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Larry Niven

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Pierson's puppeteers, three-leg two-head aliens find immense structure in unexplored part of the universe. Frightened of meeting the builders, they send a team of two humans, a puppeteer and a kzin, eight-foot red-fur catlike alien. Ringworld is 180 million miles across, sun at center. But the expedition crashes, and crew face disastrously long trek.

Ringworld Details

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Author : Larry Niven

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From Reader Review Ringworld for online ebook

Kemper says

I'd wanted to read this because I'm a fan of the Halo video games, and I'd heard that it was a big influence on those. I gotta say that I'd have liked it more if the Master Chief would have shown up and started chucking some plasma grenades around.

Set in 2855, human Louis Wu is recruited by an alien named Nessus to go on a hazardous mission to explore a strange structure that rings a distant star. Another alien called Speaker-To-Animals from a warrior race apparently descended from some really tough tomcats is also recruited. A human woman named Teela joins the group almost by accident.

When they get to their destination, they find a giant ring with a habitable inner surface that has an area many times greater than the earth. After an accident strands them on the world, they start exploring to find a way to get their ship back out into space.

This had some really big sci-fi ideas in it, most notably the Ringworld itself. But this is one of those books where the social attitudes of the time it was written have become really painful to read. Because even though it's supposed to be 2855, the women in this book exist only to: 1) Sleep with Louis. 2) Be good luck charms. 3) Act as ship's whores on long space flights.

You've come a long way, baby!

I generally try to avoid judging a book by the era it was written, but 1970 couldn't have been this bad, could it? And if so, I'd expect a guy who could come up with concepts this big to have put a little thought into gender roles in 800 years. Plus, while the Ringworld idea is pretty clever, I found the rest of the sci-fi kind of crude and dated. Maybe that's just because there's been 40 years of material since it was published, but I didn't get much enjoyment out of reading this.

Leo Robertson says

I find it hard to believe anyone got through this one, let alone its whole legion of sequels and spin-offs.

The Ringworld is such a cool concept but it's SO poorly described, I defy anyone to picture what the hell Niven is on about. It was black and on the horizon blue, a ribbon, several squares were hovering there like... WHAT?! Take some time to do this thing justice, mate! We're gonna be spending a deal of time there...

It takes too long to get to Ringworld, then when they do, nothing happens. Plus I couldn't work out how they'd landed? Wasn't there supposed to be glass on the inner surface or something? Did I read that? So confused.

It was kind of fun to see how male writers handled female characters in the 70s though ;) Ahaha, so badly. Worst sex scene ever ("impaled herself"? More like "flattered YOURself"!)—it just came outta nowhere and ended just as abruptly.

Can't recommend.

Guillermo says

This was a blast to read. It was great, escapist, old school science fiction at its best. It's a pretty light read, with fast moving short chapters all in single narrative. The story is a classic exploration tale taking place on an alien artefact that is one of the most amazing concepts ever imagined in my opinion. The Ringworld is an enormous artificial ribbon one million miles wide with the diameter of Earth's orbit. It's basically a partial dyson sphere.

"Take Christmas ribbon, an inch wide, the kind you use to wrap presents. Set a lighted candle on a bare floor. Take fifty feet of this ribbon, and string it in a circle with a candle at the center, balancing the ribbon on edge so that the inner side catches the candlelight. (Niven, 71)"

The ribbon is Ringworld and the candle is the alien sun. The inner side that catches the lights is the habitable zone. Here's where it gets crazy: the habitable flat inner terrain has a surface area of about 3 MILLION Earth-like planets. This thing was built for some serious room. The mystery is who built this thing, and what the hell for?

We follow four main characters each with a different motive on an expedition to Ringworld. The interaction between them is what really made me enjoy this book more than anything. There is a 200 year old human (in perfect physical condition due to an age extension substance called boosterspice) that has become bored with his life, a two headed, tripod alien that comes from an extremely advanced civilization yet is painfully and comically afraid of everything, a tiger-like warrior species who has become semi docile after their species were nearly wiped out by mankind, and a young woman who is so lucky that she doesn't know what fear or pain is. The relationship between these four strangers as they try to understand each other while they simultaneously struggle to comprehend the majestic and enigmatic Ringworld, is really entertaining. I read somewhere that Niven is a master at creating aliens, and I can't disagree. Nessus (the two headed tripod alien) is worth the price of admission alone, as he has become one of my new favorite sci fi characters ever. That strange paradox of coming from such a technologically advanced race while constantly turning itself into a ball at the slightest threat, was very fun and made me laugh out loud several times. The girl unfortunately was a really flat character that didn't really add very much except be the only other human's love interest/penis storage.

I've read some criticism about whether or not Niven is sexist because he doesn't create very well rounded female characters. I don't think that's the case in Ringworld, but the muted female presence was something typical of that time (1970s) in science fiction, so I didn't think much of it. It's a stigma that has stayed with this genre because of those classic science fiction authors that didn't create complex female characters, whether by choice or simple lack of ability. I imagine Niven's target audience here was probably adolescent boys anyways. In fact, I wish I had read this when I was much younger, because it would've been in my wheelhouse.

It's far from perfect, however. I think a lot more could've been done with what was actually found on the Ringworld, and would like to know a whole lot more about the natives. Sure there were killer sunflowers, flying buildings, and a storm created from a meteor strike that looked like a gigantic human eye, but for some reason, the last third of the book was kind of ho hum. The ending felt a bit rushed too.

You know, it's strange to have nostalgia for a book that I just read for the first time, but oddly enough, that's exactly what I feel. Maybe I even read it when I attended Hammocks Middle School and went across the street to the library almost every afternoon during my golden age of reading, and I simply forgot after all the decades of hard drugs, booze, sex, and rock and roll.

There's something comforting and familiar in this book. Or maybe it's going back to that much simpler time in science fiction where aliens spoke English, the speed of light could be broken, and we could come to understand the biggest mysteries of the universe. There is great optimism in Niven's universe. It reminded me in a lot of ways to Gene Roddenberry's vision of mankind's awesome future. In these bright futures, mankind has grown up from its infancy of constant warfare and self destruction and instead has begun to explore a relatively unhostile galaxy. In these bright futures, the stars are reachable and we're no longer alone.

It may be that there really is nothing groundbreaking in *Ringworld* 43 years after it was published. We've seen a ringworld in the famous *HALO* videogame franchise, and we've seen more interesting aliens have been depicted elsewhere. There are much better writers out there with much more fluent beautiful prose and deeper characters than in *Ringworld*, but there was something that just felt right, comforting, and genuinely fun in *Ringworld*. For that I will give it one more extra star than it probably technically deserves.

Bettie? says

The concept of a ringworld is wonderful - Niven's story, not so much, yet good enough to entice me back into after the mega-structure on the other side of the universe is currently topical (if indeed, anyone could use the term 'other side' when talking about our curving and folding universe). Great fun for sci-fi week here on goodreads.

A Dyson sphere is a hypothetical megastructure that completely encompasses a star and captures most or all of its power output. TED Talk: Tabetha Boyajian · Astronomer. Tabetha Boyajian is best known for her research on KIC 8462852, a puzzling celestial body that has inspired otherwise sober scientists to brainstorm outlandish hypotheses.

Adrian says

Well this book won both the Hugo and Nebula award in 1970/71 for best novel, and who am I to argue with the voting panels. In my view this book is astounding (SF pun intended), its characters are well built, and the story is just so far reaching with brilliant science to back it up.

I first read this sometime back in the late 70s and have re-read it a couple of times since, but it has to be 15 years since I last read it, oh how I have missed books this far ranging, this broad in their scope, this thought out, and just this enjoyable.

Shall I go onto sequel number 1, well the problem is, I can't seem to find it, so I shall have to buy it to carry on the adventure.

If you are a SF fan and have never read this book, then I urge you to do so, you will not be disappointed. Thank you Mr Niven for this truly marvellous story !!

Paul Bryant says

I have a lot of faith in science fiction but this one dented it - it's a daft cartoon of a novel in which there's this really big, you know, I mean giant big big enormous, like, world, and these aliens go there, and they droop and mumble about in it, and it's really big, and one of them looks like a carpet and the other looks like a diplodocus, and the other like an old chinaman cause you got to have an old chinaman in your far future novels, yeah. It was showered with awards but i would have showered it with something else.

Greg says

I can't believe this won three big awards.

The story is about as interesting as the trade war minutia of Episodes 1-3 of *Star Wars*. In non-geeky terms, not very interesting. Actually as I went out to buy a cup of coffee this morning I thought that if Larry Niven had teamed up with George Lucas the prequel episodes of *Star Wars* could have been totally ruined, and maybe episodes 4-6 could have been reworked too to make them completely insipid and unwatchable. How? Well, Larry Niven seems to be really interested in stopping times for ships going really fast. For example he has some ship that can travel hundreds of light years in like three minutes or something like that, but then it takes months to slow down- now if the principles of deceleration were applied to the warp-speed (or whatever it was called in *Star Wars*), then so much unnecessary coolness of the first three movies could be eliminated and in the time it took say for the Millennium Falcon to slow down on a mission so much extra trade details could be included.

Anyway, for all of the details given to deceleration and the math involved in figuring out the size of the ringworld (for those who don't really give a shit, it's really really big), Niven knows shit about evolution which would be fine except that he ties up the whole story in selective breeding nonsense that makes no sense at all, and actually works as a cheap literary device to get the characters out of any situation they might happen to find themselves in. I know this is called *Deus ex Machina*, but in this context I like to call it Dungeon Master bullshit.

There is really no story here, except if one thinks of a story as 340 pages of how big a fucking ring is.

There are things to give the asocial and undersexed hope for the future when apparently women will be dumber than a box of rocks but very very easy, and men will have to have constant companionship (be constantly getting their rocks off with these dumber than a box of rocks women) or else they might start raping aliens (yes this is mentioned twice at least, the main character will need a companion or he might rape an alien). This makes sense though because the male lead in this story is really not much smarter than a box of rocks either, we are told he is smart, but he's not. He's a hedonistic moron who constantly needs to be

entertained and have his physical needs met like a hyperactive infant. When in one of the only scenes where something really happens, this idiot is in a dangerous situation he quickly starts whining to himself that there is no entertainment. Maybe this isn't so far fetched a future man though.

Why two stars? Because for some reason the first 70 pages were actually kind of fun, but once the idea of this big ring was fully introduced there was nothing left in this book except for a plot line that was dumber than a box of dung.

Apatt says

Ringworld is definitely a sci-fi classic, a monumental achievement in world building. Any sci-fi aficionados who don't like it should be ashamed of themselves.

Argh! It's never pleasant to go against the conventional wisdom but over at PrintSF (online SF discussion community) I see a lot of comments along the line of "I really want to like this book because everybody say it's great, what am I missing?" I think a lot of people try too hard to like certain books and I don't know why, it does not entail that you are wrong or even that you are right and everybody else is wrong. You like what you like, leave it at that.

OK, enough of the irrelevant opening. There is no denying that Ringworld is a major work in the history of sci-fi. A ginormous artificial ring-shaped planet encircling a star is an amazing concept, especially as Larry Niven is able to back up the concept with real world science. Gravity generated from the centrifugal force of the planet's programmed rotation speed, an inner ring of shadow squares to create nights, a weird "horizon" due to the shape of the planet etc. These are mind blowing concepts and very influential for later generations of sci-fi authors.

The Ringworld itself is a monumental sci-fi creation.

Where it falls down for me is the story and the characters. Having built this amazing world I don't think the events that take place on it make for a very compelling narrative. The characters do get into a lot of trouble but their adventures do not read like edge of the seat thrills. I am having a lot of trouble explaining why the plot does not excite me here, there are many wild inventions here which are almost as awesome as the basic premise itself but I just felt detached from the narrative. Certainly part of it is the characterization, characterization is not *indispensable* for good sci-fi, the likes of Asimov and Clarke were mostly able to get away with quite perfunctory character developments. However, I think they told very riveting stories with the right pacing and at modest page counts. Niven's characters in *Ringworld* are quite colorful but I did not care for any of them and did not give a monkey whether any or all of them snuff it through the course of the narrative.

One problem I perceive is that Niven uses the sci-fi trope of each alien species having one type of overriding character trait. The kzinti are all warlike, the puppeteers are all cowards etc. Why then are humans so diverse in personalities? Real aliens may turn out that way I don't know but it is hard to believe in a species with one personality. Consequently the alien characters come across as a little "one note", but come to think of it the human characters are kind of "one note" too. They don't feel like vivid, complex believable characters, they

are just there to drive the plot. By the end of the book I was feeling quite impatient to be done with it.

For “Big Dumb Object” books I much prefer Clarke’s Rendezvous with Rama, the characters are equally flat but the book somehow feels alive and the sense of wonder is more palpable. As for Larry Niven I am a big fan of his collaborations with Jerry Pournelle, especially The Mote in God’s Eye which is one of my all time favorites.

Ringworld is not “bad” by any stretch of imagination, it’s me, I’m the bad one.

Rating:

5 Stars for the Ringworld planet.

3 Stars for the storyline

2 Stars for the characters

= 3.3333 (etc.) neutron stars

Note:

Another Ringworld art, this depicts a view from the surface of the planet:

Ringworld's "horizon" is interesting to imagine. Given the shape of the planet it does not really have a horizon! The above artwork is probably inaccurate though because the Ringworld is many times the size of Earth (600 million miles in diameter, one million miles wide) so you probably would not be able to see ~~so~~ ~~much~~ any of the upward curvature. I am not sure what you would see but it would look awesome and weird!

Matthew says

Classic science fiction has always been hit or miss for me. I have always been told how great Ringworld is, but I found it to be mediocre and kind of blah. It is a somewhat interesting story, but I never really cared about the characters or what they were doing, which is disappointing because the premise sounded really interesting.

Dirk Grobbelaar says

Not much I can say about this.

It blew my mind.

In order for you to **truly** appreciate *Ringworld* you would have to mentally backtrack forty-odd years.

Big Ideas in Science Fiction are a dime a dozen.

Today.

But in 1970...?

Perhaps Niven’s vision upstaged his characters. Perhaps. But I could still lose myself on the **ring**. It

fascinated me then; it fascinates me now. This novel made authors sit up and pay attention to just how big you could think if you really applied your imagination. Also, I've spent years wracking my mind trying to think just how that **horizon** must look, curving up like that for millions of miles...

Hugo Award – 1970

Nebula Award – 1971

Locus Award – 1971

Respect

Loved it then

Love it now

Favourites

Andrea says

I'm afraid this made me want to punch Larry Niven in the stomach on the behalf of all women everywhere. Along with people who aren't so privileged that life bores them with its comforts, but mostly on behalf of women.

A 180 year old man sleeping with a 20 year old woman? Just so wrong, and it keeps going more wrong. He writes things about Teela like

"Her lips, he saw, were perfect for pouting. She was one of those rare, lucky women whom crying does not make ugly."

It is painfully condescending, even as her power is revealed, her thinking and aware self remains enslaved to it. But I said it got worse. The females of the feline alien race on the ship are non-sentient beings whose only purpose is to have babies, and it is intimated that the puppeteers might have a similar system. We finally meet one of the Ringworld over-race whatever and it's a woman who is not too bright and there were only three women there in a crew of 36 on the spaceship she worked on so obviously she is some kind of prostitute. Why else would a woman be on a spaceship? So apart from that infuriating fact, there are sentences like "Prill tried to explain to me what happened here, as one of her crew explained to her. He had oversimplified of course." And then: "Her touch was a joy as thick as syrup. She knew a terribly ancient secret: that every women is born with a tasp, and that its power is without limit if she can learn to use it..." And she *will* use it to enslave and control her man, of course she will, she has no other options.

Worst of all? He names one of his creatures the frumious bandersnatch. My favourite Carroll creation, I did not appreciate finding it here. The ring world is very cool, Nessus too, but I couldn't get over the anger. Still, I finished it and it kept me turning the pages, so it is now two stars as I suppose one star is for the books I just couldn't even finish.

Katie says

A very interesting concept....BUT, I have to get on my soapbox for a minute. After reading a few of his books, I have to say that Larry Niven's attitude towards women, what they are like and what they are capable of, is sadly lacking. Though his male characters seem to be pretty well fleshed out (human--even if they are alien--fallible and interesting), his female characters are sadly one-dimensional. It seems to me that most the female character in his books are either clueless, idiot savants, helpless before the sexual attraction of the main character(s), or all the above. Ok, I'm off my soapbox now.

Though this little issue nearly spoils it for me, the convoluted plot is well thought-out and the concept of the novel is interesting...blah blah blah...I will say that it's still worth reading. With a grain of salt.

In response to all those that say that Niven should be excused for essentially being an old man... and for being born in the first half of the last century...I'd like to point out the following:

- A) This book was written in 1970, well after the feminist movement had taken root.
- B) There is a vast array of male sci-fi authors, both contemporary with Mr. Niven and writing earlier, that don't have this same issue. **cough cough Tolkien cough Douglas Adams cough Frank Herbert cough**. Excuse me. :)
- C) This is my opinion and a warning to other feminist-types (lukewarm or otherwise), not an attack on Mr. Niven's character nor overall ability as an author. Kind of.
- D) That being said, it's frustrating that an important character in this interesting novel would be so incredibly (and irritatingly) one-dimensional.

Just saying.

TK421 says

On Luis Wu's 200th birthday, he is approached by Nessus, a quasi-equine alien species known as Puppeteers because of the two heads sprouting from their backs that are tethered by strands of skin, to undertake a remarkable journey. Being 200 years old, Luis has seen his share of the universe, so he is a bit skeptical when Nessus asks him to join a force of beings to explore the mysterious Ringworld.

So far so good.

Enter the rest of the cast.

First off, I have no problem with how any alien is created. By my count the possibility of alien life, and what these beings may look like, are limitless. So when Speaker-to-Animals, a Kzinti, is aptly described as being lion-like and ferocious I dig it; likewise, when Teela Brown is brought on board as the token (human) female with sexy attributes, I again dig it, but with a shameful misogynistic sneer. (Let's be honest for a minute, folks. There are plenty of times in 60s, 70s, and even 80s science fiction where the female beauty is there for nothing more than sexual deviance; it was a curse of the times.) But I do have a problem with how this quartet came to be. For my money, I wanted more details of how these species interact, their histories, and even what they are like within their own cultures. Granted, Niven does give some of these details throughout the book, but, I'm greedy, and I wanted more...okay most of the book is about the interactions of these four, but I still wanted more backstory.

So the story itself. Well, you see...uhmm....how about this: Plot: Mysterious sphere (reminiscent of a Dyson sphere) is floating through space and is begging to be explored. I wish I could tell you more; alas, there really isn't more to tell. You see this is not an adventure novel of space exploration or alien world

exploration. This novel is all about ideas. If you're the type of reader that likes to have a solid plotline throughout a story, with nice resolutions at the end, you're going to be disappointed. There are far too many questions that never get addressed again after being introduced, and the biggie question of them all: Who are the Ringworld Engineers? is never given. Basically, RINGWORLD is a novel about the characters insofar as the Reader is allowed to understand them. For instance, there is a wonderful bit of cosmic politics about why humans, and not the Kzinti, were given the knowledge of hyperdrives from the Outsiders. (Think war war war....kind of ironic when you stop to think about it). Furthermore, the mere scope of the Ring is mindboggling. The radius of the sphere is set at one astronomical unit; that is: 93,000,000 miles. Niven explores about .000001% (guesstimate only, put your calculators away) of this through his characters. Like I said, this is a story about ideas. And because this idea of a ringworld is so powerful and unique, this novel rightly deserves to be considered canonical. Just think, where do you think HALO came from?

I digress.

Niven had an idea with this story. Nothing more. Most of the time this would cause a novel to fall flat on its face, lose the reader...not here. It is precisely for this reason that the reader becomes trapped and awed by this story, never wanting to leave, and always searching for answers. Niven allows the reader to leave the novel with all of his ideas, and the permutations of ideas that the reader had while reading the novel...that is AWESOME! Granted, Niven did buckle. He did write a sequel ten years later (THE RINGWORLD ENGINEERS) explaining some of the questions and giving all those that didn't like the original book a nice, tidy bow as an ending. I can't say that I've ever read this; I can say that I will never read this because I don't want to lose the magic of this novel. If you liked Clarke's RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMA, you'll like RINGWORLD. If not, you best steer clear of this one.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Stevie Kincade says

Larry Niven takes a lot of shit. A lot. Without ever reading a word of his before I have heard him called a racist, a sexist pig and a dolt. If the racist statements attributed to him are true, well, that is deplorable but everything I can find about them is 2nd or 3rd hand and seems to be of fairly questionable authenticity. Even in the worst case I can enjoy a Roman Polanski or Woody Allen movie so I should be able to enjoy a Larry Niven book right? He is not *that bad!*

As far as the sexism goes, these are not the strongest female characters you will ever read. They get mocked pretty mercilessly by Louis Wu while he is boinking them at every available opportunity. I do have a fundamental problem with judging a work from 1969 by 2017 moral standards though. I love Heinlein and his cast of buxom babes. Something about reading Niven's description of boobies as *conical* and later, another set as *high and heavy* tickles the inner schoolboy in me. I'm sorry. I can read dozens of recent books without a single description of body type and size. Larry Niven *goes there* .

As far as Niven's failings of hard science go, it doesn't bother me in the slightest that the Ringworld is an impossible structure. It bothers me that a central premise of the story is that *luck is a genetically inherited characteristic*.

What I did like is the idea of the "tasp", a pleasure based weapon that induces instant ecstasy and eventually

addiction. I thought Niven had some terrific turns of phrase *her eyes pierced him like a martini olive* and some giggle inducing dialogue. I loved this exchange between Tila and Speaker-to-animals - a giant Klingon cat:

Tila: *Why, does that challenge your manhood?*

Speaker: *My ability to procreate is not in question*

Michael Dorn could not have delivered that line better.

My absolute favourite Science Fiction trope is “humans encounter massive alien object”. *Rendezvous with Rama* is an all-time favourite. I loved *Revelation Space* and *Arrival*.

Ringworld left me cold though and I think it is because Niven’s writing style is so devoid of clear description (other than his memorable recounting of the shape of the women’s boobies). For the Kjin I see a race of Klingon cats. The “Puppeteers” I see a cowardly “Mr Men” type alien with 2 heads. For the Ringworld I see the image on the cover and found it very hard to visualise based on the writing. So many times while reading it I was like “what are we doing” “who are these people” “oh we are not at the thing” etc. The plot wasn’t complex but it just seemed to jump all over the place without any clear descriptions and I had to pick up what was happening from context. The actual descriptions of things were bare bones thin and I felt my attention frequently wandering.

The audiobook was narrated by Tom Parker and one of the few very old Audible audiobooks (1996!) that was very well done so no problems there.

J.G. Keely says

Radio waves move at the speed of light. This is not particularly noticeable on Earth, but if you were at the sun, it would take eight and a half minutes for a signal to reach you, which would make a phonecall rather awkward. It would be even worse at the next closest star, Proxima Centauri, where messages take four years. Thus, the speed of light is the rate at which information moves, at which change can propagate.

But most people don't think, when watching Star Trek, that Captain Picard shouldn't be able to have a quick chat with someone back on Earth. For those who *do* think that, there is Hard Sci Fi. It's a subgenre where the author actually knows something about scientific theory and tries to use that knowledge to make his world seem more reasonable to other people who know something about science.

It can be delightful to hear someone tell Commander Shepard that such communication is possible due to 'Quantum Entanglement', especially if you already know what that means (even if Shepard *doesn't* know, meaning you are now playing a character dumber than you). Thus, Hard Sci Fi is made up of a series of technological thought experiments, which can be very interesting, or very dull.

For instance, you can play a fun game with the author and second-guess their ideas, which OCD aspies seem to get off on. I decided to play around a bit myself and test his repeated assertion that it would take a lot of time to populate the Ringworld, thoroughly solving overpopulation problems for a species like humans.

Human beings on Earth double their population every fifty years, which is a geometric progression (x2, x4, x8, x16, x32), so that the growth gets faster and faster. The current population density of humans on the

Earth is 45.3 people per square kilometer of land. Take the 6.8 billion humans on earth and move them to the ringworld (1.6×10 to the 15th square kilometers, but half of that's water), and you get eight and a half people for every million square kilometers of land. That is a lot of room to spare.

But that's before we start doubling and redoubling. Since the Ringworld's land area is 1.5 million times the land area of Earth, we'd need 1.5 million times as many people to reach the same population density. We would reach a population of 1.5 million times 6.8 billion between doublings 20 and 21, which--at 50 years per doubling--is just over a thousand years; not really that long a respite, in galactic terms.

And that doesn't even get into the migration rates, since, to get from one side of the ring to the other in a thousand years would require traveling 16 thousand miles per day, so you're probably starting to see both how distracting and how tedious Hard Sci Fi can be.

But Niven's isn't that bad, and he rarely gets into the numbers. A lot of readers might not even consider him to be real 'Hard Sci Fi' today--he's got faster-than-light travel, after all, and without a complex explanation or anything. But if a writer wants to make an engaging adventure story, they can't let themselves get too bogged down in the Science of it all. And Niven doesn't, it's just a treat for the reader who knows what to look for--some of it's even informative.

His characters are fairly straight-forward. We have a smart, introspective, science-minded guy who doesn't have a whole lot of personality. We've got distant, unusual logic alien, giant noble warrior alien, and a naive girl. It's not a bad exploration of these now-familiar tropes, even after all the intervening time.

The woman I found rather annoying, in part because she reminded me of the type of girl I usually avoided at parties: someone who had been pretty and well-off her entire life and hence, never had the need to develop a personality. I much prefer people who started our weird and awkward and only became attractive later in life.

But, at least Niven actually tries to explore this aspect of her character, instead of merely taking it for granted that this is how women are. I won't say his portrayal of women is ideal, she and the only other woman in the book are defined by their femininity and derive all of their power from sex. They do it somewhat knowingly, but it hardly makes for very complex characters or a challenging worldview, nor is it very 'alien'.

The plot itself is passable, much more sober and well-constructed than Riverworld, but also less whimsical. It moves along at a quick pace, uncovering a few intergalactic political mysteries on the way, but we don't get a very solid conclusion at the end, so I must assume it's more of a lead-in to the next book in the series. We do get some closure, but I would have appreciated a stronger and more definitive arc.

Altogether an enjoyable, unpretentious read, and it's not hard to see why it became influential in the genre. It's not going to feel revolutionary to sci fi readers, even compared to earlier works like Star Trek and the Golden-age authors, but it's a solid, well-executed piece.

Comments below contain spoilers.

Mark says

this book was silly. the ringworld was a cool idea, and the interplay between the species was intriguing, but

there were a lot of strikes against this book.

- * anthropomorphic cat people that are fierce proud warriors; i imagine the furry contingent had a field day with this one
- * not much happens in the latter half of this book - mostly a lot of traveling across the ringworld
- * at several points there are lengthy sections where i'm unable to tell what's going on because i can't visualize the strange concept the author's pushing - for example, my conception of the shadow squares was totally f'ed. unlike cyberpunk where you can ignore descriptions of data flying around the Matrix, in ringworld these difficult-to-visualize things were integral to the plot.
- * the book is a mite sexist: the male characters are either hyper intelligent or hyper buff-ass (there's even a He-Man type with an oversized sword), whereas one of the female characters is a ditz with SuperLuck so she lucks her way into advantageous situations and the other is a prostitute who's only skill is using sex to control men. naturally, both have about 5 pages from their introduction to when they sleep with the protagonist.

ditch this shit

Manny says

The magic intersection point of the old and new styles of SF... basically, Golden Age space opera with cool aliens, but also including sex. (The sex isn't with the cool aliens, in case you were wondering - that's James Tiptree Jr. you're thinking of).

If you are an SF fan and have never been to the Ringworld, try and visit them some time! If you're not particularly into SF, well, these days Iain M. Banks does the same kind of thing better, so I would recommend reading "Consider Phlebas", "Player of Games" or "Use of Weapons" instead. But Ringworld is still a fun book.

Baelor says

I started this book expecting an awesome experience -- it won the Hugo AND Nebula awards, after all.

Too bad it was a hot mess.

The smile is because the book was lighthearted.

What to say of Niven's prose, other than that it is horrible? The dialog is stilted; often it is impossible to tell what the characters are talking about because their references are unclear or new information necessary to understand WTF is going on passes through the cardboard cutout/protagonist's head only after the page-long conversation has ended. The narrative is equally confusing; at times it was impossible to visualize what was happening (e.g. with the shadow square wire) or what anything looked like.

The protagonists have nonexistent emotional ranges, and when they do emote (each always in the same way, since all four are completely one-dimensional), the reader is told through adverbs and adjectives exactly how they feel (how many times is "fear" used in reference to Nessus, for example), eliminating any sense of complexity. Furthermore, there is no wonder. Everything is prosaic, which is a problem when the discovery and exploration of the unknown is the focal point of the book. When they finally see Ringworld, we are told that Louis will "remember this" (99), but it rings completely hollow since no visual impression or sense of awe is communicated in any depth. In almost every case, their response to the titanic and dangerous Ringworld is best described as dull surprise.

"OMG!!! An enormous artificial structure 600,000,000 miles long built by an unknown race a really long time ago!!!"

Characterization is not much better. Louis Wu is two hundred years old, which has no consequence or manifestation at all other than internal reflections on how he is two hundred years old. We have Nessus, a two-headed alien, who changes from an intelligent coward with instances of bravery to an intelligent coward with instances of bravery who speaks an additional language. Speaker-To-Animals, a member of the feline Kzin species, experiences a similarly fundamental character change. All of them have no motivation whatsoever for anything besides a generic racial survival motive (supernovae will wipe everything out unless they can develop fast enough space flight) that is never explored in any detail or complicated in any way.

The exception is perhaps Teela Brown, a young, naïve, lucky girl, whose development is obvious because *Louis explicitly describes the inane ways in which she has changed*. Why not SHOW us? Not that her character changed in a good way: she went from being oblivious eye candy for Louis to less-oblivious eye candy for another man. The only other woman, by the way, is a near-bald prostitute with the unfortunate name of Halrlopprillalar Hotrufan. She serves essentially no plot function, but does often "touch Louis *here and there*," inducing the vaguest orgasms I have ever encountered in literature. As an illustration of gender in *Ringworld*, I will leave you with this gem:

"He got very uncomfortable and stopped sleeping with me. He thinks you own me, Louis."

"Slavery?"

"Slavery for women, I think. You'll tell him you don't own me, won't you?"

Louis felt pain in his throat. "It might save explanations if I just sold you to him. If that's what you want."

"You're right. And it is."

Niven's Enlightened Woman

The plot is not much better. Nessus the puppeteer rounds up three other crewmates haphazardly in order to explore Ringworld for unclear reasons. Then they crash-land on the surface. The rest of the novel is spent on Ringworld, a place so big and empty that it is dreadfully boring. The four leads fly around. Stuff happens that does not move the plot forward at all, or, worse, is discernibly contrived so that the plot does advance in the most mundane way possible without any real character growth or revelation. Nothing is explored in any depth and there is no payoff whatsoever. The Ringworld is ultimately irrelevant in every way, (view spoiler). The book ends with a whimper and little resolution. What makes this so ludicrous is that an enormous terraformed Ringworld (view spoiler) should be interesting *in se*. Niven's genius lies in executing marvelous premises in the most mind-numbingly dull and intellectually sterile ways possible.

Niven touches upon some interesting ideas -- birth control, homogenization of cultures with increased

contact, FTL travel, introduction of non-native species to a new environment (the Slaver sunflowers), breakdown of civilization -- but does nothing more with them. Most of the actual discussions about these issues take place in half a page and never resurface. There is essentially no world-building. Various alien races exist and have different dispositions; they are advanced. That is all we get. On *Ringworld*, we learn that (view spoiler) For a novel about "big ideas," there was a disappointing dearth of them.

Visual representation of the bountiful depth of *Ringworld*

Perhaps the most egregious flaw of the novel is the malignant plot tumor of Teela's luck. By the end, the reader learns that (view spoiler). First, how unnecessary. How more meaningful would her journey have been if she had started young and innocent and ended with her naïveté eliminated because she had matured into a real woman with real agency? Instead, any significance and growth is ripped away from us as Niven piles on the pseudo-fatalistic nonsense for pages and pages WITH NO PAYOFF.

Second, what an absolutely garbage idea. Fate would have been more plausible because at least it is not empirically falsifiable. Niven studied math, so he should know better, and indeed he does: At one point Louis states, "All he's really found is the far end of a normal curve. Probability theory says you exist...Lady Luck has no memory at all" (126). Exactly. So why do technologically-advanced, intelligent characters maintain to the end of the book that Teela is extraordinarily lucky and that past INDEPENDENT events were somehow predictable because she has ALWAYS been lucky? They all know it is mathematically impossible, and no elaboration or explanation is ever given.

Seriously, what am I missing?

This book was just **BAD**. Niven does get props for the cool idea of the *Ringworld* and the few mentions of its history (view spoiler), but nothing else. I cannot imagine why this was well-received; I can only assume the reviewers like the idea and ignored everything else. Just read the plot summary and be proud that you have experienced everything this book has to offer.

William says

Being an engineer by nature, and by training (10 yrs at MIT), when I read this book (in the 1970s) I went supernova. Massive engineering on an unimaginable scale, made real by Niven. Fabulous!

Ben Babcock says

There's a word often bandied about when people discuss books, particularly fantasy and science fiction books, which often involve the creation of worlds unlike our own. That term is (perhaps unsurprisingly) *worldbuilding*. And if ever there were a paradigm case for worldbuilding, *Ringworld* would be it. The eponymous structure is not a planet but, for all intents and purposes, functions as one. With a simple concept and a little bit of physics, Larry Niven has a striking novum that's brand, setting, and mystery all in one. If only *Ringworld* lived up to that potential. . . .

The first half of the book wasn't bad. Watching Nessus recruit Louis, Speaker To Animals, and Teela was a fascinating look at Niven's far future. I can't say I was able to visualize the puppeteers very well, but I got the idea of transfer booths, cat-like Kzinti, hyperdrive, etc. This is my first science fiction book by Larry Niven, and it instilled in me a good opinion of Niven's ability to balance carefully hard science fiction concepts (like an adherence to relativistic travel) with soft science fiction (an emphasis on the sociological effects of spaceflight and unexplained plot devices like hyperdrive). Specifically, I loved his sociological asides, such as Louis' speculations about how much Nessus and other Puppeteers have interfered with human and Kzinti development. Niven makes good use of the time it takes to reach and explore the Ringworld itself to show us his version of the future.

Alas, once the action is restricted to the Ringworld and the new goal is to discover any remaining pockets of Ringworld Engineer civilization, the only thing remarkable about the story is the alacrity with which it becomes unremarkable. It's apparent that something happened to cause civilization to "fall" on the Ringworld. Louis' speculation about a microbe that ate away at complex compounds eventually proved correct (and very cool, I'll admit). That isn't enough to save the book from a mediocre trip from the crash site to an abandoned city, where they meet up with a surviving Engineer (who is more like a prostitute, posing as a god). Along the way, we had to endure torturous talk about how Teela was "bred for luck". As a result, she has almost zero free will, because nearly all her actions result from chance. I'm sceptical about accepting this whole "breeding for luck" idea, but suspension of disbelief compels me to shelve the matter and ignore Niven's incessant speculations. If only Niven hadn't similarly ignored the most interesting part of Ringworld itself: its inhabitants!

I'm talking about the fallen descendants of Engineers, of course, not the original inhabitants. Louis himself, near the very end of the book, reflects on the fact that the Ringworld is so vast as to support a great diversity of cultures. And Nessus makes a valid point that, because it isn't a planet and the Engineers could just transmute matter from one form to another, the Ringworld has no metal ores to mine. The only way to make tools is to scavenge what's left from abandoned cities. It would have been interesting to see how those diverse cultures and see how they've adapted to the unique challenges of living on a ring (which they think is an arch). Aside from a few scenes where Louis and the others pose as gods and meeting Seeker, we don't get a lot of face time with the natives. Niven and his characters are more obsessed with what happened to the Ringworld Engineers and (understandably) getting off the Ringworld.

It might seem strange that I didn't share their obsession. After all, I'm a technophile. The Ringworld is an awesome idea, and I was curious to discover who had built it. Nevertheless, I'm jaded enough that I was sure—especially after learning that civilization had fallen—that the answer wouldn't be very satisfactory. I was right.

After shrouding it in so much mystery, Niven reveals that the demise of Ringworld civilization wasn't nearly so mysterious. Louis was right about the microbe. The Engineers are dead, mad, or integrated into the fallen societies scattered around the ring. Only Pril is left to tell her story. But because Louis and Nessus had already unravelled much of that story on their own, there wasn't much left to serve as a surprise or a twist.

But it's the journey, not the destination, right? Aside from my complaints about not showing us more Ringworld culture, it's true that Niven gives us plenty of episodic events on the way toward the rim wall. We get killer sunflowers, a massive storm, and a floating castle with a holographic map. Ringworld would be an awesome place for a roleplaying game, just because it's such a wonderfully built world.

So in case I haven't browbeaten you enough yet, I'll be explicit: *Ringworld* is great because of its worldbuilding and sucks because of its story. If you're one of those people who likes reading about intriguing

hypothetical constructions like rings, Dyson spheres, etc., then you should probably read this book. However, one cannot draw much satisfaction from the mystery of the Ringworld or the characters who try to solve it. Unlike the Ringworld, they aren't built nearly so well.

My Reviews of the Ringworld series:

The Ringworld Engineers →
