



The Puppet Masters

Robert A. Heinlein

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First came the news that a flying saucer had landed in Iowa. Then came the announcement that the whole thing was a hoax. End of story. Case closed.

Except that two agents of the most secret intelligence agency in the U.S. government were on the scene and disappeared without reporting back. Then four more follow up agents also disappeared. So the head of the agency and his two top agents went in and managed to get out with their discovery: an invasion is underway by slug-like aliens who can touch a human and completely control his or her mind. What the humans know, they know. What the slugs want, no matter what, the human will do. And most of Iowa is already under their control.

Sam Cavanaugh was one of the agents who discovered the truth. Unfortunately, that was just before he was taken over by one of the aliens and began working for the invaders, with no will of his own. And he has just learned that a high official in the Treasury Department is now under control of the aliens. Since the Treasury Department includes the Secret Service, which safeguards the President of the United States, control of the entire nation is near at hand.

The Puppet Masters Details

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From Reader Review The Puppet Masters for online ebook

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Buddy read with Anne ~~coming up in August 2015~~ maybe, someday, if she's ever in the mood for it. :)

I *loved* this old pulpy SF novel when I was a teenager. I'm a little nervous about how it will hold up on reread. But how bad can it be with a cool concept like "evil alien slugs take over your brain"???

Mike (the Paladin) says

This and Glory Road are maybe my favorite Heinlein novels. The movie of this one tried to be true to the story but failed to capture the spark present in this book. One of the better and also most original invasion novels out there.

Update: My attention brought back to this one, so I thought I'd include a "by the way".

If you noted my "shelves" you might have noted I included the "Spy-Fi" shelf for this one. The story is told from the point of view of "Sam" a character who puts me much in mind of the movie spies just coming into vogue at the time. He works for a "super secret" agency that of course "doesn't exist" if you try to find out about it. He also put me in mind of The Man From U.N.C.L.E. a bit in that....you enter HQ through a rare stamp shop where of course if you ask about the agency you'll be told you're crazy and the proprietor will try to sell you a 2 Penny Black.

Anyway, still a great read, usually considered a YA or "Teen" book.

Andrea says

An invasion of Earth via means of 'slugs' which attach themselves to people and control their actions. The story is told from the viewpoint of an elite government agent looking back on the situation as it was discovered.

Lacking the sensawunda of his juveniles, or any particularly interesting speculative idea, this is a fairly rote alien invasion. There is some frustration at the idiocy on display at times - they recover alive a person with a slug attached, detach the slug, then have a big moral debate about putting the slug back on him so they can interrogate the slug. This stupidity is then followed by scenes of difficulty convincing people in charge that the slugs are real. Sigh.

The story follows a fairly common route for alien invasion stories - the population is near overwhelmed, then find a way to fight back. It had its entertaining aspects, but isn't really that memorable.

Like most of Heinlein's books, it's difficult to be female and focus on the story. It's full of statements like:

"Listen son, most women are damn fools and children" and "Forgive me darling. I'm weak and womanish". Even compared to other books written in the 40s, it's bad.

The story does open with a team featuring a competent male and female agent, but at the close of the story the female has been reduced to saying little but "Yes, dear" in blissful wifely servitude.

Jim says

The audio reading was pretty good, but I didn't care for the story as much as I recall. There was so much dated about it, both the technology & the sexism.

Heinlein's never been great at characterization - some have said he only has one main one & I think they have a good point. In this one, we saw that character as a 30 year old & an older version, plus a sort of female one. Mary was tough, but too much the demur 50's gal from the ads. The technology was kind of fun in a pulp way. Phones embedded under the skin, for instance. They sounded bulky, though.

This book just didn't hold up nearly as well as some of his juveniles that I've read recently.

Mike (the Paladin) says

I reviewed and rated the print version of this book earlier. I first "read" it when I was 14 or 15 and I've read it several times since. Recently I got this "Playaway" version from the library and I am doing a separate review as....the reader really pulls the rating down. I considered going all the way to 3, but it is still a pretty good book. So, okay good novel...poor reader. The reader of this book for some reason felt it was necessary to pause often. He paused almost between each sentence and between paragraphs he'd pause 3 or 4 seconds...drove me crazy.

*** Some discussion of story line below, may have spoilers ***

This book was written in 1951 but takes place about "now", this date, in story time. It's very interesting to see what Heinlein imagined and what he didn't. He talks of stereo video casts, but they require line of sight relaying, no satellite or cable. He communicates with and through multiple space stations but doesn't picture communication satellites. He mentions a device for an intelligence officer to use that is very small...the size of a loaf of bread, micro-miniaturization not thought of. Sterocast scanner...used tubes. It's all interesting.

There's also a lot here about human nature and human action and reaction that rings true. I personally believe that when it comes to possible contact with an "extraterrestrial intelligence" we need to remember what happened to the native Americans when they had "visitors who arrived in strange looking ships". I'd say

more but read the book. I can't agree with all Heinlein's views, but it's still interesting and thought provoking.

Nicola says

Another Heinlein masterpiece. It's always funny when there is a date specified for the action in the book - which in this case was over 50 years in the future, but currently 5 years in my past!

Mark says

Alien invasion? Fifties paranoia? Mind control?

After a visit to the British Library's Out of this World Exhibition in London, I was suddenly reminded that I hadn't read this Heinlein for a long while.

And indeed I haven't read it in its 'uncensored' version, which was published in 1990 with the tale increased from about 60 000 words to 96 000.

So: it was time to revisit!

Puppet Masters is Heinlein's version of an alien invasion tale, written at a time when such tales were popular in film and in prose.

The tale itself is quite simple. Told in the first person, 'Sam' Nivens (not his real name) is working for the US secret service. This means different names, different places, different faces (as I find on the first page a blonde in bed with Sam, who wasn't there in my original version!)

He's assigned with a red-headed woman currently named Mary and his boss, 'the Old Man', who go to investigate a report of a crashed saucer in Des Moines. It is quickly claimed to be a hoax – a schoolboy prank reported by an overenthusiastic local news station, but there is clearly more to it. Mary, being the typical Heinlein heroine, notices she doesn't get a reaction from the adult males that she usually receives – the drooling is pretty much left to Sam.

Things develop as Sam and his colleagues quickly discover a secret invasion is going on that seems to suggest the future of the human race is at stake. Sam's job is to stop it.

Those of you who know 'Operation Annihilate' from Star Trek: the Original Series will get an idea of this story and realise how close these tales are. I'm surprised Heinlein didn't sue, frankly.

But back to the book. What we have here though is a B-movie plot written in the Heinlein way, with all the good and bad points it entails. There is the usual fabulous prose, the honed wise-cracking comments, the drip-feeding of all those little neat ideas that Heinlein does so well. The plot moves along at a great pace and there's a lot of tension and suspense along the way.

There's also the use of a typical strong red-headed Heinlein-gal, with all the 'Hey, sister' type comments that the Heinlein character usually has attached to it. These still jar a little, even allowing for the context of the times. Though Mary is fast, intelligent, strong, resourceful and more than capable, there is still a feeling that all she's there for is to serve the needs of our Hero, Sam. This is not by far the worst example of this by RAH – later novels do it much more – but it is more noticeable in this souped-up, more risqué version.

This is perhaps where I see a transition between the juveniles and say, *Stranger in a Strange Land*: this still has the excitement and the pace of the juvies, but the addition of the posturing lecture seen in later books such as *Stranger*. That and the need to get naked.

Sometimes ‘more’ can mean ‘less’, and I’m reminded of that, as I was when I read the longer version of *Stranger in a Strange Land* – I’m in two minds to decide whether this longer *Puppet Masters* is one of those examples.

Despite this, the tale’s an engaging one and must have shook things up a little when first published in 1951 – 60 years ago. There are parts that are quite good, for all of my complaints.

In summary, though, this is an interesting read: an alien invasion story with some intelligence that shows many of Heinlein’s strengths, but a few of his weaknesses, and sadly more so in this longer version. It is definitely worth reading, though it has to be seen as a product of its time.

Michael says

Zumindest in der deutschen Übersetzung liest sich dieser typische 50er Alien-Invasion-Paranoia-SF-Roman so eigenwillig, dass ich von der Handlung oft regelrecht abgelenkt wurde und mehrfach das Buch zuklappte. Hinzu kommen Sprünge und ein höchst eigenwilliger Erzählrhythmus; manche Merkwürdigkeit stellt sich allerdings zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt als gewollt heraus, so die überstürzte Ehe zwischen Sam und Mary. Die anfänglichen Anklänge an das Inzest-Motiv, das später bei Heinlein eine größere Rolle spielen wird, sind dann im Verlauf der Story nicht mehr aufgetaucht, vielleicht habe ich ja das Gras wachsen hören. Jedenfalls sind Sam und Mary keine Geschwister, auch wenn sie sich zu Beginn zwecks Tarnung als solche ausgeben. Mein Eindruck ist, dass dieser Roman in jedem Fall im Original gelesen werden sollte, weil letztlich nur dann zu beurteilen ist, welche Eigenheiten der Übersetzung geschuldet sind und welche Heinlein beabsichtigt hat.

Stuart says

The Puppet Masters: Early Heinlein at his most embarrassing

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

Slug-like alien invaders who land and take over Des Moines, Iowa, 50s-style cold war paranoia, wise-cracking secret super agents, and a totally hot red-headed babe with deadly weapons concealed on a voluptuous body who is strong-willed but still totally subservient to our intrepid, tough-talking hero Sam. Yes, that would be a Robert Heinlein book, this one first published back in 1951. Apparently this was the extended version, and I guess they just stuffed back all the embarrassingly-bad, sexy repartee and other bits that should have remained on the cutting-room floor.

Most readers either love or hate Heinlein, and I’ve only read a few of his books, having absolutely hated *Starship Troopers* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*, but really liked *The Door Into Summer*. So after a 20 year hiatus I decided to give this one a go (with *Double Star* and *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* on deck). Well,

maybe I should have left well enough alone.

I'm afraid this book just really didn't do anything other than induce shivers of discomfort with its thoroughly dated dialogue and characters. The story itself may seem hackneyed now, but it's been 60 years so I can't lay that at Heinlein's feet. But the plot itself just completely stalls partway through the book, as what I would expect to be the finale comes in the middle, and so I couldn't bother myself to read any further.

We all know that the attitudes toward women were pretty cavalier and sexist back in the Golden Age of SF, but this book really took the cake. Here's a few choice tidbits to make a reader cringe:

"I like nurses; they are calm and earthy and very tolerant. Miss Briggs, my night nurse, was not the mouth-watering job that Doris was; she had a face like a jaundiced horse but she had a fine figure for a woman her age, hard and well cared for."

"She took a deep drag, swelling out her chest and pushing her arrogant breasts against her halter almost to the breaking point. I thought again what a sweet dish she was; she was just what I needed to take my mind off Mary."

"Listen, son, most women are damn fools and children. But they've got more range than we've got. The brave ones are braver, the good ones are better and the vile ones are viler, for that matter."

To sum up, I really didn't find much to like in this book, but perhaps teenage boys in the 1950's really liked it. Plus, this being the extended version (96,000 words vs. the original 60,000), maybe shorter in this case was better. But I won't waste any more precious reading time finding out.

Michael Nash says

I'm not sure what I expected from *The Puppet Masters*, but mostly I expected it to be dumber than it was. On one level, it was a fun action-adventure story, really one of the best Heinlein narratives I've ever read (in the sense that the plot never gets bogged down in whatever the hell Heinlein wants to talk about). It's also groundbreaking. I read *The Animorphs* as a kid, so I have a deep appreciation for the "parasite aliens who are taking over the country by invisibly controlling people" scifi trope, and since this came out in 1951, I feel pretty confident in declaring it the first of that genre. And Heinlein does an incredible job of investigating the logical consequences of just such an invasion to their conclusion. Throw in some deep meditations on the nature of conscience and individual liberty, just enough to add some heft, and you've got a pretty great little novel.

It does have some standard disturbing Heinleinisms, like Sam's weird relationship with his wife, and Heinlein's idea of portraying strong women in general. There's some weird tension between Heinlein's alleged support for individual liberty and distrust of the state within the novel, and the fact that the situation in the novel presents a problem which can only reasonably be solved by massive draconian government intervention, which the main character carries out more or less cheerfully. Also suspicious that Heinlein, a noted nudist, should come up with a situation where it's reasonable for the government to require nudity all the time.

Jenifer says

I had the extended version of this book and made it through to page 199. Had I read the original version than I would have finished the book making it that far along. Somewhere along the way there were additions made to the story to extend it to 370 pages. A bit more than I am willing to read for this story. It was an interesting concept and I would love to see how it ends, but I'm going to cheat and look that up on wikipedia so that I can put this story behind me. It is extremely dated and misogynistic. The use of the term Babe tired about page 10 and I couldn't stand the endless droning on about the slugs any longer. I've read other Heinlein books and enjoyed them so this isn't enough to deter me from reading other pieces of his work.

Paul Hancock says

A classic of sci.fi, but not a great read, or a well written book. A good reminder of why we don't want to return to "the good old days".

The writing is rather rushed and ham-fisted. The story sort of hangs together, despite a lot of tangents and gaps that should have been worked out in further revisions. The characters are all paper thin without much development.

The main character Sam is the biggest dick-head: he clearly has un-resolved father issues that fuel his distrust and dislike of women. The first person narrative style means that you get to explore the depths of Sam's misogynistic thoughts. This aspect of the book alone made me really dislike it.

At one point Sam sees Mary doing something that he judges to be wicked-in-the-way-that-only-women-can-be-wicked. His solution is the slap her. He then tries to chat up a nurse and whinges about how Mary is some kind of whore-demon. This is then followed by some reconciliation where by Sam describes how he saw the situation and interpreted Mary's actions. AT WHICH POINT MARY APOLOGIZES FOR SAMS MISINTERPRETATION saying "yeah I would have slapped me too if I were in your place". WTF kind of stupid crap is this? This incident isn't just left to die on the pages of the book. Oh no - it is referenced later on when Sam and Mary are saying their first I-love-you's, as Mary says "I loved you ever since you slapped me". ><?!

The amount of casual sexism, violence against women, and lack of ethics in the treatment of animals (Sam burns a dog because he is angry), made this book a tough read. I hated all the main characters, and was almost pulling for the slugs to just end humanity.

Monica says

Últimamente en mis reseñas describo lo que me ha parecido la obra con una frase o más bien una palabra; en éste caso sería: una obra IMPRESCINDIBLE para cualquier lector en general, y para los amantes del género en particular.

El porqué, pues por ser un gran libro con una excelente historia, bien narrado y construido, con un ritmo envidiable y un excelente desarrollo, interesante en todas sus partes y a lo largo de la obra sin desfallecer en

ningún momento, con unos buenos personajes, eso en general, y en particular (para el género) por ser un poco el ABC de las invasiones extraterrestres; por tanto, Heinlein (como siempre) acaba siendo con ésta obra el precursor de los posteriores “homenajes” a tan estimables obras como: Alien, Aliens, La cosa, La invasión de los ladrones de cuerpos, incluído James Bond ...por nombrar unos cuantos títulos.

Pero voy allá con unas pinceladas de la novela que quiero destacar y su argumento...

Nos situamos en el año 2007, cuando uno de los mejores agentes del servicio secreto de inteligencia de EEUU, “Sam Cavanaugh es enviado junto a una compañera “Mary” por su jefe, “El viejo” (todo ésta comillado por un sentido pero no voy a hacer spolier, lo tendréis que leer), el cual se añade como tercer miembro y testigo directo, a una expedición para investigar el aterrizaje, supuestamente falso en Iwoa, de un platillo volante. Desde ése preciso momento, se nos adentra en la investigación en terreno y científica, posterior estrategia militar y política, la toma de decisiones (no siempre populares), los conflictos personales de nuestros tres principales protagonistas y la lucha por la supervivencia para el posterior fin de la invasión y bien común; además , la obra incluye un romance. Cómo se puede ver es un gran ejercicio de acción, ciencia ficción, política, estrategia militar y amor.

Cosas que destacó aparte de lo mencionado en generalidad de la novela:

1/ Sus personajes:

Sam, se nos plantea a priori como un tipo duro (pelo machista y sexista), de vuelta de casi todo, un pelo adicto a ciertas drogas exóticas y futuristas, y en el que prima por encima de todo su lealtad al departamento. Pero bajo toda ésa estela, nos encontramos con un hombre solitario, con carencias afectivas que cubre con su servicio al estado.

Mary, a priori es una chica exuberante, con unas aptitudes para el combate fuera de lo normal. Pero detrás de eso se oculta un corazón solitario, que quiere hacerse la dura, con un pasado dramático y con las mismas carencias que Sam.

El viejo, es un tipo de mucho cuidado, taimado y manipulador, que nunca hace nada sin un propósito oculto, pero en el fondo es un sentimental, un patriota y un idealista.

2/ El punto de vista de un infectado:

Se nos describe en primera persona el punto de vista de un infectado a nivel de acción y pensamiento.

3/ La doble lectura de la novela:

Bajo la “aparente” simplicidad y primera lectura, Heinlein nos hace una crítica al tiempo de se mofa de casi todo. Unos ejemplos:

- Crítica del carácter cerrado, egocéntrico con unas prolongadas y sofistas deducciones de los científicos vs la practicidad de los hombres de acción. Quiero hacer una especial mención a un pasaje de dos científicos con unos diálogos los cuales me han parecido un guiño por parte del autor a un compañero de profesión, Asimov.

- Crítica a la TV (Dios, si levantase Heinlein ahora la cabeza..) el porqué del llamado progreso y su función.
- Mofa de las lecciones preconcebidas de un rango militar y lo dado por hecho.
- El símil que hace entre invasores y fascismo (control de la comunicaciones y las personas)

- Crítica a la política y sus protocolos, la falsedad burocrática e intereses. Mención especial a la fina ironía que nos plantea a los congresistas y su parecido con los alienígenas invasores .
- También se menciona al maltrato animal (y a la tauromaquia)

4/ La redacción:

Una escritura envidiable que nos hace reír, llorar, entretenernos e interesarnos por el devenir de los acontecimientos futuros. Se combinan descripciones graciosas que dan un respiro a la acción. Por otro lado, los diálogos son irónicos, sentidos, duros y también picantes y sexuales (sin caer en lo grosero) cuando lo requiere la ocasión.

5/ La posible descripción del invasor:

No voy a spoilear pero me ha gustado, ni es excesiva ni se queda corta, y esta bien ideada

6/ Las frases:

- Hay muchas frases que no tienen desperdicio. Ejemplo: “Son dos empollones comparando su colección de sellos [...]” descripción de los científicos.
- “ No fui consciente hasta entonces de que nunca había sido feliz. Sí, alguna vez estuve vagamente interesado en algo, entretenido o distraído, pero nunca feliz” . Descripción del amor de uno de los protagonistas

Y cómo éstas varias y en varios apartados.

7/ (ésta es subjetiva) los gatos:

Cómo en toda obra de Heinlein aparece un gato y sus metáforas gatunas.

No hay nada perfecto, por lo tanto quiero incluir un apartado que sería de peros, pero más bien lo describiré así..

Lo que no hay que tenerle en cuenta al bueno de Heinlein:

- 1/ Su obsesión por el comunismo en la obra. Toda persona tiene unas tendencias y ha vivido en un tiempo, y la persona que somos es un cúmulo de vivencias (recordemos que era militar)
- 2/ Su aparente machismo. Yo no me sentido ofendida como ser femenino. Es más provocación que otra cosa, pero en el fondo se ve que Heinlein admiraba a las mujeres, las sabías más inteligentes y capaces que los hombres, por lo tanto conscientes de sus armas femeninas y cerebrales. Y los deja muy claro en unas cuantas frases.
- 2.1 Y el aparente placer de obediencia la chica. Yo no lo comarto pero oye, no pasa nada, hay mujeres que les gusta sentirse protegidas por el hombre que aman y el cual la quiere resguardar.
- 3/ Su primer y aparente cliché de personajes sexistas con patrones muy definidos (como hablo en el párrafo de personajes) hay mucho más en lo que hurgar que en lo que en un principio parece. La obra de Heinlein es siempre así, nunca te quedes con la simple lectura.

4/ Por último, su obsesión camuflada por el nudismo..jeje. A él le hubiese gustado vivir así, está en más de un relato suyo. ¿Creeís que una persona fascista tendría esas tendencias? No yo. Lo digo por lo que siempre se le ha tildado de eso. Me creo que era más patriota que otra cosa, puede parecer una línea delgada, pero yo creo que es perfectamente visible.

En conclusión, me ha vuelto a encantar retomar la obra de Heinlein. Un relato prácticamente redondo (no hay nada perfecto). Por lo que a mí respecta, A Titán con usted!..y gracias por deleitarme con un relato con un encanto, si bien diferente a la magnífica 'Puerta al verano', igualmente imprescindible en mis estanterías del género.

Mi puntuación, como no, un cinco.

Phrynne says

I enjoyed this book for its story which was well thought out and interesting. However it's age definitely showed mostly in the naivety of the writing. I can't really describe what I mean exactly but if you read it I think you will understand straight away. And the dialogue left a bit to be desired as well. Nevertheless it is a true science fiction story of the old kind and it is very readable.

Lyn says

Putting this book down I cannot help wondering if Bob wrote this for the excuse to see, at least in his mind, a nation wearing no clothes.

You see, this is about an invasion of body snatchers type event, the aliens being large slug like creatures who affix themselves to the hosts' skin. So, one method of finding the insidious creatures is an ordinance where everyone must be nude.

Clever! You are a devil, Bob Heinlein.

First published in 1951, this is a couple decades before he took the turnpike exit to weirdville, and this is not bad at all, but we may be seeing early glimpses.

Heinlein took the concept of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Jack Finney's classic Cold War allegory was actually first published in 1955 – AFTER Heinlein's continental nudist colony) and toolled it to a SF alien invasion for a vehicle to espouse civil libertarian and free will doctrines. No doubt Heinlein saw the metaphorical qualities of the concept and made many direct references to life behind the Iron Curtain, but his narrative lacks the B-movie cool of Finney's work.

Published between Farmer in the Sky and The Rolling Stones, this is bibliographically in his juvenile period, but this has more of an adult premise, setting and tone. Still filled with his inimitable Show Me state charm and his wise cracking similes, this is a true Heinlein classic.

Kat Hooper says

Unfriendly aliens from Titan have arrived on Earth and are planning to conquer us. To do this, the slug-like beings latch onto the backs of their human hosts and take over their bodies and minds. The aliens are rapidly spreading in the Midwest and they've managed to infiltrate the Treasury Department. To make world domination go even faster and easier, they're planning to get the President of the United States. That's why Sam Cavanaugh, secret agent, has been called in from his vacation. He's teaming up with Mary, a beautiful red-head, to stop the invasion. But Sam and Mary soon learn that even secret agents are susceptible to alien body snatching.... and falling in love.

There's plenty of action in *The Puppet Masters* — chases, capture, torture, escape, reconnaissance missions, hide-outs, vehicle crashes, parachute landings, vigilantes, and even a plague. And since this is Robert Heinlein... Read More at Fantasy Literature: <http://www.fantasyliterature.com/reviews/the-puppet-masters/>

Sara says

I have no problem with dated things. I do not hold against a past time its inability to miraculously speak to my present. I enjoy trying to crawl into the context of a different reader who may have lived decades or centuries ago and to imagine their responses to what I am reading...or to imagine what rules the author tried to follow or break, as the case may be. I seek this kind of exercise in books, art, film, music...it's one of the many reasons why I dig old stuff.

So, regarding *The Puppet Masters*, I feel compelled to observe that it is not its dated quality that specifically irks me. As a work of early science fiction, this novel earns a high rank for introducing about a thousand tropes that became par for the course in later scifi novels and films. It must have seemed strikingly original to contemporary readers and the story stands up today. It has much to recommend it. But I will forget, for a moment, *The Puppet Masters'* status as a science fiction novel and consider it in light of another genre to which it relates.

The Puppet Masters begs comparison, not just with other scifi novels, but with the pulp novels that inspired film noir. Heinlein portrays the Titanian slug invasion as a mystery to be solved and his characters as the confrontational, go-to (hardboiled even?) individuals who will get to the bottom of the problem and resolve it, come hell or high water. It's got the wisecracks, the unadorned yet coy dialogue, the hero's ethical (if not moral) ambiguity, and it's got a purportedly dangerous female protagonist...and in the "purportedly" lies my beef with *The Puppet Masters*. "Mary", its female protagonist seems more subservient than dangerous, and not even subservient in that spoiled-brat, woman-child, I'm-just-doing-this-to-get-my-way sort of way. Though no more forward-thinking in terms of rewriting the hackneyed gender map, at least this latter behavior has some spirit in it, for crying out loud.

I like a good detective novel and I love noir films, genres which are riddled with female stereotypes, so it's not the sexism of the novel per se that gets me. I expect sexism from a novel straight from the 50s - whence also many pulp novels and films - and so try not to let it overly determine my feel for the work as a whole. So it's not the sexism in *The Puppet Masters* that annoys me...it's the kind of sexism.

What's upsetting about Mary is that Heinlein describes her for the reader, through the mouths of his other characters, as a deadly assassin, a smart cookie, a femme fatal. He leads us to expect a character of this ilk...and then he offers us, not Barbara Stanwyck, but Donna Reed with an upsetting past. Ok, she's not quite that bad, at least not in the beginning, but by the novel's end she makes Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* look like a woman of independent spirit. The "yes dear"s and "whatever you say dear"s made me pray Mary would get, and stay, "hagridden", as people who play host to a Titanian parasite are called.

One of the characteristics of pulp and noir that makes the genre so compelling is the juxtaposing of the male protagonist with a female who actually challenges him. She's often evil. He usually has to kill her. And of course those stories perpetuate the whore/virgin dichotomous view of the female gender that is no friend to women, but at least these female characters possess agency and independent will. They function as foils to the heroes and flesh out those male characters. The more spirited the female protagonist, the stronger the hero. That's how this equation works. But, despite Heinlein's early hints and implications that this is the kind of dynamic he's cultivating, Mary does none of the above for "Sam", the hero of *The Puppet Masters*. And consequently, her shortcomings become his. He seems less formidable precisely because he finds no rival of any consequence in her. Heinlein promises this rivalry the first time he introduces her character, but he never delivers. Mary doesn't need to become host to an alien parasite, because she's already hagridden by Sam.

Manny says

Evil, slug-like aliens land on Earth. They attach themselves to people and take over their minds. After a while, everyone has to walk around completely naked, so that you can spot the ones who have a slug attached.

I just can't understand why Paul Verhoeven didn't film this. He could have combined *Starship Troopers* and *Showgirls* into one movie, and both he and the rest of the world would have been happier. My guess is that he discovered the book too late, and has been kicking himself ever since.

Simon says

Well that was a classic bit of vintage SF. Up there with Heinlein's best I would say. Aliens are invading earth in a most insidious way and there's no room for compassion or understanding; it's them or us! For heaven's sake don't try to read anything allegorical into it or you're bound to find issue with it.

Okay, the novel is undeniably dated but it shouldn't jar with most modern readers unless they are particularly sensitive to these things. It does feel like a novel written in the 50's but it is set several decades in the future which might lead some to criticise Heinlein of failing to anticipate the direction social/technological development would take but I think that would be a distraction from the many qualities this book has to offer.

Read it for what it is; a period SF piece full of excitement and suspense. It was just what I needed.

Christy says

Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* is both an action-oriented adventure story about parasitic slug aliens attempting to take over the world and its citizens and social commentary on Communism and the Red Scare. As such, it appeals to young adult readers, who are looking for excitement and aliens, and to the general populace of the early 1950s, who would recognize the paranoia and militarism as part of the broader culture of the time.

This book, like Wylie's *The Disappearance*, is very much a book of its time, first in its Cold War references to the Iron Curtain and Russia, and second in its characterization of women and of gender roles. This comment made by Sam, the protagonist, is typical of the attitudes expressed toward Russia: "I wondered why the titans [the parasitic aliens] had not attacked Russia first; Stalinism seemed tailor-made for them. On second thought, I wondered if they had. On third thought, I wondered what difference it would make; the people behind the Curtain had had their minds enslaved and parasites riding them for three generations. There might not be two kopeks difference between a commissar with a slug and a commissar without a slug" (205). It reflects clearly the divide between the East and the West and makes unmistakably clear the connection between the alien parasites and Communists. Later still, after the United States population has become fully aware of the problem and measures have been taken to protect them by curtailing their freedoms and increasing security, Sam describes the country as "undergoing a Terror. Friend might shoot friend, or wife denounce husband. Rumor of a titan could drum up a mob on any street, with Old Judge Lynch baying in their van. . . . The fact that most of the rumored discoveries of slugs were baseless made the rumors no less dangerous" (254). This description sounds very much like the effects of the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s. Just as the slugs are "puppet masters," taking over the free will and the lives of humans, so, according to this novel, are Communists puppet masters of their citizens, whose "puppet strings are always at hand" (262).

In terms of gender roles, although Heinlein's future society (the book is set in 2007) includes some societal changes that should affect gender roles and relations, such as new ways of approaching marriage (short-term, renewable, or permanent marriage licenses, for instance), the chief female character, Mary, undercuts this apparent progressive attitude toward gender roles. Mary is always little more than a sex object or a wife. When Sam first meets her, for instance, she is described as extremely desirable (in what is the weirdest description of a supposedly sexually attractive woman I think I have ever read): "A long, lean body, but unquestionably and pleasingly mammalian. Good legs. Broad shoulders for a woman. Flaming, wavy red hair and the real redhead saurian bony structure to her skull. Her face was handsome rather than beautiful; her teeth were sharp and clean" (4-5). Although the next few sentences make it clear that Sam wants to jump her bones, this description is disturbingly like a description of livestock. Furthermore, although she, like Sam, is a field agent, and a very good one, even better than Sam perhaps, her contributions to the narrative eventually deteriorate to the point where all she says is "Yes, dear." Stay here; go back; have a baby; go with me to fight aliens on a faraway planet--to all of these things, she says "Yes dear." Having said that she is a good field agent, however, it must be pointed out that her primary skill seems to be flirting. Her job for the first half of the book is to act sexy around men and see if they respond. If they don't, bam! They must be slug-infested slaves. In fact, she tells Sam after their marriage that fists are not her weapons. Sam reflects, "I knew that she did not mean that guns were her weapons; she meant something older and more primitive. True, she could fight like a bad-tempered Kodiak bear and I respected her for it, but she was no Amazon. An Amazon doesn't look that way with her head on a pillow. Mary's true strength lay in her other talents" (220).

This book is frequently marketed to young adult readers and I have read several reviews that say that although they wouldn't re-read it as an adult, they would recommend it to an adolescent reader, especially

adolescent boys. I would not. These ideas about women and sex roles simply permeate the book and most young readers are not equipped to deconstruct them.

A final element of the book and another reason I wouldn't give this to a young reader is the militarism of the ending. The final chapter of the book sees Sam and Mary packing up to go to Titan and finish off the rest of the slug parasites so they cannot return and attack again in the future. While that's a sensible goal given the situation, the ideology in which it is steeped is troubling. Sam says, of this goal, "Whether we make it or not, the human race has got to keep up its well-earned reputation for ferocity. If the slugs taught us anything, it was that the price of freedom is the willingness to do sudden battle, anywhere, any time, and with utter recklessness" (338). He continues, saying, "Well, if Man wants to be top dog--or even a respected neighbor--he'll have to fight for it. Beat the plowshares back into swords; the other was a maiden aunt's fancy" (338). Freedom, according to Heinlein, is only to be found at the muzzle of a gun and pacifism is no more than a silly woman's dream. Not only that, but it is humankind's place to be fierce and not only to be respected but to be in charge. This complements American patriotism and nationalism too well for it not to be a problem, especially given the lessons we should have learned over the last few years. The final lines of the book complete the image of glory-seeking freedom fighters: "We are about to transship. I feel exhilarated. Puppet masters--the free men are coming to kill you! *Death and Destruction!*" (340). Given the political climate of the time, this furthers the separation between East and West, "puppet masters" and "free," and justifies the ongoing Cold War and its attendant curtailments of freedom. Given our current political climate, it does much the same, only exchanging Communist puppet masters with Islamic terrorist leaders.
