

TIME IS THE SIMPLEST THING BY CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



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A telepath inadvertently acquires a powerful alien consciousness and must run for his life to escape corporate assassins and hate-filled mobs in this enthralling science fiction masterwork

Space travel has been abandoned in the twenty-second century. It is deemed too dangerous, expensive, and inconvenient—and now the all-powerful Fishhook company holds the monopoly on interstellar exploration for commercial gain. Their secret is the use of “parries,” human beings with the remarkable telepathic ability to expand their minds throughout the universe. On what should have been a routine assignment, however, loyal Fishhook employee Shepherd Blaine is inadvertently implanted with a copy of an alien consciousness, becoming something more than human. Now he’s a company pariah, forced to flee the safe confines of the Fishhook complex. But the world he escapes into is not a safe sanctuary; Its people have been taught to hate and fear his parapsychological gift—and there is nowhere on Earth, or elsewhere, for Shepherd Blaine to hide.

A Hugo Award nominee, *Time Is the Simplest Thing* showcases the enormous talents of one of the true greats of twentieth-century science fiction. This richly imagined tale of prejudice, corporate greed, oppression, and, ultimately, transcendence stands tall among Simak’s most enduring works.

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A great read from the "classic" sci-fi era!

By Paul Weiss

The story opens in a distant future on earth - so distant, in fact, that space travel is only a memory of the past. After countless attempts, man has begrudgingly acknowledged itself defeated by the insurmountable difficulties of travel to the stars. But, in the attempt, mankind has rediscovered and refined a long-lost talent - paranormal kinetics, a form of telepathy by which gifted individuals - called "parries" - can "travel" to the stars and experience with their minds all that other worlds have to offer. Fishhook, a corporation set up to develop, market, sell and profit from the myriad wonders the telepathic travelers find has succumbed to the greed of a monopoly. It now secretly works at promoting a global belief that these abilities are somehow abnormal, twisted or, even worse, represent a perverted, evil magic as opposed to a normal but seldom used human talent.

During an otherwise routine exploration, one of the parries, Shepherd Blaine, inadvertently "trades minds" with an alien intelligence. In more modern sci-fi terms, I was put in mind of a permanent Vulcan mind meld. Coming to the realization that he now has access to virtually all of the accumulated knowledge and wisdom

of the galaxy, that he can simply will himself bodily through space and time, and that he is no longer even entirely human, Blaine flees Fishhook. He attempts to reconcile himself and his newly discovered abilities and knowledge with the visceral hatred and fear he encounters in the heartland of Simak's stomping grounds, the US Midwest.

In one chapter, the irony in Simak's chilling portrayal of a frightened and hateful lynch mob trying to pull Blaine out of a local jail to string him up is extraordinary. Simak didn't dress his mob in white hoods and robes carrying burning crosses, but there was no question in my mind of the picture he was painting. The irony arose somewhat later when Simak took an opportunity to remind his readers that the US was formed as a result of the Puritan's fleeing that same type of prejudiced, bigoted persecution and hatred. As an aside, I wouldn't think that Simak had any particular subliminal message in mind when he created Fishhook but, in this modern world, one can't help but be concerned about the perils of allowing untrammelled corporate growth to blossom into pure monopoly.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable tale from the 50s and 60s classic pulp sci-fi era and a wonderful example of Simak's fertile imaginings as to how time travel might be experienced in the future. "Time is the Simplest Thing" is pretty clearly dated and doesn't travel into today's world quite as well as some of his other works but it's a fast-paced thoroughly enjoyable read nonetheless.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

An almost great novel from the Golden Age of SF

By J. Kel

[Recently,I had occasion to make some comments on Simak's novel, Time is the Simplest Thing. What follows is a slightly edited version of those comments.]

Time is the Simplest Thing takes place sometime in the late 22nd century (almost the exact same period, btw, as Time for the Stars, the great Heinlein juvenile that Simak appears to be riffing on.) We are informed in the preface that sometime around the mid-21st century, manned spaceflight was shown to be prohibitively expensive, notably in terms of lives lost. A generation after that realization really struck home, a group of maverick thinkers that would become the "Fishhook" company, or just "Fishhook" decamps to Mexico ("the country with a heart") to set up operations - the American government, as we now know will subsidize almost anything, but it draws the line on Fishhook.

So what is Fishhook? Think of the company as a kind of Microsoft (tm) of the paranormal, and you will get the core idea. What it boils down to is that the company has discovered how to control and use what had been considered dubious paranormal phenomena, telekinesis and the like. What this means is that it can send its version of astronauts (mentalnavts? Cogninavts? No happy word choice I can see) on fishing expeditions very far indeed - thousands of light years in fact, using mind-enhancing devices known as a Star Machines (SMs). This is astral projection with a vengeance.

The parallels, unintended to be sure, with the contemporary PC world are definitely present and intriguing from a present day perspective. This is Simak more cynical than sentimental and he does a good job in painting this depressing future. "Parries," freelance, uncontrolled users of the paranormal, are the hackers that the company alternately ignores or tries to suppress. SMs, like PCs, go through regular equipment upgrades and are then dumped (there is no re-sale market for them, however, as Fishhook forbids anyone else even to have an obsolete model) as the company moves on to the next, more powerful model. Like many a contemporary giant corporation, Fishhook values maximum loyalty above all else from its employees -- who in turn spout the company line whenever called upon to do so. And finally, a few employees have gone

renegade, though there appears to be little the company can do about it once they have escaped (from a combination prison-resort in Baja-California) into the American hinterland.

Unlike the Big M and others, however, Fishhook completely dominates the world's economy, and in the process has pretty much destroyed the social structure and likely even the political structure of entire continents. This is a considerable stretch but if we go with the premise, it is understandable that there would be a lot of resentment against Fishhook and its employees.

Enter our hero, Mr. Shepherd Blaine. We don't know a lot about him (and indeed learn almost nothing about him during the course of the novel - one of its weaknesses), but he is a good and loyal company employee, if somewhat indifferent to the world around him. He has one romantic attachment of sorts to a newspaper reporter, but that is about it. My guess is that he is 29 years of age. We are given no description of him. For the most part he has a prestige job, does it well, and probably can look forward to a comfortable retirement sometime in his thirties. He apparently thinks and cares about little else beyond the company. Again the parallels with some modern high-tech employees are remarkable. When the novel opens Blaine has just come back from his latest fishing expedition, but this time he is in big trouble and knows it. In addition to the usual debriefings and form fillings, he has a secret - not only has he contacted an alien, but has been affected (infected?) by one.

He is about to go on a new and much different mission as he approaches his 30th year.

Note: the religious overtones are laid on thick as the book progresses - the novel was originally serialized under the title of "Fisherman," so even the dullest reader would be likely to harbor few doubts as to where it was heading.

Here's what happened thousands of light-years away from earth. Blaine caught the attention of an alien he dubs the "Pinkness," a bored, silly creature looking for amusement and/or stimulation who finds Blaine to be rather fetching, at least Blaine's mind. So contact happens, and it is made clear in the novel this is an obsessive company concern. In fact, what transpires is the worst possible scenario: the alien "trades" minds with his human guest: i.e. overwrites a copy of its mind onto Blaine's and in turn makes of copy of Blaine's for his personal use/curiosity. Blaine is given no say in this and it all happens very quickly. The alien also seems not to be concerned in the slightest about consequences or interface issues: the overwriting of Blaine's mind is something of a mess. It will take the rest of the novel for our hero to sort even some of it out. Back on Earth, Blaine soon finds himself on the run, a marked man. The company embarrassed and worried that he has slipped through their fingers, as a few have before, finds itself increasingly ineffective against this half-human, half-alien hybrid that is learning the secrets of manipulating time itself, making Blaine a formidable opponent indeed.

All of this undoubtedly sounds far more portentous and exciting than it really is. Part of the problem with Simak was that while he was a great writer, he was not a very good one. He had a lazy streak that, particularly in his later books (e.g. *Why Call Them Back from Heaven?*) and this one certainly qualifies as that, which often resulted in a lack of attention to plot details, not to mention the inevitable and wearying sections devoted to what I came to dub "Field&Stream" prose, and an overall lack of interest in the psychology, history, and plausibility of his characters. All of which can result in a reading experience that, compared to Heinlein or Bester, is best described as flat. In the grandest and most charitable sense, Simak was a writer of Big Ideas and Themes -- which he would toss out with assurance and quickly move on. Ugly details of plot and characterization seemed not to have overly concerned him. Only when the conception really caught his interest (as in *City*) would he hit one out of the park.

The tragedy of *Time is the Simplest Thing* is that Simak stumbled upon a great story, potentially his greatest, but didn't realize it or care at the time and settled for it just being okay. His vision of a future ruined America, of a despairing mankind that has given up all hope of the future even as Fishhook showers them with technological (indeed bio-technological) marvels, of the Parries being subject to pogroms by people of all races, creed, and colors, is one of the bleakest imaginable. There is something hypnotic about the way the novel strips down the future to its grimmest essentials, so that the only hope left is for the emergence of a new religion, not the bad one that we see forming, but a good one -- to be lead by this most reluctant of messiahs, the good Shepherd Blaine. It is only religion, Simak implies, that will give people the belief that there is something they can believe in (the book borrows in this theme from the classic, *The Stars My Destination*) and thus enable civilization in some form to continue. Despite the fact that Simak keeps his emotional involvement distant from his own the novel, the grand themes do emerge and they work, but only if the reader has the patience.

As befitting a work of religious prophecy, which is probably the best way to describe the book, there are no laughs here. Contemporary readers, however, might be amused at the vision of a Mexico with apparently no Mexicans, along with the non-existent border between the two "countries." As a work of prognostication, it is not bad and still holds up. Today, the future of manned spaceflight is in severe jeopardy, for economic reasons primarily, though radiation (the core premise of the book) is certainly a serious factor for long-term space-flight. The book's emphasis on bio-technology over the gosh-wow gadgetry of the future typical of the era is absolutely sound. The fact that there will always be pogroms against some group somewhere is painfully obvious - now, though this book was conceived at the height of American and post-World War II optimism. It's as if Simak saw more clearly than most writers of the time the kinds of obstacles that would likely rise up and destroy the dream of interstellar travel, at the very least. Likely as well, though I cannot be certain on this, the novel as it emerged in the writing depressed him.

Highly recommended, with some reservations.

9 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Best Classic Sci-Fi Ever

By C. Morse

"*Time is the Simplest Thing*," by Clifford Simak, has been my favorite science fiction novel since I first read it in high school many, many, many years ago. Simak writes soft sci-fi, rather than hard, and does a darn good job of it. Reading about technology and how it works has always been a turn-off for me. I'd much rather read about how people interact with each other, and the philosophy of life, and the social structures of Earth and other planets. This book definitely fits the bill.

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