



Rite of Passage

Alexei Panshin

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In 2198, one hundred and fifty years after the desperate wars that destroyed an overpopulated Earth, Man lives precariously on a hundred hastily-established colony worlds and in the seven giant Ships that once ferried men to the stars. Mia Havero's Ship is a small closed society. It tests its children by casting them out to live or die in a month of Trial in the hostile wilds of a colony world. Mia Havero's Trial is fast approaching and in the meantime she must learn not only the skills that will keep her alive but the deeper courage to face herself and her world. Published originally in 1968, Alexei Panshin's Nebula Award-winning classic has lost none of its relevance, with its keen exploration of societal stagnation and the resilience of youth.

Rite of Passage Details

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From Reader Review Rite of Passage for online ebook

Julian says

At its core Rite of Passage is a classic coming of age tale. Alex Panshin writes with warmth and pace, and he crafts a story with depth that sets this book apart from many other young adult SFs. It is no surprise that Rite of Passage took home the Nebula. 4/5

I couldn't help but write down some thoughts I had while reading Rite of Passage.

Trial, the practice of marooning 14 year olds on alien and unfamiliar worlds for 30 days came off as absurd to me. The ritual just doesn't mix with the sophisticated nature in which shipboard society was portrayed. Every adult's adolescence would have been traumatized by the loss of several classmates or friends. Too many parents would suffer the ultimate loss. A ship governed democratically by citizens who were also parents would never allow such a practice to continue. Panshin should have made deaths seem like an uncommon occurrence. This additionally would have added weight to Mia's Trial group's disastrous experiences.

A safer version of the Trial ritual is practiced right here in the wealthy and powerful space ship called the United States. For decades, possibly starting around the late 60's when this book was written, a common Rite of Passage for American youth has been travelling to foreign lands. The travellers are looking for adventures, fun times, new perspectives, new faces and perhaps a touch of danger and the unknown. Collectively, these experiences probably do our society a lot of good.

This allegory of Developed Society as the ship and Developing societies as the colonists becomes more interesting still when it is carried through to Rite of Passage's conclusion. At the end of the book two political factions disagree about how the colonist's unprovoked violence against Mia's trial group should be addressed. One side argues that the total destruction of the planet is the only way to contain dangerous ideas that have festered there such as uncontrolled population growth, slavery and possible plots to attack the ship directly. They warn that this path is what ended Earth and pushed human civilization to the brink. The opposing coalition argues that every attempt should be made to reeducate and inform the colonists and that the carefully guarded knowledge and technology in the ship should be freely distributed for the good of all.

In my opinion, Mia's father seemed much too reasonable early in the book to become Darth Vader at its end. I can only explain the drastic approach in two ways. Either this was to spice up the conclusion in the minds of young readers, or Panshin had a similar allegory in mind and really wanted to drive home how much evil occurs on our behalf in the developing world – we might as well be piloting the Death Star ourselves.

Drastic approaches aside, the exposition of the ship's moral dilemma at the conclusion of the book was excellent. It tied up everything from Mia's morality essay to her move across the ship to her experiences on Trial. Is the protection of what we deem to be sophisticated knowledge worth the blood and suffering of the masses? As someone who is paid to study physics in a gleaming white tower, this is a question worth grappling with on a personal level.

There were so many other things I liked in this book. The spear carrier and the storytelling. Mia's Hell on Wheels attitude, her self awareness, and the development of her character. I was impressed by how well this book has aged since the late 60's (I assumed it was from the late 80's while reading it, for no particular reason). I liked that the ship's government reminded me of Alastair Reynolds's Demarchists (Reynolds of

course doesn't claim to have invented this idea, but his books introduced it to me).

Overall, a Rite of Passage is a wonderful coming of age story that is worth your time and thoughts. If you know any young teens who like reading, get them a copy of this and assign them the task of writing a comparison between this and The Hunger Games or Divergent. At least, that's what I'm planning to do to my 13 year old sister!

Bryan Alexander says

A very pleasant young adult novel wrapped in science fiction critique.

Like a classic YA story, we follow a protagonist (Mia Haver) as she moves through adolescence towards adulthood. She meets various challenges, struggles with family and love, then grows up.

It's also a recognizable science fiction world. We have a generation ship filled with advanced humans who ply the starways. The setting also includes a space opera framework, with a destroyed Earth and low-technology colony planets.

It's a rich text to think about in terms of science fiction history, especially given the period of its composition. The novel is definitely a response to Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky*, a 1960s liberal revision with progressive attitudes towards child-rearing, pedagogy, sexuality, and family structure. The devastating finale echoes another Heinlein book, *Have Spacesuit Will Travel*.

About the ending: (view spoiler)

Kiwi Begs2Differ ✪ says

[: the adventure resembled a Western rather than Sci-fi and I didn't like the fact that sex between kids just turned 14 was treated so casually (hide spoiler)]

Özgür says

"Olgunluk, içinde büyüdü?ünüz, kabul edilmiş? yalanlar ve kendini kand?rmalardan ortaya ç?kan gerçe?in parçalar?n? s?n?fland?rma yetene?idir."

"Her zaman ba?ka birinin hikâyesinde m?zrakç? olman?n ne demek oldu?unu dü?ündüm. Bir m?zrakç?, koridorda durup Sezar geçerken haz?rola geçip m?zra??n? yere vuran ki?idir. M?zrakç? tehdit alt?ndaki di?i kahraman? kurtarmak için ilerleyen kahraman?n do?rad??? isimsiz karakterdir. M?zrakç?, hikâyeye at?labilen bir kâ??t mendil gibi kullan?lmak için konmu? bir karakterdir. Bir hikâyede bir m?zrakç?, asla birden m?zra??n? bir kenara at?p, "?stifa ettim. Kullan?lmak istemiyorum," demez. Onlar ya atmosfer ya da kahraman?n yolundaki ufak engel olarak kullan?lmak için oradad?rlar, i?in kötüsü herkes bir m?zrakç?lar dünyas?nda ya?ayan kendi kahraman?d?r. Biz kullan?l?p at?lmaktan hiçbir zevk almay?z."

"Elimde olsayd?, yaln?zca birbirini iyi tan?yan insanlar birbirlerini öldürebilmeli diye bir öneri getirirdim. Hiçbir ölüm burun silmek gibi olmamal?. Ölüm ona neden olan? etkilemesi gerekecek kadar önemli bir ?ey."

Algernon says

[7/10]

Somebody quiped this is the best juvenile that Heinlein never wrote. In her excellent review of the Panshin novel [jo Walton]

, Jo Walton argues that the author's goal was more subversive than paying homage to the grandmaster of science-fiction, a point sustained by the known critical disagreement between the two. I have read literally hundreds of coming of age stories, most of them fantasy or SF, which might explain my lower rating for what is arguably one of the least conventional and better written of the lot.

The setting: Earth has been completely destroyed in a global conflagration in the 21st century. The survivors scattered through the galaxy in hastily built multigenerational spaceships. Some of them settled on planets, where they struggled hard to make them habitable and to produce enough food to survive, leaving too little time for education and leisure. A minority remained in the spaceships, avoiding overpopulation through strict birth control, preserving the advanced technology of Earth and trading this knowledge with the colonists in exchange for essential raw materials. In the absence of real life challenges inside the carefully controlled and regulated environment of the Ships, all young people reaching the age of 14 are sent on a 30 day Trial down to one of the planets, there to survive only by their wits and skills. Not everybody survives the initiation ritual, but the ones who return safely are considered adults with full rights in the society.

The hero(ine): Mia Haveron is the narrator of the novel, in an extended flashback, starting with her tomboy phase at age 12, following through her two years advanced education and survival training, her Trial and its aftermath. She is a wonderful guide through the Ship's world, spunky and witty, "a reluctant daredevil" with a passion for old-fashioned SF stories and a carefully masked streak of loneliness and insecurity. In her own words she is "a little black-haired, black-eyed girl, short, small, and without even the promise of a figure". Much as I liked Mia and her tribulations adapting to a new school, new friends, new ideas and new responsibilities, I sometimes felt her character is a bit too good to be true. Like the kids from a TV series I used to watch (Dawson Creek) she seems written by a parent who puts down how he would like his offspring to talk and to learn from mistakes. Real teenagers, from my experience, are a lot more anarchic and authority flouting, less focused on growing up and more self-centered than Mia. This is not to say she is tame, or well mannered, just a tad too didactic and well organized for a 12-14 y.o.

Things I liked best about the story:

* fables and parables used in the text as a learning tool, storytelling in its more pure and effective guise, including the riddle games so beloved by Tolkien and a tongue-in-cheek approach to classic quests to slay the ogre and win the hand of the princess in marriage.

* a project Mia has to write about ethics, where she studies "Epicureans and Utilitarians; Stoics; Power Philosophers, both sophisticated and unsophisticated; and humanists of several stripes. All these not to mention various religious ethical systems." She balances the strengths and shortcomings of each system, and later sees how they apply to real life conflicts during her Trial. Again, it is done by Panshin in an over-simplified and didactic manner, but it is still very effective. Example:

The trouble with stoicism, it seems to me, is that it is a soporific. It affirms the status quo and thereby puts an end to all ambition, all change. It says, as Christianity did a thousand years ago, that kings should be kings and slaves should be slaves, and it seems to me that it is a philosophy infinitely more attractive to the king than to the slave.

* Mia's "reluctant daredevil" attitude, her "Hell on Wheels", "The Compleat Young Girl" sarcastic persona, always ready to mock her own fears and honestly admit her faux pas. Favorite episode is her participation in an illegal sortie outside the Ship, in the company of her friends from the Survival Class.

I had never realized before that adventures took so much 'doing', so much preparation and so much cleaning up afterward. That's something you don't see in stories. Who buys the food and cooks it, washes the dishes, minds the baby, rubs down the horses, swabs out the guns, buries the bodies, mends the clothes, ties the rope in place so the hero can conveniently find it there to swing from, blows fanfares, polishes medals, and dies beautifully, all so that the hero can 'be' a hero? Who finances him? I'm not saying I don't believe in heroes - I'm just saying that they are either parasites or they spend the bulk of their time in making their little adventures possible, not in enjoying them.

Other pearls of wisdom from Miss Havero:

There is nothing like hunting a tiger almost barehanded to give you a feeling of real confidence in yourself. If you manage to survive the experience.

* the general pacing and the length of the novel : a fast and entertaining read that kept me glued to the pages from start to finish.

* finally, I really appreciated how the comic elements and the light headed spirit of a fun adventure a replaced later in the novel by the real issues Mia will have to deal with as an adult: intolerance, xenophobia, death, free will versus predetermination, the individual versus the political, and more. This is where Jo Walton draws our attention that becoming an adult is not equal to saving the planet from an alien invasion in a blaze of spectacular explosions and other special effects, but looking inside yourself and finding the strength to change what is wrong with your society instead of accepting the status quo. Here are my favorite quotes from this later phase in the novel:

I've always wondered what it would be like to be a spear carrier in somebody else's story. A spear carrier is somebody who stands in the hall when Caesar passes, comes to attention, and thumps his spear. A spear carrier is the anonymous character cut down by the hero as he advances to save the menaced heroine. A spear carrier is a character put in a story to be used like a piece of disposable tissue. In a story, spear carriers never suddenly assert themselves by throwing their spears aside and saying, "I resign. I don't want to be used." They are here to be used, either for atmosphere or as minor obstacles in the path of the hero. The trouble is that each of us is his own hero, existing in a world of spear carriers. We take no joy in being used and discarded. I was finding then, that wet, chilly, unhappy night, that I took no joy in seeing other people used and discarded.

If I had the opportunity, I would make the proposal that no man should be killed except by somebody who knows him well enough for the act to have impact. No death should be like nose blowing. Death is important enough that it should affect the person who causes it.

I can think of nothing sadder than to know that you might be more than you are, but be unwilling to make the effort.

Maturity is the ability to sort the portions of truth from the accepted lies and self-deceptions that you have grown up with.

Recommended for readers who are not yet fed up with coming of age stories and who appreciate classic SF.

Timothy Mayer says

Alexi and Cory Panshin wrote one of the best histories of early science fiction, *The World Beyond the Hill*, in 1989. I found the book at a bookstore in Wichita, KS when I lived there in the early 90's and read it cover-to-cover in one sitting. So it was a surprise to me when I found this neat little book at Indian Path Books a few weeks ago. Needless to say, it ended up in my "To read" pile.

Winner of the 1968 Nebula award, *Rite of Passage* shows the influence of the dean of American science fiction, Robert Heinlein. I note that Mr. Panshin lives nearby in Quakertown, PA. He also lists Harper Lee as an influence on the novel, which anyone familiar with *To Kill a Mockingbird* will understand.

The novel follows several years in the life of Mia Havero, who lives on a massive interstellar star ship nearly two hundred years in the future. Obviously there was a huge advancement in technology from the present since the first of the interstellar ships was completed in 2041. Sometime afterwards, a series of wars, brought on by overpopulation, led to the destruction of Earth. Fortunately, a number of other planets outside our solar system had been colonized, so humanity was able to survive. The ship in which Mia lives was made by hollowing out an asteroid. It was built to haul colonists across the galaxy, but the scientists and engineers piloting the ship decided to stay on board after the last colonists were delivered.

Told from the viewpoint of an older Mia, the story begins with her moving out of one quadrant of the ship into another at the age of twelve. Her parents having split up, Mia is raised by her father, who has a prominent position in the ship's society. She yearns to be a "synthesist", a person who has accumulated a general, but expansive, amount of knowledge. Her best friend Jimmy, also twelve, wants to be an ordinologist, or classifier of information.

There is one small hurdle they both have to overcome: The Trial. At age fourteen, after extensive survival training, all children are dropped off the ship at the nearest inhabitable planet. They are expected to survive on their own for one month. At the end of a month, they are picked up. If they manage to survive on their own, the child is now considered an adult and welcomed in the ship's community with all rights and responsibilities. There are no exceptions.

Much of the book leading up to The Trial consists of Mia's recollections of her interactions with other kids and daily life on the ship. She spends a lot of time reading up on ethics at the encouragement of her tutor, Mr. Mbele. She also learns how to ride a horse, since the kids are dropped on primitive planets with them for transportation.

Because of resource limitations, the population of the ship is strictly controlled. Families seldom have more than one or two children. One of the sources of disgust is the colonial planets, whom the ship trades information and knowledge with to get needed raw materials. The ship people refer to the colonists as "mudeaters" who practice primitive "free birth". The ship itself has a eugenics committee who approves and

encourages birthing based on genetic records.

The final test of Mia's class before undergoing The Trial is a tiger hunt. A group of kids are sent out into a wilderness park with their adult survival instructor in pursuit of a full grown tiger. When they do encounter the tiger, they have to kill it using only the knives they carry and whatever rocks can be found. Amazingly, they do it with few injuries. It's Panshin's credit as a writer that he can make this passage so believable.

Mia is finally dropped with her class on a planet known as Tintera. There has been little contact with the planet since it was colonized a 150 years previously. The kids split-up, Mia deciding to spend her month on Trial exploring the planet.

What she encounters is a society similar in technology and organization to what the United States knew at the Civil War. She manages to confront a band of ruffians on horseback before getting bushwhacked. Mia's nursed back to health by an old man named Kutsov who lives alone. She learns enough about the society where she's been dropped to rescue her best friend Jimmy from a territorial prison. They both manage to hide out in the woods until the month has passed and the pick-up ship arrives.

Half of her trial class never make it back to the ship. After hearings are held in the ship's assembly, the citizens decide to punish the inhabitants of Tintera in the worst way possible. I won't spoil the ending of the book for those who want to read it. But I will say the over riding message is how the worst deeds can be justified by the best intentions. Consider Crime and Punishment: it's remarkably simple to justify killing an old woman.

Rite of Passage shows the mark of the time in which it was written. Panshin assumes it would be easy to organize a self-contained society with few internal problems. But this is a minor point. It's a landmark book which needs to be read.

Steven says

"That's something you don't see in stories. Who buys the food and cooks it, washes the dishes, minds the baby, rubs down the horses, swabs out the guns, buries the bodies, mends the clothes, ties that rope in place so the hero can conveniently find it there to swing from, blows fanfares, polishes medals, and dies beautifully, all so that the hero can BE a hero? Who finances him? I'm not saying I don't believe in heroes-- I'm just saying that they are either parasites or they spend the bulk of their time in making their little adventures possible, not in enjoying them."

I love this book dearly. To me, it's everything I liked about Downbelow Station and Ender's Game, but without the tedium of Cherryh's book, and without the fearful national security mentality of Card's. This story is exciting and hopeful to anyone who has been moved to improve the times they live in, and true to the experience of growing up.

It seems everyone's read Ender's Game, but how many have actually read Rite of Passage? Because I think the comparisons scream to be made, I wanna say this about two stories about young kids in extraordinary SF circumstances, just trying to survive: I'd pick Mia Haveron and Jimmy Dentremont over Ender to be on my soccer team; I'd take the advice of Mister Mbele over that of Graff's any day; I learned more from Mia's universal education than from anything they taught in battle school, and I'm sure I'd take Shakespeare's Sonnet XCIV over the whole Yancy Street gang.

Sometimes it's not about being the one who survives--it's about being the one who's humane. And sometimes it's not about saving the human race--it's about preserving the race's humanity.

"It is harder to assess critically the insanities of your own time, especially if you have accepted them

unquestionably for as long as you can remember, for as long as you have been alive. If you never make the attempt, whatever else you are, you are not mature...I knew long ago that the ability to do something doesn't necessarily give you the right to do it--that's the old power philosophy, and I never liked it. We might be able to discipline Tintera but who appointed us to the job? We were doing it anyway and there was no one to stop us, but we were wrong."

Catie says

This is a very thought provoking book about a young girl's mental awakening. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic society existing on a ship that has been hollowed out of an asteroid. In this universe, Earth has been destroyed and humans are either existing on these ships or eking out a living on dangerous and mostly uninhabitable planets. The ship dwellers, faced with high population pressure, devise a test for every fourteen year old. Each adolescent is sent to one of these planets for a month with limited supplies and is challenged to survive. As the story progresses, the main character approaches her 14th birthday and must face this life or death challenge.

I really enjoyed this book. There are great lessons here about prejudice and coming of age. Highly recommend!

Stephen says

3.5 stars. This is an really good novel (and, amazingly enough, this was Panshin's first novel). It is a classic coming of age story that is very well written, thought-provoking and has very good world-building (I really liked the interplay between the "Ships" and the "colonies"). Unlike some "SF classics" I was never bored with this one and it held my interest throughout. RECOMMENDED!!

Winner: Nebula Award Best Science Fiction Novel
Nominee: Hugo Award Best Science Fiction Novel

Jan Priddy says

It is excellent every time. I think I would update about fifteen words in the entire book. (The "*men* on the *counsel*" for example should be *people* or *counsel members*.)

The POV character is female, lives on a generation ship, explores & discovers what it means to be human and to grow and to wrestle with justice and fairness, and I identified with her perfectly the first time I read this novel in about 1972.

One of my favorite passages:

I've always wondered what it would be like to be a spear carrier in somebody else's story. A spear carrier is somebody who stands in the hall when Caesar passes, comes to attention, and thumps his spear. A spear carrier is the anonymous character cut down by the hero as he advances to save the menaced heroine. A spear carrier is a character put in a story to be used like a piece of disposable tissue. In a story, spear

carriers never suddenly assert themselves by throwing their spears aside and saying, "I resign. I don't want to be used." They are here to be used, either for atmosphere or as minor obstacles in the path of the hero. The trouble is that each of us is his own hero, existing in a world of spear carriers. We take no joy in being used and discarded. I was finding then, that wet, chilly, unhappy night, that I took no joy in seeing other people used and discarded.

Cindywho says

Dated SF published in 1968. It's one of those books that's entertaining in how it reflects its own time more than the future it's describing, though with a few surprises, including a disturbing ending. It's a bit over-explanatory and preachy, but a good adventure most of the time. (November 19, 2006)

Kate says

I read Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* again. For some reason, this story is very close to my heart. It's a story of a young girl, Mia, living in a floating spaceship, facing the Trial of her society. This Trial is the mark of adulthood in their community of thirty thousand, their 'Rite of Passage'.

The story began with Mia's little joys and frustrations. And behind that, she had her fears and prejudices. I always love 'coming of age' stories. Usually I just enjoy reading about the growing potential of a young man. But as the story goes on, *Rite of Passage* becomes much broader than an ordinary coming of age story. I mean broader in the intellectual sense rather than things like epic action with is usually expected of sci-fi stories.

Mia's growth is a course of continuing discarding her own previous convictions and embracing new. At first She had plenty of reasons to dispise other kids. She gradually came to having peace with this sort of unpleasantness. Likewise, she and other Ship people had plenty of reasons to dispise Planet people. But obviously people as a group comes to a change much slower than an individual does. As an individual, Mia came to her own conclusion of how to deal with planet people. I read with enormous joy about how she became more and more open-minded. All that was required is that she had a vigorous spirit and was naturally compassionate.

I have to say that this change of previous beliefs and gradually opening up the mind is the center of growing up, at least that's how I have felt. I can't think of any other fiction that deals with this theme so well. Appearing in sci-fi form gives the story a sense of neutrality, not siding up with anything now in this world. That's one of the advantages sci-fi as a form can provide, which writers should utilize more.

I even love one of the minor implications of the story. It is implied that living self-content like those in the Ship do, without feeling attached to their primitive Planet people, the society seems to be going nowhere. Creative activities such as writing a novel, or creating art ceases to happen.

The author Alexei Panshin has put his 'making of' this novel on his website Abyss of Wonder. It largely concerns with how he was fascinated by sci-fi because of Robert Heinlein's early work. And later Panshin had serious problems with them. Panshin says in 'Robert Heinlein and *Rite of Passage*' that as a child he read Heinlein and was led to the question, 'can it be that the present human culture is still in its adolescence

phase? do the grown-ups still need to grow up?". Later he found the answer to those questions is yes as he encountered the problems with Heinlein's work.

The problems Panshin met was that though the West has plenty of reasons to despise and feel threatened by the Communists, do they have the right to destroy them by atomic bombs? It's very like Ship and Planet relationship in *Rite of Passage*. And in RoP, Panshin made his points more eloquently than I can put here in a review.

Maturity consists of the ability to sort out portions of truth from accepted lies and self-deceptions that you are grown up with. If you never made the effort, whatever you are, you are not mature.

Jan Priddy says

Panshin's novel coming of age science fiction novel won the Nebula and was a close second for the Hugo. It is one of my all-time favorites and I have read it many times, including reading it aloud to my sons when they were children. I just read it again and find it highly relevant.

Here is a tiny slice of why I love this book, and why I grieve each time I read it: "I've always wondered what it would be like to be a spear carrier in somebody else's story. A spear carrier is somebody who stands in the hall when Caesar passes, comes to attention and thumps his spear. A spear carrier is the anonymous character cut down by the hero as he advances to save the menaced heroine. A spear carrier is a character put in a story to be used like a piece of disposable tissue. . . . The trouble is that each of us is his own hero, existing in a world of spear carriers. We take no joy in being used and discarded. . . . No death should be like nose blowing. Death is important enough that it should affect the person who causes it."

At the beginning, Mia Havero is 12, smart, curious, but afraid of change, and in fear she is hostile to difference. She lives on a former generation ship that has been converted to use by the descendants of the scientists and other intellectual elites who escaped Earth and carried people to populate planets.

Generations after Earth is destroyed by war and overpopulation, the Ship society requires all children to pass a literal rite of passage—at age 14 all children, including Mia, are dumped on a strange planet, alone, and with limited resources. If she survives 30 days to set off her beacon, she's a citizen. If not, no one will come looking for her. That's the plot. But she's studying ethics, reasoning through her prejudices, and trying to understand what matters in life. Initially, Mia is narrow in her thinking, but gradually she comes to understand to care about and respect other people. (Roger Zelazny's blurb calls the main character "at that age when girls are most beautiful and pathetic." His words say nothing useful about the novel, but perhaps something unpleasant about Zelazny. Despite the author's unfortunate lack of notable secondary female characters, Mia herself is never pathetic and is a fully *human* being.)

I recognized myself in this story when I first read it as a teenager between terms at the UW. Since then I've read it 8 or 10 times, maybe, and even taught it. I still love it. Overpopulation is a major issue and the trigger for Mia's circumstances, but social justice and fear of the "other" make it an excellent study as we grow beyond 8 billion people on this planet, more than double what it was when I read it the first time, and nearly the number Panshin cites as the trigger of our planet's destruction.

[There are many covers. The one above is my favorite because it is the cover from my first reading. However, it should be obvious from her name, not to mention her description on the first page, that Mia Havero is dark-skinned with black hair and eyes, while most illustrations give her green or blue eyes and often blond hair. I used the various editions as a dramatic demonstration of the inaccuracy of cover illustrations.]

At one time I owned 30 copies of the novel. At least two of my former students teach this novel themselves and I wonder if they are rediscovering the wisdom of this story as we face a world increasingly divided between those who have and those they fear..

David says

I'm not sure why this book has stuck with me so long -- I read it over 20 years ago. But it was one of the most memorable early-Heinlein-era sci-fi stories I ever read. The story is somewhat reminiscent of Heinlein, though the writing is not. The social issues raised in this novel are still compelling, though rather dated now, but I imagine it was even more relevant when it was first published.

I really liked the main character, who was quite believable as a rather privileged teenage girl suddenly forced to grow up. One thing to note: the covers all depict her as a white girl, but in the book, she's described as having dark skin. Not surprising for when it was published (1968), but you'd think at some point someone would have gotten a clue and released a more contemporary cover.

Reread: August 2012

If I was reading this for the first time, I'd probably only give it 4 stars, as it's quite good but probably wouldn't have made my list of "favorites." However, the story has stuck with me all these years, enough that it did become one of those rare books I reread, so it keeps its 5 stars.

Notable to me on this reread is that it's aged pretty well. As with most classic SF, the 21st century reader is likely to notice that this 22nd century starship has less advanced information and communications technology than we have today, but hardly any sci-fi authors wrote futuristic technology 40 years ago that looks plausible today. Other than that, though, it's a work of thoughtful science fiction that's more about the people and the consequences of a society split into people living on Ships and "Colons" (or "Mudeaters" as the Ship people call them) spread across the stars. Most of all, it's a *bildungsroman* about Mia Havero, who is a spunky, intelligent, and basically decent but very prejudiced and sometimes pig-headed adolescent. She grows throughout the book, and the planetary adventure at the end is indeed a suitable rite of passage for her. The ending still disturbs me in the same way it did years ago, which I think was Panshin's intent.

This is a great classic which really should be better known. If you have ever enjoyed Heinlein's juveniles, or you like what usually gets marketed as "Young Adult" today if it's not some stupid girl-in-a-prom-dress paranormal romance but an actual YA protagonist who thinks meaningful thoughts and makes meaningful choices, I highly recommend it. I am resisting the temptation to shelve this as Young Adult because it wasn't written as a YA novel, but really, it's got a voice and a writing style that should appeal equally to YA and adult readers.

Althea Ann says

This brings me up to 89% done with Reading The Nebula Award Winners.

I'm really sorry I somehow missed reading this book when I was a kid. I would have loved it when I was a pre-teen. As it was, I liked it, but it's very definitely a coming of age story with an Introduction to Ethics woven in.

Matt says

'Rite of Passage' is one of science fiction's more overlooked and lesser known masterpeices.

Really, they did know what they were doing when they gave this book a Nebula award.

I think one of the reasons it hasn't maintained the enduring audience of some of other classics from the golden era is that it is a book that suffers from having an uncomfortable relationship with any of its potential readers. On the one hand, adult readers may be put off by a book which appears at first in both its language and ambitions to be little more than routine young adult fiction in an exotic setting. On the other hand, younger readers may find the book ultimately dark, disturbing, unsettling, and at times too graphic. (Adult readers who have finished the book are probably similarly unwilling to put the book in the hands of their children.)

For my part, I think pretty much everyone is rewarded for pushing through the difficulties. This is a great book that I find myself chewing over in my head time and time again, and repeatedly drawing on for insight. Having become a parent has only deepened my appreciation for the subtleties of the book.

To begin with, it is a great coming of age story. Refreshingly it has a young complex female protagonist - far different from the sort of simple boy-men that typically populate SF coming of age stories. Likewise, this a character that truly comes of age in every way that it is possible to come of age, which I find incredibly appealing compared to the typical 'how I learned calculus and 20 other ways to kill' of more boyish SF. Not that our heroine doesn't learn calculus or... but that might be giving too much away.

On that level alone, 'Rite of Passage' has much to recommend itself. But I'm also repeatedly struck by the insight Panshin shows into humanity and human social structure. Ultimately, this is book about the value of life, about the value of living well, and about what really makes an adult.

I highly recommend this novel. Especially in a time when adults are embarrassing young adult fiction, its time to reexamine this little gem.

Kit says

If I had read this book when I was growing up, it would have ended up shelved next to Julie of the Wolves, A Wrinkle in Time, Call of the Wild, and Robot Dreams and fully earned its place.

I must begin this review with the honest disclosure that my curiosity regarding reading it was entirely

spurred by my unfortunate association with one Tobiah Panshin, mutant Russian gremlin and general beard-carrying spawn of the author. This may have colored my perception slightly, but more than this, I wanted to read his work because of his associations of being (seemingly) one of the only people that thinks it is okay to not accept everything Heinlein writes as gospel and look at how he writes with a critical eye, which is something that I deeply respect, for reasons apparent in many of my RAH reviews. Bully for you, Mr. Panshin.

And on to the book...

Rite of Passage is a rather unique book in my experience with SF in that Mr. Panshin has seemed to figure out the seemingly impossible puzzle male authors almost always struggle with: writing female characters. Lord knows how many SF books I have read that seem to see the so-called fairer sex as nothing more than a goal or plot device, substituting physical power for actual agency and fully rounded, developed characterization. When Mr. Panshin seems to write this so effortlessly, why is it so hard for everyone else? (Hint: There is no "writing women" so much as "writing CHARACTERS.")

Mia is an interesting character in that she doesn't seem to care much about your approval of her as a narrator. She is telling these events from her own mind for her own purposes and doesn't seem to care at all whether or not you agree with her, which is unspeakably refreshing. The ranks of people that dislike this are, nine times out of ten, the ones who praise books like A Clockwork Orange for the exact same behavior in a male. Curious.

I also find it terribly entertaining that Mia isn't so quick to rush to correct people over misgendering her. Seems to me like she is fully aware of the implications of doing so in a dangerous situation. Good for her. This makes it even more upsetting to me when I see how readily the various covers I have found of this book seem to actively ignore not only this basic aspect of her character, making her seem more traditionally glamorous, but also whitewashing her in the process. With a last name like Havero, people might be able to take a hint, but I suppose an argument could be made for future changes in the genetic pool...
...if the book didn't explicitly describe her as being darker skinned.

I have taken the liberty of pulling up the three editions I purchased, entirely out of amusement with this serial whitewashing...

<http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I...>

http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-YjJ_s-Ffdq0...

<http://www.isfdb.org/wiki/images/0/0d...>

...a-and those are the less glaring ones. The conversations of shoulder-peaking coworkers in regard to this book were something like this:

"What are you reading? Looks *squints at cover, wincing*...kinda old."

"Well, so's the Bible, but I can't help but notice people keep picking that one up."

Great book, bad covers.

I really enjoyed the fact that Mia's "Mudeaters" issue is something that is always socially relevant and that she was not written as a perfect example of a Strong Female Character™ and thus without any moral failings. Classism is at play all over our lives no matter what country we come from, and Mia is a product of

a culture that, not unlike our own, has many convenient justifications for their monopoly over life-improving tools for less advantaged people. Someone is always lording some kind of power over someone else and, in the case of the Ship people and the Mudeaters, it is a kind of power that is particularly chilling to me in my line of work in libraries. Keeping knowledge from others is one of the most effective tactics of control and stifles ideas and opportunity. I wonder if Panshin's own past in libraries informed this at all, or if it was entirely coincidental.

Anyhow, the story is, admittedly, a bit on the slow side in terms of pacing. It seems to take a long time to get to the Trial and, once it gets there, the book is kind of over in a sneeze, which was a small disappointment for me. I would have liked to see more of Mia's struggles in her new environment, but it was just as refreshing to know and actually *see* that Mia was a problem solver and hero in her own right, rescuing Jimmy, outwitting much larger, stronger gangs of men, and allowing her some failures in the process. All in all, a solid SF title for those who like a little terra in their SF.

Paul Baker says

Spoiler Alert!

Rite of Passage is an easy book to pigeon-hole as a "coming of age" novel, but to do so would be a mistake and a disservice to this excellent little science fiction novel that steps beyond the genre.

The book is written first person past through the eyes of the central character, Mia Havero, looking back at herself from the ages of twelve through fourteen. She is the daughter of the elected leader of a group of scientists and engineers who live on a spaceship at the end of the twenty-second century.

Through internal strife, Earth has essentially destroyed itself. The ships were created to ferry passengers from Earth to new worlds that they might colonize to continue the existence of humanity. But the ships' leaders have made a conscious decision to separate themselves - and their knowledge and expertise - from the farmers who are actually carving out the new worlds. These elitists decided that the knowledge they possess would be useless on worlds barely hanging on for survival, that the knowledge would be lost if they joined in that fight for survival, so they stay on their ships and merely trade *bits* of knowledge to the farmers ("Mudeaters" they are called) for supplies.

Mia herself, after being separated from her parents for years, recently left the common dormitories to live with her father. She is a precarious character at the beginning, having suffered from her separation, nervous to a fault around others, and easily frightened. At the beginning of the novel, her father is moving them to a different part of the ship and she is losing her tenuous hold on security.

But she begins her new existence by being teamed with a boy named Jimmy Dermently, precocious and just a few months older. They are assigned a tutor who is very old and who has been an opponent of Mia's father. He teaches them to think outside the box and they both jump at the chance. Their major line of study becomes ethics and that leads to the central crisis of the novel.

How nice it is to have an entire novel based around a major ethical crisis.

During the next two years Mia and Jimmy educate themselves and prepare for the Trial that they must endure when they turn fourteen years old. The Trial is a survival ordeal that all juveniles on the ship must

undergo to reach adulthood. They are dropped individually onto a planet's surface, supplied with a horse, a gun, a knife and a tent and they must survive for thirty days until they are picked up. Many do not survive the "savagery" of the Mudeaters.

As Mia gains confidence through her survival training, she also studies the great philosophies of Earth's past, picking each one apart, finding things that she can relate to and ideas that she must outright reject. She is forced to think and to make a major decision that will separate her from her family permanently. It is this part of the novel that it seems many critics completely ignore. But Panshin had some big ideas when he wrote this book and I think it is important that I share at least some of Mia's thoughts:

"I've always resented the word *maturity*, primarily, I think, because it is most often used as a club. If you do something that someone doesn't like, you lack maturity, regardless of the actual merits of your action. Too, it seems to me that what is most often called maturity is nothing more than *disengagement from life* [my emphasis]. If you meet life squarely, you are likely to make mistakes, do things you wish you hadn't, say things you wish you could retract or phrase more felicitously, and, in short, fumble your way along. Those "mature" people whose lives are even without a single sour note or a single mistake, who never fumble, manage only at the cost of original thought and original action."

To readers more accustomed to slam-bang action (which is, I think, a major pitfall in the writing of science fiction), this book may appear slow and way too thoughtful for them. What is mature deliberation is mistaken for plodding and a reader can miss all of the salient points that the novel is meticulously honing.

When a novel wins the coveted Nebula Award and is nominated for the Hugo, it usually means there is something very, very good about the book. I have now had the opportunity to read many reviews of this novel and most of them are frankly superficial and miss the point of the novel. But this is a fine little book, filled with the inner life of a fully realized character struggling to attain confidence and finding it at the point of a knife called ethics.

(As a side note, I read the Timscape paperback by Pocket Books, March 1982, with a terrific cover painting by acclaimed illustrator Rowena Morrill. It captures the absolute essence of Miva Havero, especially in the eyes and the wary set of her face. Great cover art can really help a book to come alive!)

As I said at the beginning of this review, it is a mistake to pigeon-hole this book. It is a much larger and more challenging novel. I strongly recommend *Rite of Passage*, not just to science fiction readers, but to the general reading audience.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

How old SF can be as crappy as new SF: "Rite of Passage" by Alexei Panshin

After finishing "After the Apocalypse" by Maureen F. McHugh, I wanted something from the good old days. With some serendipity involved, I read "Rite of Passage" by Alexei Panshin, which I read in my teens. My memory of it was at best very hazy. The only thing I remembered was that I didn't like it at all at the time.

So much junk published is called SF (“Hunger Games” by Suzanne Collins, “His Dark Materials” by Philip Pullman, etc.) and it’s very difficult to find decent reading stuff. I wanted to know whether my memory was playing tricks on me after 30 years (it wasn’t).

To start at the end, I still don’t like it.

The rest of this review can be found elsewhere.

Manny says

The plot of this rather fine coming-of-age SF novel is described well in several of the other reviews. Oddly enough, no one seems to mention that it is constructed around Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94, which appears on the last page.

Since the poem isn’t nearly as well-known as it deserves to be, and it’s one of my favorites, let me reproduce it here:

*They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,
They rightly do inherit heaven’s graces
And husband nature’s riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer’s flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*
