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Known for ?superior science fiction” (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), author John Varley returns to his Thunder and Lightning series with a novel of how one man’s volatile genius could alter a starship’s epic plunge into a future where human survival is just a theory...

On a voyage to New Earth, the starship Rolling Thunder is powered by an energy no one understands, except for its eccentric inventor Jubal Broussard. Like many of the ship’s inhabitants, Jubal rests in a state of suspended animation for years at a time, asleep yet never aging.

The moments when Jubal emerges from suspended animation are usually a cause for celebration for his family, including his twin daughters—Cassie and Polly—and their uncle who is captain of the Rolling Thunder. But this time, Jubal makes a shocking announcement...

The ship must stop, or everyone will die.

These words from the mission’s founder, the man responsible for the very existence of the Rolling Thunder, will send shock waves throughout the starship—and divide its passengers into those who believe and those who doubt. And it will be up to Cassie and Polly to stop a mutiny, discover the truth, and usher the ship into a new age of exploration...

Dark Lightning Details

Date : Published August 5th 2014 by Ace (first published August 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9780425274071

Author : John Varley

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Space, Space Opera, Young Adult

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From Reader Review Dark Lightning for online ebook

liza says

varley is superb.

each of the thunder and lightning books has taken off in it's own direction, clearly part of the same universe, just as cleary making it's own points. this one had a nearly heinleinian flavor (don't kill me for using that adverb/jective), but stayed true to varley's style. the crazy, fast paced, hard to believe action that is so present in most of his works stormed right through this one too and somehow he makes it all seem perfectly normal.

Kathy Davie says

Fourth in the Thunder and Lightning young adult science fiction series and revolving around the twins: Cassie and Polly Broussard.

My Take

It's an adventure with scary overtones. Mutiny is never a good thing. And it all revolves around Jubal's fear of something terrible happening. It's a fear that is explored throughout and is the primary conflict in the story. However, the premise for the mutiny seems thin. Why would an old friend react like this? He's supposed to be smart. Why not talk to Travis? Wait for Jubal to finish his thinking? All I can say is, it's a good thing that the Broussards are so paranoid. Although it turns out that they're not paranoid enough.

The prologue was irritating. Oh, not at first. Later, when Varley repeats it all. What was the point of having a prologue at all?

Varley did pull me in with that skypool incident with Polly falling out of the sky and landing in that pigsty, *laughing*.

I'm of two minds about the BLINKLINK (sounds like those Google glasses). Varley sometimes uses it as an info dump, and other times, he uses it as part of the communication channels for the inhabitants of *Rolling Thunder*. It's almost as if Varley didn't get on his roll until later, and I wish he'd gone back and cleaned up those info dumps.

Okay. Whine over. I do adore the thought Varley has put into *Rolling Thunder*. Wow. It's laid out like a planet with varying land "masses", rivers, villages, newspapers, etc. I love the sound of food delivery and the dishwashing set-up. I want this! Travis buying up all these buildings; the names he bestows on the villages (Grover's Mill, Grand Fenwick, etc.); the supplies he's laid on; the humongous variety of equipment, foodstuffs, and animals; the transportation options — lucky for them that Jubal invented the black bubbles. *Think Noah on steroids.*

I also like the bayou "camouflage" on the Broussard homestead and its location on the river. And I'm jealous (too) of that treehouse! It truly is amazing how homey the interior of *Rolling Thunder* is. It's worth reading if only for that!

The tragedy of Jubal's childhood simply reinforces my wish that parents had to be licensed. He's such a great guy, and you can't help but wonder what wonders he'd have achieved if he hadn't suffered all that brain damage. Then again, as Varley notes, it might be that brain damage that allows him to make those leaps of intuition. Uncle Travis is a pretty easygoing guy and willing to allow a lot of leeway, er, democracy, until he disagrees. Fortunately, he doesn't disagree often.

The twins are assertive, forward, loyal, caring, and intelligent even if they don't apply it to schoolwork. As for Patrick, I did wonder about him and his reluctance to do anything during the mutiny.

On the negative side (I do hate science *wry grin*) is all the physics in *Dark Lightning*. It is easy enough to leap over, though. Part of my frustration could well have been that it's been too long since I read the first three in the Thunder and Lightning series.

Events do help Cassie make up her mind about what she wants to do with her life. And Jubal's last invention in *Rolling Thunder* opens up a ton of possibilities. I hate that I'll have to wait a few more years for #5, for I do love this series. It's a group of stories that sticks in my mind and pops up every so often, making me want to re-read it.

The Story

Coming out of stasis, Jubal cried out "The ship must stop, or everyone will die." One sentence that sets fear and mutiny in motion.

"Laissez les bon temps rouler!"

The Characters

Cassie and Polly Broussard are twins whose father is **Jubal**, the eccentric, brain-damaged, and brilliant inventor with a lot of phobias. Their mother is **Podkayne** (I know, she's even from Mars! Her story is in *Rolling Thunder* , 3) and a very famous singer. The captain of the ship, sorry, the Supreme Exalted Admiral, is **Travis Broussard**, their uncle.

The extended family are the Broussard-Strickland-Garcia-Redmonds and includes..... Podkayne's parents, **Ramon "Ray"** and **Evangeline Garcia-Strickland**. **Great-aunt Elizabeth Strickland-Garcia** is a nanosurgeon with one prosthetic hand that is so much better than a real hand. She's married to **Dorothy**, a psychiatrist; they live in Bedford Falls. **Great-grand-père Jim Redmond** runs the best Martian restaurant on the ship; his wife is **Great-grand-mère Audrey**. **Great-grand-père Manny** and **Great-grand-mère Kelly Garcia** are in stasis at the moment. **Uncle Mike** (Podkayne's brother is an achondroplastic dwarf adopted by Ray and Evangeline) and **Aunt Marlee** (she's an artist) have a son, **Patrick**, who the first real problem between Polly and Cassie. Patrick and his family live at Fantasyland, the ship's theme park; Mike manages the casino for the ship. **Natalie Broussard** is a third cousin.

Fortunately, Jubal's father, the fanaticall y religious **Grandfather Avery** died in prison.

The **Nguyens** are the farming couple raising the pigs. **Lori** is standing a watch on the bridge. **Rachel Waters**. **Katy** is a ten-year-old assistant at one of the meetings. **Fiona Kelly** is the head newsreader for RTBS. Some of the politicians include **Governor Wang**; **George Bull** is the mayor of Freedonia Township; **Mayor Oringo Ngoro** of Sweet Apple (he raises 50-some varieties of apples and is the chief ecologist); and, "**Uncle**" **Max Karpinski**, the fattest and second smartest man on the ship, is the Chief Relativist.

Skypool is...

...a full-contact sport played on bicycle-like contraptions that include wings, since it's played in the air. Fortunately, parts of *Rolling Thunder* have differing gee levels. The twins play for the **Bayouville Gators**,

and the story opens with their playing the **Hilltown Hillbillies**. **Cheryl Chang** is the Hillbilly defense, the intimidator; **Woody** is her younger brother. **Mazzie Niven**, **Violet Silversteen**, and **Suki Kurosawa** are fellow Hillbilly team members. Gator team members include **Pippa Mendez** and **Jynx Molloy** who are good friends with Polly and Cassie and **PJ Leaping Deer** while **Milton Kaslov**, the bright but socially clueless one: "talking to Milt for ten minutes made you have thoughts of suicide", is on the boys' team. The Gators' intimidating coach is **Peggy** who is absolutely deadly with martial arts.

The mutineers include...

...**Elton**, **Roger**, and **Lieutenant Vince** from the Castle Rock police force.

The ship, Rolling Thunder, is...

...a hollowed out asteroid that's been on its way to **New Sun** for the past twenty years with some 20,000 awake inhabitants who are spread all over the inside with some 1,350 people per town. There are a ton more in stasis. **Sheila** is the AI that controls Travis' personal ship. **Colonel Jane Litchfield** leads the security team that's in stasis.

Black bubbles, a.k.a., stasis bubbles, are like suspended animation. You can be inside one for years, decades, and come out without having aged or aware of the time that's passed. **Skippers** are the people who choose to go into a black bubble and skip over real time. **FOCTs** are Family of Captain Travis, and it has its privileges. The **Mejd Allah** was the only ship that returned (*Red Lightning*, 2); it destroyed a large chunk of earth when it came back. **Boudreaux** is one of the few koi with a name.

The Cover and Title

The cover is dark browns and deep purple with an exterior space view of *Rolling Thunder*'s secret dock. It's the captain's ship thrusting in. The author's name is large, at the top, and in lime green. The title is much smaller, at the bottom, and in white.

The title is what Jubal fears, *Dark Lightning*.

Rachel says

I have *loved* the Thunder and Lightning series so far. And while I still liked this book, it seemed written just as a tour of the asteroid. I would have liked to see it move the story a little further along, especially with as long as we wait between books.

Michael says

It's only fair to warn you that I am a long-time Varley fan and have read all his work multiple times. It pains me to write anything negative but I cannot regard this book as anything but a fairly weak addition to an otherwise brilliantly entertaining series. Several reviewers seemed to be under the impression that this was a YA book and I can see how they thought so.

My immediate source of dissatisfaction was his choice of main characters. Twin teenage girls? How trite. I also question why they had been given all this "training" when none of the other kids, notably the useless and boring Patrick, in the clan had received any.

There was entirely too much vapid teen girl nonsense conversation that added nothing to developing the

characters nor the plot.

Underneath the story and the characters was simple disappointment that the world inside the ark was not in the least interesting. Certainly not the fantastical yet plausible "society-building" that I have come to expect from Varley. So they had an amusement park and a casino...big deal. I look to Varley for startlingly original environments that make me want to be there myself. Not rural England, for fucks sake.

As I'm writing this, I'm realizing just how many aspects of this caused me disenchantment.

I think I shall regard this book as a "transition short story", a setting of the stage for the next book when they arrive on the planet and commence to explore. I'm fervently hoping he harks back to his astonishing Gaea Trilogy both in depth and writing style. There's enough books out there written by and for dumb people...I'd like to see him write for his established admirers. His book Slow Apocalypse was his one bad book....I shall brook no others.

Ian Wood says

This is the complete review as it appears at my blog dedicated to reading, writing (no 'rithmatic!), movies, & TV. Blog reviews often contain links which are not reproduced here, nor will updates or modifications to the blog review be replicated here. Graphic and children's novels reviewed on the blog will generally have some images from the book's interior, which are not reproduced here.

Note that I don't really do stars. To me a novel is either worth reading or it isn't. I can't rate a novel three-fifths worth reading! The only reason I've relented and started putting stars up there is to credit the good ones, which were being unfairly uncredited. So, all you'll ever see from me is a five-star or a one-star (since no stars isn't a rating, unfortunately).

I rated this novel WARTY!

WARNING! MAY CONTAIN UNHIDDEN SPOILERS! PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK!

John Varley was born quite close to where I live, and I have several of his books on my shelves. Admittedly it's been a long time since I've read anything by him, I cannot remember ever reading a work of Varley's which was as annoying and boring as this one turned out to be. This volume is part of his 'Thunder and Lightning' series, and was preceded by Red Thunder, Red Lightning, and Rolling Thunder, the latter of which I haven't read. The first two I found moderately entertaining but nothing to write home about. My favorite of Varley's is Steel Beach, by far, with his short story Millennium a close second.

While I was quite interested to see a fairly new novel from Varley in the library I was less thrilled to begin reading it, unfortunately. It features first person PoV, which is so unnatural as to be completely unbelievable unless it's very well done, and it's rarely done that well. In this case it was absurd. Even hyperthymesics don't have that good of a recall and unfortunately, they all-too-often pay for that memory with unpleasant functionality issues.

I skipped the prologue because I think prologues are ridiculous affectations. If it's worth telling, it's worth putting into chapter one or later. If the writer doesn't think it's worth a chapter, then I don't think it's worth reading! And as long as I'm complaining, Varley is known for hard sci-fi, but this volume read more like fantasy in some regards, most notably in relation to the 'ark' space craft in which his characters were traveling.

The ark's creator evidently financed it entirely his self, which means he must have been a trillionaire or something. He built it to look exactly like Earth inside (as far as was possible, of course!), including bringing up actual Earth homes, and populating the terrain with waterways and lakes, as well as food animals. I found that to be going way-the-hell too far beyond practical, and for me it detracted from the believability of this whole enterprise.

This story is set around the year 2100 and begins with some action - fake action. The main two characters are the Broussard twins (Star Trek Broussard collectors, anyone?). They're named Cassie and Polly. I thought this was for Castor and Pollux, but it's actually Pollyanna and with that I guessed - correctly - that her sister was Cassandra. They're playing a game called flycycle - which is nothing but a huge rip-off of Harry Potter's quidditch. Polly gets into trouble with her harness, and starts heading down for a crash. Cassie notes Polly's absence, manages to spot her falling, and goes to her aid.

So we have this totally unbelievable blow-by-blow account of Polly's dire straits, which was farcical because it was narrated by the person to whom it was happening. Seriously? I don't know why writers are so addicted to 1PoV. It doesn't get me involved or give immediacy to the story for me. It just makes me think over and over, how ridiculous and restricting the whole technique is, and how dumb the writer is for at once hog-tying themselves and putting the rest of us through this with them. It's particularly ridiculous when the narrator spews a ludicrous 'B' movie line like this: "...somewhere in there I had lost my helmet, and I didn't even remember it..." I seriously doubt you would remember remembering that if you were plummeting to your death....

The cover has a booster line from author Cory Doctorow: "There are few writers whose work I love more than John Varley's...". I was not impressed in my first outing with a work by Doctorow, but what these blurbs serve for me is to prove once again how truly far Big Publishing™ has its corporate head buried in its corporate ass. At the time, I don't know Cory Doctorow from some random guy across town. I have no more reason to trust his judgment than I do some miscellaneous woman standing in line for the bus. Why would I even care what he thinks - especially when his comment is so generic that he could have utterly detested this particular novel and still give that as an honest quote?

Not only is the 1PoV annoying, it's interrupted by annoying definitions, right there in the text, of cute buzzwords Varley has invented, such as 'flycycle'. All this to say that after only one chapter - five pages - I was really struggling to see how I was going to like this even as I was hoping that it would win me over - and soon, very soon!

The two girls walk home from the crash tossing banter back and forth - banter of a nature which suggests that Varley forgot that these were girls, and put boys' dialog in their mouths. But at least he has the guts to use 'masturbate', a word of which YA writers inexplicably live in mortal terror for some reason.

The twins live on a gigantic spacecraft which is essentially a two-mile diameter, six mile long cylinder, artificial gravity being provided by the rotation of the cylinder. I have no idea what Varley means with his mumbo jumbo about 'gravity' changing, dependent upon whether you go spin-ward or counter-spin-ward. Maybe I'm missing something, but it seems to me more likely that he is with a comment like that.

The rotation of the cylinder provides a centrifugal force that draws things to the perimeter of the cylinder, thereby representing gravity, with the perimeter (the inside of the cylinder's walls) feeling like the ground, and the center of it feeling like the sky. It's not the same thing as gravity, which is what overcomes the centrifugal force of Earth's rotation and keeps us from flying off into space. Moving spin-wise or otherwise will not affect the centrifugal force, so their subjective 'gravity' will not change.

This story is alternately told by Polly and Cassie, and they're the biggest chatterboxes ever, filling page after page with uninteresting drivel. It can be highly inappropriate, too. Their father, Jubal, has been sequestered in a "bubble" for reasons unexplained at the time, and when he comes out, he demands that they stop the ship. Instead of them actually doing that, or us getting an explanation as to why it's considered necessary, we're treated to some thirteen or fourteen straight pages of family history, which is not only boring, it kills the drama completely. When they finally decide to go see Uncle Travis, the completely whack inventor of the ark, it takes some fifteen pages of drivel to get there. I skipped most of those. This ain't no Steel Beach!

I managed to make it to roughly half-way through this when the never-ending flood of irrelevant and boring drivel replete with pseudo-intellectual lectures on physics rendered me incapable of proceeding. By then, I'd actually started hoping that this entire space craft would indeed do whatever it was they feared it would do, which was still pretty much unexplained even at that point. Ain't I a stinker? This is without a doubt the worst Varley I've ever read.

Douglas Berry says

Announced as the final Thunder and Lightning book, this volume kind of stumbles. It's a fun read, and Varley is still channeling Heinlein, but the first half of the novel is taken up by endless talking and almost no action. The action, when it comes, is so predictable that I knew which character would get the Tragic Heroic Death(tm).

Much like in the Expanse, there is a development in this book that opens the stars to humanity. But I think it's best to end the story here.

Richard Schenkman MD says

Heinlein at his best

John Varley has conjured for us a story that evokes Heinlein at his best, I want more of Cassie and Poly and Jubal and Travis and spacetime bubbles!!!!

Joshua Zucker says

A bit of light fun is about the most positive thing I can say about this book.

I did enjoy reading it and wanted to finish it and find out what happened in the end, but was totally disappointed by the combination of "good guys of course win basically unharmed, some formerly bad people turn out to be good underneath with no reason for us to have seen that ahead of time, and the bad people lose", which was bad enough on its own, but then he had to layer at least one deus ex machina on top of that.

Meanwhile what we got for plot and characterization was Heinlein pastiche of the worst kind. I mean, I expect Heinleinesque things from Varley pretty often, and a lot of the time it's, well, an homage, or at least an imitation of the best parts of Heinlein. This was more a "tribute" to Heinlein's self-indulgent later work.

We get the beautiful, hyper-competent, sexy young female twins (Lapis Lazuli and Lorelei, cleverly disguised by making them taller and with a different hair color?). We get the magic technology from super-smart savant-types. We get the "democracy is overrated, benevolent dictatorship is the best, and they should stay dictator because they love and value the 'freedom' that comes from having the best guns / strongest army". We get the "society is going to self-destruct so we should just select the people we think are worth saving and go away".

Yuck.

Anyway, if you're the sort who really enjoyed late Heinlein, you'll like this book. If you are irritated by Heinlein's worse qualities as a writer, you'll find them in spades here too.

Edward B. says

I had never heard of John Varley, although he's apparently been writing for decades, to much acclaim. I don't remember where I came across the recommendation for Dark Lightning, but I picked it up, not realizing that it was the fourth (and final) in a series. It sounds like each instalment is about a separate generation, so while I'm sure I missed many references and some background, there weren't any issues with following the story.

It's definitely not hard science-fiction, and the sci-fi elements kind of take backstage to the story, I would say - and it seems like the language, the writing is simpler, less sophisticated than most of what I read. Possibly intentionally, as the alternating narrators are 18-year-old girls. Anyway, with the writing and the quick-moving plot, it makes for a quick read.

I likely will read the earlier three at some point, but they're not at the top of my list.

Oh, I'll also mention that I find it creepy when men write about the sexuality of young girls. It was really just a couple sentences here, but I found those sentences to be completely gratuitous.

Harald Koch says

This book was terrible.

- The author should not try to write teenage girls.
- The vast majority of the book is long digressions about life inside an asteroid, life with the crazy family, and on and on. I must admit I skimmed a lot of pointless drivel to get to the story.
- There were also random information dumps best described as "Science for Dummies".
- It never felt like anyone was really in dire straits. The "bad guys" were incompetent, the good guys kept revealing previously unmentioned talents, and always escaped trouble easily.
- SHOW, DON'T TELL.
- The end of the book is a giant Deus ex Machina that incidentally had little to do with the plot.

Don't read this book.

Andreas says

At the end of Rolling Thunder, the great asteroid starship Rolling Thunder leaves the solar system led by the extended Garcia-Strickland-Broussard clan. The ship is a classic hollow rotating cylinder, propelled to a high fraction of the speed of light by the mysterious squeezer-bubble technology invented by Jubal in Red Thunder. As with previous installments in the series, we again jump forward a generation. The story is told in the first person by identical twins Cassie and Polly, daughters of Jubal and Podkayne. After one of Jubal's regular exits from stasis in a "black bubble", he screams that the ship must be stopped. Eventually he figures out that Dark Energy (catchily referred to as "Dark Lightning" in the book) may be a danger when traveling at a very high percentage of the speed of light. However as always with Varley, the story is about the people. Jubal's scream of "Stop the Ship!" triggers shipwide unrest, and the twins are the ones who have to sort things out.

In true Varley form, the worldbuilding is first-class, detailed and intricate. The characters are authentic and easily engage the imagination. The twins are in their late teens, and as such their commentary is peppered with talk of boys and fashion, but without being annoying. Mostly it is just plain funny. After the pessimistic tone of Red Lightning and very gloomy one of Rolling Thunder, it is also nice to read an installment in the series with a brighter outlook.

<http://www.books.rosboch.net/?p=1842>

Lexxi Kitty says

Was a neat enough book. A good solid continuation of the series. So . . . why 3 stars then? I'm not really sure I would call it bloat or Weberesque need to be wordy but

Story is told from the point of view of two women, twin teenage daughters of Jubal, the 'mad' scientist who came up with the technology they use. They narrate the story that involves some select group of humans heading off to New Sun in a giant ship. Using that technology that I referenced. Going closer and closer to the speed of light.

And the two young women, 18 or so, alternate narrating the big issues that develop. Like the part where they all might die due to 'dark lightning'.

Well the problem is, or, I should say, the problem I had with the book is how much extra 'stuff' got packed in. The two young women kinda babble and bicker with each other, but that isn't the problem. The problem is all the needlessly long explanations of everything.

But, as I said, it's a good solid addition to the series. Just has a hundred of so pages that could have been trimmed.

I suppose I should note that the stars of the earlier books are mostly not present. Mentioned, one or two spotted here and there, but not the focus of the book.

Frank Burns says

Rounding off the series so far. I felt this one was a bit, lighter, than the other ones. Mostly because it was a pure Heinlein pastiche with no added weight from other story strands. An enjoyable enough romp, to be sure, and still definitely a 4 star.

Mark Garn says

i have always enjoyed his books and look forward to the next

Daniel says

This is Varley in his riproaring space adventure mode as the "Rolling Thunder" starship/space colony heads to their new home. The characters are interesting, particularly the two narrators, twin teenage sisters who alternate telling the story. I much prefer the mindbending Varley stories, but this is solid entertainment.
