



For Us, the Living: A Comedy of Customs

Robert A. Heinlein, Spider Robinson (Introduction), Robert James (Afterword)

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Robert Heinlein destroyed his copy of this manuscript, his first attempt at a novel, but his biographers rescued it from oblivion after his death. The Heinlein fan will find many familiar elements of Heinlein's philosophy and stock characters but practically nothing of the great story-telling he delivered as a mature writer.

For Us, The Living marks the beginning and end of an extraordinary arc of political, social and literary crusading comprising the Heinlein legacy. He couldn't have known in 1939 how things would change over 150 years, but we have our own true world history to compare with his imaginings, making this riff on Rip Van Winkle a time capsule view into past, present and future.

The novel is presented with an introduction by science fiction writer Spider Robinson and an afterword by Professor Robert James of the Heinlein Society.

For Us, the Living: A Comedy of Customs Details

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From Reader Review For Us, the Living: A Comedy of Customs for online ebook

Norm Davis says

For Us, The Living: A Comedy of Customs. Robert A. Heinlein 1939

I'm rounding up from one star, this is a disaster, to two stars, it was OK. Reluctantly. Well, it is embarrassing to insult a legend who you came close to worshiping.

Perry, the protagonist tragically dies in an automobile accident in or around 1939 and then wakes up fine in 2038 in someone else's body. Thank Odin Mr. H. didn't write a doctoral thesis on how or why that happened. In good taste, he just didn't explain it. Good for Mr. H.

Perry's taken in by a stray cat collecting kind of loving woman, Diana (had to look it up..., that is so sad I neither remembered or wrote it in my notes). There begins the "Comedy of Customs" where Perry is 'educated' about all things 2038 with touches of plot intimacy, sexuality, plenty of smoking and drinking, and thinly disguised plot lectures you knew were wrong when you unwillingly fell asleep in economics 101. But I digress.

Through the philosophy and doctoral thesis in several fields of science is a thinly veiled story of Perry's growth and acclimation to all the wonders of the quasi perfect future.

That's about it, without telling you... (Massive spoiler) (view spoiler). The Ending.

Here a cut and paste note of one day's reading: "In the last 100 pages Mr. H. has gone from techno-sermons to very long winded techno-sermons that are both very wrong and extremely boring. And patronizing to boot. Something no reader cares to endure. But I will. Out of respect for Mr. H. I hope he's finished tweaking his Marxism and can move on to something not so brain numbing. "

Here's the kick up to two stars. More if you're primarily interested in Heinlein biographical information. My edition of this book has bookends of long commentaries that are biographical in nature about Mr. Heinlein. This stuff I found very interesting and ultimately changed my mind from never reading another thing Heinlein back to my love of Heinlein.

Sadly it also contains footnotes and end-notes continuing his long winded patronizing thesis or theories on pretty much everything that he didn't finish lecturing you about during the "story". Economics the most boring of all.

If you're a Heinlein fan, like some folks loved L. Ron Hubbard's great science fiction, pick up this book, read the forwards, prefaces, and all things "not story" and skip the 'story' unless you're kind of interested in the history of his writing and the core of all his book's stories as his ideas that never made it to press... at least not as For Us, the living.

audry says

We listened to this book on a long road trip.

This book was found and published long after Heinlein's death, and probably for good reason.

It reads like a lecture in economics(with boobs). There are several books of his that read more like lectures than novels. It's not the political or economic or social philosophies of Heinlein that I object to, not at all. It's chapters and chapters of philosophy and economic theory, that do nothing to serve the plot. In the "Moon is a Harsh Mistress" there are lectures, but for me, the difference is that these lectures support and help drive the plot. The characters are coming up with a mechanism for revolution not author's proxies lecturing for the sake of lecturing. (The professor character in the moon is a harsh mistress is an author proxy, but he also serves the plot!)

There were some bright spots. Set in 2086, the alternate history lectures were interesting. Giggles were had regarding how man hasn't gone to the moon yet but has flying cars. And of course, nudity.

Jim says

I've tried to read this once & listen to it on audio book since I'm a real fan of Heinlein's earlier works.

Unfortunately, this reads like one of his later books - preachy & boring. If you had a problem with most of his books after 1970, then this isn't for you.

Mary JL says

I would recommend this only for the Heinlein completist or diehard Heinlein fan. It was an early effort and never published and it is easy to see why!

When I first heard about it I said "Wow! A new Heinlein I've never read!" After I read it I was disappointed. The only reason this got published was it had Heinlein's name on it so the publishers probably felt many Heinlein fans would grab it, as I indeed did.

I did give it 2 stars because I found a few ideas interesting.

Clarica says

What I like about this book is the economic theory. I've read a lot of science fiction, and I love it. This has some future speculation that is more or less brilliant, as far as predicting technology goes, though it feels a little antique because most of the stuff he was pie-in-the-sky fantasizing about came off in a slightly different direction. But as science fiction, well, eh. As fantasy, well, eh. I can't wait for my rocket-gyro-car, whatever that is! The author has a maybe-we-can-all-just-get-along utopian dream which didn't address issues of fraud, and is wildly optimistic about how much compassion people are willing to expend misfits. In my opinion, though seriously, I am totally willing to be the one to say "it's a one in a million chance, but it might just work!"

I haven't read this with my eyeballs, I had an audio book version, so I had to take some of the math on faith. Yes, math. It was very simple, but the economic story of investment, production, supply, demand and redistribution of wealth, even in its simplest case of only one company with one product... Let's just say I don't know if I've ever done any math problems out loud and seeing would have been more reassuring than just listening to it.

Lyn says

Enjoyed this, but I may need to say that it is best for Heinlein fans, not one of his great works, but appreciable for true followers.

Begun in 1938, (though not published until 2003) this could be one of, if not actually, his earliest work. The discerning reader can find glimpses of his later vision and brilliance amid a fairly minimalistic setting and storyline. At times I had to remind myself that this visionary narrative was written in 1938, other times it was painfully obvious that this was an incomplete work put together after his death.

Still, he shows signs of his later mastery, expounding on ideas of sociology, politics and economics within the framework of a futuristic imagination. Ironically, the master of modern science fiction missed the moon landing by over 100 years! All that to say, if you love Heinlein, you will like this and not want to miss reading.

John Majerle says

This was Heinlein's first novel, written in 1939. The publishers rejected it and for good reason: it was not very well written. Fortunately for all us Heinlein fans he didn't give up and so we now have many subsequent well written novels of his to enjoy.

So why was it published decades later and why should you read it? If you are a first time author yourself you will have a good example of what not to do. The book is technically OK, but it needed considerable editing to make it professional quality. On the plus side, many concepts Heinlein developed better in his later works were first conceived in this first amateurish attempt. In reading this book you get a sense for where he was headed. For these reasons I have given it 3 stars, not because it was a better than average novel.

Booker says

To be fair, I am not nearly so full of vitriol with regard to this book compared to some of the other bad books I've read, such as Scalzi's Old Man's War or Atwood's Handmaid's Tale.

However, to describe it as a novel, a true novel, is incorrect, since its plot is flimsy at best and the characterization for characters is so incredibly weak, even compared to many stories dealing more with societies than a specific character. It's instead setup for the author preaching at the reader some ideas, but so blatant that it's frustrating or annoying instead of engaging.

1. Style and Presentation

In the introduction, it's noted that this book was something published posthumously, that Heinlein didn't publish it and it shows, especially since there was also very little editing. While Heinlein's writing flows alright to some extent in some areas, this truly shows as the first major work of someone who's quite inexperienced and the lack of editing is part of that, especially since good editors can help greatly.

2. A lack of story

The story, as many have noted, is severely lacking. It's about a man flung into the far future and him trying to play catch-up with history. However, it's just this man learning the history of the United States up to that point. What would have been more interesting would have been seeing the actual wars and politics of those eras, through the eyes of people experiencing them.

Instead, we get a bunch of dry lectures. And, while some have compared this issue to Plato's dialogues, I found Plato's dialogues to be more engaging since it dealt with timeless examples of politics and logic and theology with minds who were brilliant and of their time, whereas this book has the problem of these characters not being particularly intelligent and getting half their information wrong at best.

It is quite possible for characters who are engaging and lack the worldview of the readers, while still being compelling. A good example of this would be many of the viewpoints in A Song of Ice and Fire, since Westeros is quite sexist and a feudal society, but because the characters feel like people, the readers can still relate to them while thinking some of their ideas are wrong.

3. Sexuality

Thing is, I don't mind sexuality in any sort of media. Sexuality is a part of life and I'm open about being bisexual when the topic comes up about personal tastes and nature. However, how it's handled in this story is on the bizarre at best side.

They go into a discussion of sexual evolution, but my issue with the free love paradise and lack of jealousy and envy is thus- a hundred years of socialization and cultural changes cannot supersede millions of years of evolution so quickly. While one can make the evolutionary argument that humans aren't inherently monogamous, since all of our close ape relatives practice some variation of polygamy, to say that jealousy is entirely against human nature is incorrect.

And, from what I've heard about the incest things of Time Enough For Love, Heinlein runs into the same problem, albeit relating to human wiring against incest. It instead acts as if humans are entirely blank slates/ *tabula rosa*, shaped by their culture and environment. To be fair, I cannot comment about that story entirely since I've not read it, but if it is a recurring issue in his stories, it's a frustrating one. Humans may not be bound entirely to biology, as the nature of sentience implies the ability to go beyond one's mere animal self- to fight and fuck- but it still exists to some extent.

4. Characterization

The only character who truly has character would be Perry. Now, he's our main character and viewpoint character, so more development makes sense, but the character strikes me as quite annoying.

5. Misreading Trends and Wrong Information

Much of this is quite quaint, since this was written in 1939 and, thus, many of his guesses are wrong. However, some of these are outright strange, given the time and political moves made, such as the United States completely side-stepping World War II and the claim that modern wars are caused merely through trade balance issues.

It's also quite quaint that he thought eugenics would work like that. Or how he thinks this story's economic system would work so easily. Problem is, you'll never change that, though a social species, humans have many individuals who are total bastards, or greedy, or what have you.

6. The Problems of Utopia

Others have noted that the story is about a utopia and the text itself makes a comment about it not being utopia. Thing is, the US of the story is clearly a utopia. However, utopia is creepy because nothing is perfect. It's a sanitized world where everyone agrees with everyone, where there aren't greedy assholes and where everyone completely goes along with everything.

There's hope, and then there's utopia. And utopia leaves the niggling feeling in the back of your mind that there's a genocide going on, that it's too good to be true. Because it is too good to be true. Are you telling me nobody has to use violence in self-defense anymore? That police never have to deal with someone who just doesn't care, like a sociopath? That there aren't greedy people? That children can somehow manage their own affairs with their own money? That there aren't abusive pricks when it comes to their children?

The notion that unions are entirely unnecessary is also quite amusing, since I'm part of a union and, believe me, the shit people try to get away with that violates contracts... Well, to say they're unnecessary ignores that some people don't care.

Not to mention the same problem of all of these is the presumption that these different groups do not have conflicting needs. Problem is, that's why these various conflicts in society exist between different factions- they have different needs, or different opinions on what meets the needs of a given person or group of people. It also presumes incredible good intentions when the reality of the world is not so rosy. At the end of the day, it's too sweet. It's too good. It makes you search for the underbelly, that there's something wrong.

So much of the setup bothered me for that reason, since there are so many conflicting ideas in this world and even people who mostly agree still have disagreements. You cannot have millions and millions of people in a country with multiple regional subcultures just agreeing so easily with some of these notions, especially when they run counter to human nature. Humans are a social species, true, but altruism has its limits and when a person's too altruistic, it's often the marker of some severe deficiency. It's often a sign of abuse, where the person's completely subsumed their own desires and were taught their wants and needs were unimportant and that they mean nothing if they aren't constantly giving. But that's no way to live, because that person will give and give and give, and often never gets anything in return, especially since certain types will prey upon them. Even if they know that logically, abuse victims will still do such actions because of how hard it is to work someone out of those mental traps.

This is part of why dystopias exist- they are a deconstruction of utopian ideals. Whether or not they work as stories or are setting up strawmen that could not exist in the context given is another matter entirely, but a dystopia story is fundamentally saying that such utopian ideals aren't utopias at all, but instead hide their darkness. And the good dystopias are realistic enough to know that it's not one hundred percent "let's eat children and rape puppies and have spikes on everything," instead knowing that people, even when wrong, generally believe what they're doing is either good or a lesser evil for the greater good.

Mike says

Talk, talk, talk...

Blah, blah, blah...

Nudity...

More Talk

Shibbie says

I always enjoy books wherein people in the past predict the future and those of us in the present which was once the future can laugh about their predictions. Haha still trying to reach the moon in 2086 haha. Whereas aspects of social structure -- an end to puritism, everyone walking around naked and living by the rule "as long as it doesn't hurt someone else, you can do it" -- are so far past what can be hoped for in the next 70 years it's not even funny. That said the plot line was somewhat interesting at first, but often devolved into just a description of daily future life. Also, the society seems utopian at first and then there's this "oh maybe it's not so utopian after all" moment wherein Perry gets sent to be taught to not be jealous and conform to society's standard that is never properly done. That opportunity seemed missed to me.

M.E. Kinkade says

As a novel, this book is pretty weak. But as a literary oddity (Heinlein's never-before-published first work) and as a font of ideas, it's incredible.

First, why it's a crummy novel: there's not much of a story; many of the characters are sketches; there are long stretches without any action; and characters are unrealistically accepting of bizarre things. I mean surely you'd ask some questions if the man you just met claimed he was from 150 years ago?

But if characters did bother with such fundamental questions, we would miss out on Heinlein's Tour of the Future Wonders. Which is what most of the book feels like--a showcase of an ideal future, minus robot dogs but with large doses of nudity and acceptance of casual sex.

Heinlein had some really interesting, refreshing ideas for science fiction, particularly when you remember the book was written in 1938. In many ways, he was rather clear-sighted. In others, he would be terribly disappointed in our cultural failure to progress. I for one am looking forward to having my own personal helicopter/jet.

Perhaps the funniest thing is what Heinlein thought we wouldn't have accomplished by 2086--landing on the moon, a feat Heinlein would see managed a mere 30 years later. (How awesome it must have been for him to watch the moon landing!)

However, if Heinlein were to pop back in, Wayne's World-style, I think he'd be disturbed by the fetishization of the Kardashian family's goings-on; he'd be quite disappointed with our economics; and disgruntled by the populaces' ongoing appreciation for clothing. Ah well.

"For Us, The Living" is a lovely jaunt down what-if road, but only if you're up for contemplation. Seek compelling storylines elsewhere.

Jay Bobzin says

An intriguing set of essays wrapped in a story. Great if you like Heinlein, probably dull if you don't.

Start with The Moon is a Harsh Mistress. Then maybe Stranger in a Strange land. If you've read those, and generally dig Bob's take on life, this is a good quick read densely packed with insight, but light on story.

Denis says

When this was first published, I had just started on my journey down the long long road of scifi literature. I had discovered but a handful of golden age authors by then, by had already focused on Heinlein, having read most of his work. This popped into my world right then and there as if it had been tossed through the very fabric of time. It was like the discovery of a long lost relic. Such a great period in my life, that was.

I have since read this three times over the years since it was published and it grows on me. If RAH had really been serious about publishing it, I assume he would have tweaked it quite a bit more. I suppose he had, the result being, "Beyond this Horizon" (aka "The Day After Tomorrow") as Anson MacDonald.

This is somewhat, a blueprint or prototype of what he would eventually publish over the next fifty years of his career.

Rob says

I'll start off by saying this may not be a 'five' for everyone. The style is stilted at times compared to Heinlein's later efforts. There's a reason for this: *For Us, the Living* is not so much a novel as a Dialogue or series of Dialogues in the Platonic mode (in fact, to me, a veteran of *Timaeus & Critias*, it reads similarly). So those looking for a 'full' fictional experience will be disappointed. But what is here are two things: Heinlein's penchant for anticipating future events, which is in full force here, and the foundations for the fiction he would write later, particularly those tales in the *Future History* 'canon.' Also, possibly even less interesting to the casual reader, is Heinlein's economic and cultural vision, the purpose of the dialogue. I'll admit it is not all perfectly thought out, but it is interesting and probably deserves more attention than it gets.

If you want more tales from one of the masters of the Golden Age of Science Fiction, you may wish to give this a miss. If you're interested in Heinlein the Futurist, or Heinlein the social engineer, this is for you.

Dawn says

I'm enough of a Heinlein fan to snatch this up when I saw it (it's been 10 years--how did I miss it?). I think Spider Robinson is correct in calling it a proto-novel, as it is truly a series of essays--some rather dense, especially the economic ones--set in a story framework. For me, the interest was the predictions of the future from a 1938/39 standpoint. I was amused (?) he has Edward of Windsor dying in 1970 when the man actually did die in 1972, but otherwise most of his predictions are bunk. No real space flight or a man on the moon until 2089? And he was plainly a fan of the simplified spelling movement, something Perry doesn't comment on (I would have).

But proto-novel because you can see elements of so many of his other works: limited voting based on military service, no nudity taboo, what we would call free love, hints of polyamory, the preference for a kilt, a society where one is expected to live in harmony with your neighbors and doing otherwise is not only labeled "anti-social" or "atavist" but may find you banished from polite society to a literal Coventry, even the

concept of a future history. Even the greeting "Can I do you a service" or even simply "service" can be found in some of the later books.

As for the framing story, some of it is fairly choppy and I would have liked a little more character development or something, especially near the end, when Perry finds his vocation in this new world. Although I really did like the private sphere/public sphere part, where your personal behavior goes unremarked--no gossip columnists or paparazzi!--and even in public, you can declare "private sphere!" and not only do the cameras turn off, no one will report you kissed your SO. (sadly, I don't think that's something we will ever develop in ourselves)

This is not a casual pick up novel but really is meant for people with an interest in past predictions of the future, serious Heinlein fans, and those with a familiarity with his works and an interest in origins and development. Do read the introduction and afterword, too.

John Bruni says

This is actually Heinlein's first novel, but it wasn't published until nearly two decades after his death. It's very interesting to see how his work has progressed, and this novel in particular has just about everything in it that would be his life's work as a writer. He's my favorite SF writer mostly because of his progressive views. Even by today's standards, he's pretty progressive. There is a great deal of love and truth in his books, and this is no exception. He was also very good at predicting things, such as Hitler's death by suicide and the formation of the EU. Granted, he got a few things wrong, like the US managing to stay out of WWII and the fact that in the future, people still listen to music primarily on records, but still, not bad. My only issue with this book is that it's too much of a lecture on the way things should be. Heinlein was clearly frustrated with the backwards way of life back then, and he wanted to do his best to change it. What resulted was something that looks more like a document than a story. He would become much better with his didactic storytelling later in life, but this book has much more in common with the old philosophical method of using a dialogue between two characters to get a point across. If you can get past this, though, you'll love this book. It's proof that Heinlein has always been a great man with great thoughts.

John says

This is a book that every politician should be required to read. The story is very simple, a man from 1939 (when the book was published) wakes up in 2086. Little explanation is given to how this happened, instead the man starts to look at reasons this future Utopia is superior to his own time. What results is a series of discussions with the experts of 2086 about how the country has turned itself around since 1939, in areas like politics, religion, commerce, sexuality, etc. The story does date itself somewhat, for instance the idea that, by 2086 we are hoping to put a man on the moon very soon, but the factors presented as what was wrong with 1939 are very similar to current day. And the solutions, while not perfect, will definitely get you thinking. Heinlein's Libertarian beliefs are front and center as the reason the country has overcome itself to become this Utopia, basically saying that, as long as it doesn't hurt your fellow man, the government has no business in it.

Stven says

Heinlein's unpublished first novel has been rescued from the dustbin, and we easily see why it was never published. There is almost no action in the story, and instead we get pages and pages of lecturing about politics and economics. Of course, as Heinlein fans, we've enjoyed his unorthodox illuminations on politics and economics for decades, but thank goodness he learned to give us more actual STORY than he does in *For Us, the Living*.

Bump on the head. Mr. Regular Guy wakes up in the future, spends rest of book talking about how surprisingly different 2068 is from 1939. Not the first time a science fiction writer has used the Rip Van Winkle wrinkle.

For the reader in 2009, what makes the comparison interesting is the number of things Heinlein gets wrong. Even while describing the jealousy-free sexual relationships supposedly going on in 2068, the assumptions still embedded in his characters' language demonstrate contradiction after contradiction.

A hundred years after the real-world moon landing, Heinlein's future society hasn't made the jump. Rapid mail delivery occurs by pneumatic tube. Overpopulation has never troubled anyone. Etc.

Also interesting to see how firmly "socialist" Heinlein's political ideas were in this era. In later life he would support the political side designated as "conservative," but apparently his guiding political and economic philosophy was based on the idea that there WAS enough to go around, and the challenge was figuring out how to get people to share it. What shifted were his ideas on how to accomplish this.

An afterword gives some details about Heinlein's early career which are of interest for us, the living fans. And that's basically the audience for this book. It's not a good novel, but for people who've been Heinlein aficionados since their first chance at one of his terrific novels for kids (for me it was *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*), it's an appreciated chance to glimpse one more facet of the great writer.

Tim says

This is Heinlein's earliest work (although unpublished until recently). It's interesting in that this was written around the start of WWII, so his alternate history reads very odd at times. So, the whole of WWII is different and man hasn't landed on the moon. You can see the seeds of later works in this one, most notably Nehemiah Scudder from Revolt in 2100 (although the dates are different from that book). He's basically the same character in both books (and as mentioned in other books of his as well).

This book doesn't really have much of a plot at all. A guy from 1939 ends up in the far future and has to deal with the changes in the society. That's about it. Some of the customs are interesting (and I wouldn't mind if they were true now), like the concept of public and private spheres. By custom, no one intrudes on another's private sphere. An implication of this is that public figures' private lives are just that, private. It can be very preachy at times, like in his discussion of economics and how our economic system doesn't work (and it attempts to prove that it doesn't). This kind of thing is somewhat interesting but can be tedious.

All told, I wouldn't recommend it to any but Heinlein fans.

Michelle Pfingston says

Ah - future worlds; where there is no poverty or hunger, no sexual jealousy or difficult unions, everyone in every relationship to able to hook up and leave any way they want to, and everything is free and easy! Let us all skip through the perfectly blooming tulips . . . smoking and naked.

The other reviews here really do a great job of describing this book, I don't want to expand on them. So speaking for myself, in spite of the reviews, I struggled through this book a bit obsessively because I loved so much Robert A. Heinlein's other books. Also, the title did me in. It sounded So Good! "For Us, the Living" and "A Comedy of Customs", I am a sociologist and cultural anthropologist so the title suggested mental crack for me.

But being profoundly un-political, this book being about 70% politics, it was an arduous read for me. And secondly, I am woman. A woman over 40, mother of three whom I nursed and this affects a woman. So I scoff at the idea of society as a whole discarding clothes unless weather deemed it necessary. It sounds exactly like something my husband would imagine in the future . . a society where the women run around naked . . OF COURSE. He probably thinks of them as Heinlein did with very fit and perky adornment, or, in the case of Olga, Rubenesque roundness, still very pleasant. I push the the beauty of Rubenesque, but could picture myself walking around naked - except for my perky adornments have long since given up the fight with gravity and are just uncomfortable hanging free. They get in the way, and feel awkward, kinda dangling there. And even though it might be eye candy for my hubby (bless his heart) nevertheless out of my own comfort, I'd still want them strapped, tucked, enfolded, nesting snuggly in some comfortable covering. I can't believe I'm the only one that feels that way. Even for men; yes, some love to free Willy, but I have to imagine that there are others that find the swinging appendages a bit intrusive to your day, and would feel more comfortable in some tighty-whiteys or some such contraption, immodesty be damned. It's more a matter of practicality rather than social norm.

And in this very carefree and la-de-da land, Olga still shaves? What? We're free to be me, but shaven?

shaking head