously influenced a lot of his later work, in particular Starship Troopers. He had been trained as an engineer, and so kind of did some of that sort of stuff. After he was out of the Navy, he also became politically active for a little bit in the Democratic Party in the late '30s. Even tried to run for office; didn't work out. He was a proponent of a lot of socialist ideas.

**Wren**

What?

**Brandon**

Yeah. So here's the thing about Heinlein. These days, people often characterize him like he is this like really staunch conservative asshole. Some of his beliefs definitely line up with that, and some of his beliefs do not. In the '30s and '40s, he was quite liberal, and, you know, not just liberal relative to the time; his views would still be considered liberal today, albeit not like really far left. He would always kind of have a lot of ideas that were, I'll say socially liberal, especially as pertains to things like sex. Probably his best known novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, was embraced very much as espousing a lot of like, free love kind of premises. There are other ways in which he is very much what we would call conservative, in particular, his views on militarism. So he worked as an aeronautical engineer during World War II for the Navy, started to write stories to pay the bills, short fiction in magazines and stuff, as was the style at the time. Worked his way up to having a contract to write juvenile fiction, one book a year for a decade, wrote a bunch of that stuff. And then one day, in 1958 - I guess it might have been more than one day, but for purposes of dramatic effect, one day in 1958 - Eisenhower and other people were like, "We're going to stop nuclear testing." And Heinlein was like, "This is the worst idea ever, I

have to write a book about it." And that's how Starship Troopers happened. Starship Troopers is a rebuttal to the notion of decreasing, or ceasing entirely, nuclear testing in the late '50s, because to Heinlein, that sounded like an extremely bad idea, because the Cold War in particular. And so Starship Troopers is kind of this, this, you know, lengthy thing that he wrote in a few weeks, that is really espousing these ideas of how militarism is kind of a necessity, how human nature is always going to sort of devolve towards violence and war. And I imagine some of the, like, only veterans get the right to vote stuff was probably also expelling some frustrations with political movements in the US that were very anti-war and were mostly made up of people, or at least in Heinlein's view mostly made up of people, who had never served in the military, would not ever serve in the military, did not understand the reality of the world in his eyes. His publisher rejected this as his juvenile book for the year. And so he decided, at that point, he was like, I'm just gonna write for adults. Now, this was released in two parts in 1959, in the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and won the Hugo in 1960. And the rest is history, onward and upward. He had actually set aside the book that would become Stranger in a Strange Land to write Starship Troopers. He had been working on that book as his juvenile book for the year, but then got very mad about this nuclear stuff and so paused. Once his publisher had turned down Starship Troopers, he decided to go for adults now only. He reworked Stranger in a Strange Land to the book that it would become when it came out a few years later.

**Wren**

Wow. All right.

**Brandon**

So from there on Heinlein is an author who, whatever you can say about the ideas that he has, his books were often very much driven by kind of asking some political question or cultural question or examining the possibilities of, you know, what if society was built in this way, or that way, to the degree that I kind of feel like - and this is somewhat anecdotal; I've read, I guess, four or five of his novels, and there's obviously a lot more than that, so it's possible that I've not got a representative sample - relative to somebody like Asimov, for example, who kind of asks questions that are driven by technology, I think, and how people would change how society would change once there are things like living on other planets or robots that think for themselves, et cetera, Heinlein kind of is a little more about thinking about political structures, or social structures, or whatever, that aren't necessarily inherently driven by a science fiction idea, but that he couches as science fiction ideas. Through the '60s and stuff, he would continue to kind of explore more radical things. And I think some of it, it's not necessarily that he believed all of them. It seems like he would consider stuff that he didn't necessarily agree with, although I think that you can kind of tell when he does agree with things. He definitely was kind of interested in thinking about sexuality and stuff in a way that wasn't strictly the standard at the time. Although the handful of times that he brushed close to homosexuality, he seems to think that that was not great. But he did seem interested in things like polyamory being accepted, for example. Heinlein had views that we would even today consider generally liberal views. But meanwhile, his political views progressed to being increasingly conservative over the years. Several of his books, most importantly, The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, are like extremely libertarian books. And I think I saw somewhere that he thought Ayn Rand was neat.

**Wren**

Oh, no.

**Brandon**

It is hard to put Heinlein neatly in a box of like being conservative or being liberal. I do think that we tend to fixate on his conservative ideas, which granted were the ones he held later in life. And a lot of his kind of free love polyamory kind of ideas started to metamorphose into...incest might be neat, and, you know, teenagers probably consent can. And I don't know why went that way with that sentence.

**Wren**

You're Yoda today.

**Brandon**

So definitely, there's like this element that as he went, the things that he was exploring, it started to seem a little grosser over time. And so he just sort of reached this point where it was like libertarianism and gross sex stuff. And a lot of his liberal ideas, a lot of his ideas about gender and society were hamstrung by the fact that there were clearly some lines he just didn't see reasonable to cross, like homosexuality didn't seem to be a thing he was into. Differences in like gender role between men and women, that stuff often remained relatively cisgender heteronormative, as far as I'm aware, so there was this whole section of that realm of his life where he just sort of decided it seemed those things weren't worth considering. Like polyamory and stuff? Yeah, let's talk about that. That might be neat. But homosexuality? Nah. All that said, many of his books were very influential in sci-fi. He won four Hugos, one of which was for Starship Troopers. While the book I think has been broadly overshadowed by the movie, and for, I think, good reason, it did introduce a lot of really major sci-fi tropes, or at least popularized a lot of really major sci-fi tropes. Starship Troopers, for example, is basically where powered armor and space marines come from. It wasn't literally the first book to have those kinds of ideas, but it definitely was the one that was the most widely successful and popularizing of those ideas. You can't swing a cat now without hitting a space marine. Just imagine what the world we would live in if we didn't have Starship Troopers to give us space marines, or powered armor suits, or species of giant alien bugs that want to destroy us. There was a Starship Troopers war game from the mid '70s put out by Avalon Hill. There have been others since. I don't know if they still make it, but in recent years, there's been a line of Starship Troopers miniatures based upon more of the movie universe.

**Wren**

I think I just found a loophole. You just said the movie. So I want to ask a question about the movie.

**Brandon**

Yeah, yeah, we're getting close.

**Wren**

My impression of the movie was that it was actually criticizing this military culture.

**Brandon**

Yes.

**Wren**

And it very much seemed like it had a lot of things to say about this culture being just like, you know, churning out bodies and glorifying this military machine.

**Brandon**

Yeah.

**Wren**

Okay, so I don't feel bad about liking the movie.

**Brandon**

No, you got the movie.

**Wren**

Okay.

**Brandon**

The biggest thing that people know about Starship Troopers is the 1997 film adaptation, directed by Paul Verhoeven, who otherwise is best known for like Total Recall and Robocop, movies that are also satires. The film did not begin as a Starship Troopers adaptation. It began as a not-that about space marines fighting alien bugs, possibly kind of loosely based on Aliens. Not in that it was an Aliens movie, but like in that it sounds like it was sort of pulling from the, you know, another bug hunt kind of stuff. Incidentally, I read that James Cameron made the people playing space marines in Aliens read this book. But they were making Starship Troopers, or the movie that was eventually Starship Troopers - it was called like Bug Hunt on Something-or-Other that had a previous working title. But then the rights were optioned, and the decision was to shift it to an adaptation...and Paul Verhoeven gave up on reading the book about 10% of the way in because he was bored. So yes, the the movie, I think, is one of the relatively short list of movies that I think are just better than the books they're based upon. And it's not that it's a faithful adaptation, because it's not really. It's a response to the book. I kind of feel like it is definitely taking a lot of these jingoistic militaristic ideas and couching them in satire, which is Paul Verhoeven's thing. So that it turns the novel, which very much has this tone of being part of the military is glorious, it is a sign that you're morally right, it is a necessity for the preservation of our society, it's the only way we can have this utopian thing where people who aren't in the military can live relatively comfortably, even though they don't necessarily have the right to vote. And the movie takes all of that, and plays it up to the point that it's absurd and obviously incorrect. Now, granted, maybe I think that it's better than the book because I agree with the movie's message a lot more than the book's message. But that's kind of the move they do, and I think that's a pretty cool move. You know, some people were like, Why not power suits? That would have been so cool. And that apparently, is because they could either afford to make bugs or power armor. They could not do both.

**Wren**

I think that the implication was that the armor was pretty beefy in the movie.

**Brandon**

Yeah, yeah. But like, the armor in the movie is like a flak jacket and a helmet.

**Wren**

I appreciate it, though, that they got the kind of weird bulbous monkey head aspect of the helmets in the movie as a nod to they called them apes in the book because they said the helmets just made them look like big giant monkey heads.

**Brandon**

Yeah. But in the book, they are like these these powered armor, fully sealed things that give you like massively amplified strength through musculature and stuff, jump jets, bristling with weapons, all sorts of sensing systems and everything. Like all this stuff, the movie is just like, here's a helmet. It also kind of changes the nature of the Bugs a bit, because in the book, there's like one, warrior bug to every...I forget if it's 100, or 1000 harmless worker bugs. In the movie, there's kind of this horde of warrior bugs that just like comes at you like a tide of death.

**Wren**

I thought it was really interesting too how in the movie, there's this sort of throughline of how the humans are so egotistical that they just like, can't imagine that there's this like brain bug because the Bugs are just stupid. And in the book, it's just like, yeah, they have this very advanced like brain bug society thing going on.

**Brandon**

Yeah, the book, the book doesn't talk a lot about how the Bugs work, because Rico doesn't really know or care all that much. They're definitely characterized in a bit of a different way. Like their warriors have energy weapons in the book. And of course, in the movie, they're just, they're just all big claw monsters. You know?

**Wren**

I wasn't sure when I read that if it was implying that it was like, a manufactured sort of energy weapon, or if it was like, they were spitting out some sort of like, I don't know, energy.

**Brandon**

I read it this time as manufactured because there's also vague implication they have spaceships.

**Wren**

Oh, my gosh, yeah.

**Brandon**

The movie borrows names and stuff for a lot of characters. It also does have like the wiping out of Buenos Aires being a major plot thing.

**Wren**

But they didn't have Rico be from there.

**Brandon**

Right. Yeah. In the book it's a thing that happens while Rico is in boot camp. It's personal to him only because his mom happened to be visiting there. In the movie, it's explicitly a thing that the Bugs throw a meteor at Earth, and it hits Buenos Aires and wipes it out. In the book, it seems to be an actual Bugs landed troops and attacked.

**Wren**

That was definitely one one thing that I found about the writing that it was sometimes hard for me to visualize some of what was happening because if Rico didn't understand a thing or care about it, it was glossed over real fast. And Rico was kind of a dumbass and doesn't understand a lot of things. So he just moves on.

**Brandon**

I do appreciate that he was kind of self deprecating. Rico's a dope, but he knows he's a dope. Like: "I hadn't made any decision. My mouth was leading its own life." And I think that makes him like tolerable as a protagonist. We're getting the story of everything from a Rico who is experienced and grown up and has like seen a lot of combat and is this fully-forged fighting man, and he clearly looks back on who he was at the beginning with a certain sort of wry bemusement at how little he knew. Which, I appreciate that measure of humility from Rico.

**Wren**

I think he's a stronger character in the book. Because he, I mean, this may just be my own values, but he's such a hard worker. And he's not really, you know, going into the military to chase after a girl. He's not doing all this stuff to chase after glory. He's got this sort of sense of inner morality and hard work ethic. And he's just like a...he's just a stronger character in the book. And in the movie, he's just grunt, grunt boy, soldier man. I like him. But yeah, he's just got stronger characterization.

**Brandon**

He also has moments when he doubts. He almost leaves boot camp a few times, especially after that flogging. I guess we haven't really talked about it specifically, but flogging is a thing in this society, not just for military people, but it seems also civilians. Like if you break the law, you're gonna get flogged. Sorry. And there's a lengthy period when when Heinlein justifies this ad nauseam in the History and Moral Philosophy class, which...in high school, they have a class called History and Moral Philosophy, which just sounds like a propaganda class.

**Wren**

Yep.

**Brandon**

So there's that. I guess, if you want to run a civilization where voting rights are reserved only for people who joined federal service for some amount of time, probably instituting a propaganda class in high school is a step you should take. But yeah, he does ultimately kind of push through it. And he definitely is a character who succeeds and rises through the ranks, essentially, by virtue of not wanting that. He doesn't decide, "I'm going to be a war hero, or I'm going to get promoted up to being like Sky Marshal."

He joins up, he does what he's supposed to do. And when he fails to do that, he does his best to learn from his mistakes. And by virtue of this, by virtue of this perseverance, he succeeds and rises through the ranks.

**Wren**

The question we sometimes ask is, if the person who has never read the book, if they would enjoy it, had they read it when they were younger? I'm gonna give it a no. Two reasons. I think that younger me would have been way too immature to separate book for movie. And younger me would have been like, "Rawr! Dizzy's not a romantic prospect!" and "Yaar, like, Buenos Aires!" But also, I think that younger me didn't have the, I don't know, intellectual curiosity, I guess, of the fact that I don't know anything about the military. So I enjoyed learning a little bit about military structure, even though I'll never do anything with that information. But I think younger me would have been like, I don't care about this. Where's the action?

**Brandon**

Part of boot camp where they're like doing survival training is only a handful of pages. They don't spend much time on that at all. Military sci-fi oft descends from this. There's a lot of that. There's a lot of different things there. Some of it very good. If you find yourself wanting to read a book that is a rebuttal to Starship Troopers in many ways - and I unfortunately, didn't read this until much much later. So it's not in our rubric for our podcast - go read The Forever War by Joe Haldeman. It's a Hugo and Nebula Award winner from 1974 that approaches a similar story, but in a way that is a lot more critical of the human cost of war, especially a war that is subject to things like relativistic speeds. The '97 film has spawned four direct to DVD sequels, as well as the CGI spin-off series Roughnecks: Starship Troopers Chronicles, which is actually surprisingly good.

**Wren**

There's no sequels Brandon is lying to you.

**Brandon**

That's correct. Many game adaptations, war games and stuff for sure. Oh, and Wren. Perhaps most important to us aside from the movie: Starship Troopers is what inspired Mobile Suit Gundam.

**Wren**

Oh my gosh.

**Brandon**

Here's the pieces of the puzzle: they are MOBILE infantry that were power SUITS.

**Wren**

Oh, my gosh,

**Brandon**

Yoshiyuki Tomino just took the middle words out. That's where mobile suit comes from, is literally this. So yes, that's Starship Troopers, very influential, even though the book itself has been overshadowed

by many of those influences. It's a complicated one to unpack, because it does have a lot of ideas I disagree with, but I'm definitely a person who, you know, would like to think that I am open to considering arguments for ideas that I disagree with, even if I don't think that my mind will be changed. And that's sort of where this book goes for me. I accept Heinlein's arguments for why what he thinks is the right way, and I just don't find it ultimately a compelling argument. But it's a pretty readable argument.

**Wren**

This is another one of those books where I feel like there's a lot of deeper ideas and discussions that could be had about this that we just don't have time for. And I feel like we're just slightly doing it a disservice by just doing this generalized discussion.

**Brandon**

Heinlein as a writer so often, at least in his Starship Troopers and onward work, is really focused on unpacking ideas that he's working through, for the way that the world works, or should work or something, or, you know, maybe doesn't work. You could really just do a podcast of Heinlein and have a lot of things to talk about the stuff that he puts forward, as well as just sort of the merits of the stories as stories. And we could definitely go on for a long time about this book. And even longer if we talk in more depth about how the movie relates to this book. He's definitely an author that if you are interested in sci-fi with a lot of political and cultural ideas sort of infused into them, you might find his work interesting, even if you don't agree with his conclusions. There are definitely reasons that people think of him as a creep. Some of his stuff is very creepy.

**Wren**

Well: peaches.

**Brandon**

Ah, I don't know. I mean, like two and a half, maybe.

**Wren**

Oh, golly. Well, for those who don't know, who may be popping into this as their first listen, that could be a thing. We have a rating system where we rate this based on how many out of five giant peaches. We think this book is. I wrote my answer down before hearing Brandon. So I'm, I'm going to stick to what I wrote down. Four.

**Brandon**

I was reflecting on this. And I think that with Asimov, when we did The Caves of Steel, and then I reread its sequels, I found that I liked those books much more as an adult than as a kid, because I just found like a lot of the sociology and stuff that he's working through much more intriguing than I did as a kid. I think I have the opposite reaction with Starship Troopers. I think that having time and having like my own thoughts about things like militarism evolve over time, and also just being like, a bit better at unpacking philosophical arguments and what is sort of a well-considered one versus one that is a little slapdash, I just didn't enjoy this book as much. I found that it veered into areas that I thought were like

a little, okay, you've said this over and over again, you can stop now, or I don't think this part of your argument is actually very well-considered. So I'd like to move on, see some Bugs or something.

**Wren**

You know, my score was based on the fact that I found it very easy to get through. I thought that I had a really good time reading it, but I always got points for slurs.

**Brandon**

So yeah, I didn't find it hard to get through. We've read things that were much more of a slog on the show. Yeah, it's it's tough. I like talking about it a lot more than I like reading it. But I don't dislike reading it, exactly. I just don't really know what my barometer for peaches is once I get below like a three and a half.

**Wren**

Well, speaking about us, you know, sticking to type. Next week is a me pick. And we're gonna hit up another one of the great horror writers of our time. And I'm going to get Brandon to read one of the Goosebumps books by RL Stine, and we're going to start with The Haunted Mask. That was my favorite or one of my favorites.

**Brandon**

That's one of the pillars of Goosebumps canon.

**Wren**

I threatened to make Brandon read the Slappy one, but I don't remember it as much as as I remember liking The Haunted Mask. So.

**Brandon**

We'll get to talk about how I was a wimp about horror as a child again. It's always excellent.