

Review and Excerpts: The Mote in God's Eye, Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle

2018-12-10 19:50:22

When Jerry Pournelle died last year, I noticed that I didn't read any of his Science Fiction novels. In a reddit thread after him, people suggested his books as good and this one was *best* or *one-of-the-best* of him.

It's an old book, from 1960's and some of the quirks can be understandable. However most of the ideas in the book, most of the time reader spends is not in a world of the future, it's in a world of the past. Almost all power relations of 1960's are preserved, there are Muslim Arabs, there Communist Russians, Americans are still Americans, men are still men, women are still considered dangerous in the space ship, there are hammocks on board, and on and on.

It's a weird world that I couldn't continue to read. It could be minor book without those pesky environment, like 100-pages, meeting with a new intelligent species and their social structure, their biological shortcomings, etc. But here we have strong willed admirals willing to kill their mates without blink if things go wrong and all the characters look like my grandparents rather than my grandchildren.

It might be better if the author didn't claim that the year is around 3000s. We are already far from the society the book tells in major ways.

So I left the book halfway, after reading around 60% of it. Here are excerpts.

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When the room was empty he poured a large glass of wine. It was poor quality stuff brought in after the blockade, but he hardly noticed. Wine was officially forbidden on Levant, which meant that the hordes of wine sellers foisted off anything alcoholic on their customers, even wealthy ones like the Bury family.

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There was the usual hatred of the Navy for Imperial Traders, compounded, he thought, because some of the Navy staff were Jews, and all Jews hated

Levantines.

page 16

What would come would come, glory be to Allah... He grimaced. That kind of thinking came naturally, and he despised himself for a superstitious fool.

page 32

“They used to teach us that evolution of intelligent beings wasn’t possible,” she said. “Societies protect their weaker members. Civilizations tend to make wheel chairs and spectacles and hearing aids as soon as they have the tools for them. When a society makes war, the men generally have to pass a fitness test before they’re allowed to risk their lives. I suppose it helps win the war.” She smiled. “But it leaves precious little room for the survival of the fittest.”

page 32

“People breed horses. And dogs,” Rod observed. “Yes. But they haven’t got a new species. Ever. And societies can’t keep constant rules long enough to make any real changes in the human race. Come again in a million years— Of course there were the deliberate attempts to breed supermen. Like Sauron System.”

page 47

If you’ll excuse me, Captain, I must get back to my station.” He glared at Sally again. “I didn’t know they were taking females out of uniform as midshipmen.”

page 75

Long after Sally left, Rod was still studying the report. When he was finished, three facts stuck in his mind: The Motie was an intelligent toolmaker. It had traveled across thirty-five light years to find human civilization. And Rod Blaine had killed it.

page 83

He scrawled a signature on the last page; the out basket coughed and the papers vanished.

page 85

“Two ships. The Imperial battleship Lenin and the battle cruiser MacArthur. MacArthur will be modified to suit Dr. Horvath’s requirements and will carry the civilian personnel of this expedition.

page 87

At a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour the monorail car moved with a subdued hissing sound. The Saturday crowd of passengers seemed to be enjoying themselves in a quiet way.

page 147

Sally used her pocket computer. It hummed slightly, indicating that it was in communication with the main ship's memory. Somewhere in MacArthur a laser moved across holographic lines. The ship's memory held everything humanity knew of Moties—such as it was.

page 152

“Horvath, that watch is worth eight hundred crowns! It not only tells the time and the date, but—” Bury paused. “Come to that, it's also shockproof. We advertise that a shock that will stop a Chronos will also kill the owner. She probably can't hurt it much.”

page 156

“Imagine, me stuck with a Himmist for a brother-in-law! I've tried to educate the fool,” Buckman said energetically, “but he just won't listen.”

page 166

Master, fifteen rounds... “Sandy, what do you think of Horvath's idea?” Renner asked. “I don't care much for his theory of launching the fuel balloons

page 167

“Mon, we will nae show dirty pictures aboard this ship—and with a chaplain aboard! Not to mention the lady.”

page 170

“I've never been anywhere near Sol.” There was no reason for merchant ships to go closer to Sol than the orbit of Neptune, although as the original home of humanity Sol was centrally located as transfer point to other and more valuable systems. “Never heard anything good about Mars, either. Why is it important?”

page 222

Ferrets haven't turned up a thing but a bloody lot of mice. I think the beasties are dead, Captain.”

page 224

“You don’t understand. This business with tools—well, yes, they’re good with tools, but it’s not intelligence. Their heads are too small. The more brain tissue they use for this instinct to make tools work, the more they have to give up.

page 231

That was it! They were killing off the miniatures! Allah be praised, he had acted in time. Bury smiled widely in relief. He had a better idea of the value of the miniatures since the night he had left a box of bhaklavah next to the open faceplate of his personal pressure suit. He’d almost lost it all. To Buckman

page 239

“We’ll get you some food,” Potter’s Motie said suddenly. “You may hae guessed right. It may be her diet.” Both Moties left. Presently Whitbread’s Motie returned with a pressure bag that contained grain and plum-sized fruits and a chunk of red meat. “Boil the meat, soak the grain, and give her the fruit raw,” she said. “And test the ionization in her cabin air.” She ushered them out.

page 240

The Master was white. The tufts at her armpits and groin were long and silky, like the fur of an Angora cat. When they were all there, the Master turned to Whitbread’s Motie and said, “Speak.”

page 249

Fear surged into his throat. Allah is merciful, I witness that Allah is One— No! There was nothing to fear and he had done nothing dangerous.

page 258

“I know the word, but we deal very little in luxuries. We—I speak for the givers of orders, of course—we put more emphasis on power, territory, the maintenance of a household and a dynasty. We concern ourselves with providing a proper station in life for our children.”

page 262

“Carrying a child doesn’t seem to slow a Motie down,” Renner observed. Brown-and-white shoulders and heads turned toward him. Renner’s Motie said, “No, of course not. Why should it?” Sally Fowler took up the task. She tried carefully to explain just how useless pregnant human females were. “It’s one reason we tend to develop male-oriented societies.

page 273

What the hell, there was only one way to test a toilet. When he looked, the bowl was sparkling clean. He poured a glass of water into it and watched it run away without leaving a drop. The bowl was a frictionless surface.

page 273

Have to mention this to Bury, he thought. There were bases on airless moons, and worlds where water, or energy for recycling it, was scarce. Tomorrow. He was too sleepy now.

page 274

It was not Bury's habit to come too quickly to business. An overeager businessman, he felt, was easily gulled. He was not aware of the thousands of years of tradition behind his opinion. Accordingly he and his Motie liaison talked of many things . . . "Of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings," he quoted, and he identified all of these, to his Motie's evident interest.

page 274

"And you do not yourselves deal in luxuries?" "No. In power over others, in safety, in durability of customs and dynasties . . . as usual, I speak for the givers of orders. We deal in these, for their benefit, but we also deal in diplomacy. We trade durable goods and necessities, skills— What do you think of our works of art?" "They

page 275

"If I should be shot, you would lose the only merchant in this system." "Allah's—I mean to say, are your authorities really so determined to guard their secrets?" "Perhaps they will change their minds when they know you better. Besides, I'm not a physicist,"

page 283

"Commander Cargill, the Moties have had space travel and fusion power for centuries. If their buildings still have a fortress look, it must be traditional—there's no possible purpose! You're the military expert, just how would building your house that way help you against modern weapons?"

page 356

We represent the decision makers. We speak for them. To do our job we have to have some independence of judgment. So the genetic engineers work at the balance. Too much independence and we don't represent the Masters

properly. We get repudiated. Wars start.” “Aye,” Potter broke in. “And too little independence makes for inflexible demands, and you hae the wars anyway.” Potter trudged in silence for a moment.

page 359

“Never say that. Never think that. The survival of our civilization, any civilization, depends entirely on the justice of my class. We understand all viewpoints, and judge between them. If other Mediators come to a different conclusion from mine, that is their affair. It may be that their facts are incomplete, or their aims different. I judge on the evidence.”