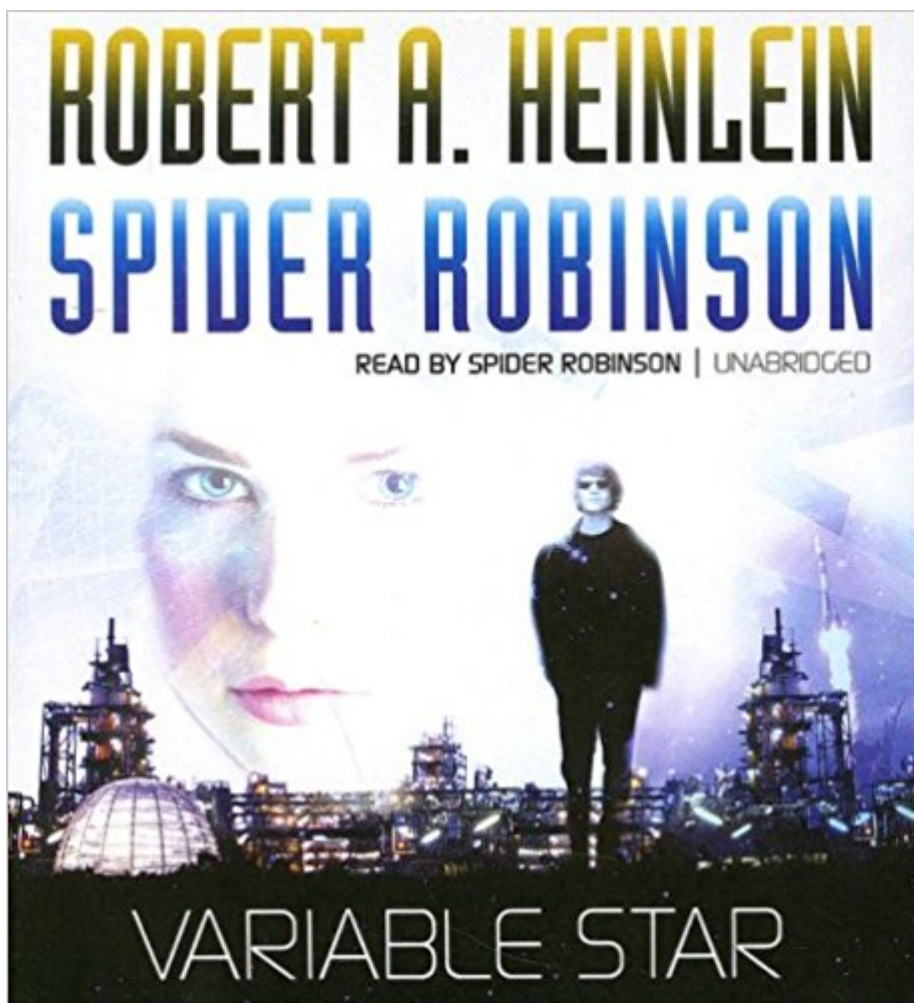




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Variable Star



Synopsis

At his death in 1988, Robert A. Heinlein left a legacy of novels and short stories that almost single-handedly defined modern science fiction. But one of Heinlein's masterpieces was never finished. In 1955, he began work on *Variable Star*, a powerful and passionate tale of two young lovers driven apart by pride, power, and the vastness of interstellar time and space. Then he set it aside to focus on other novellas. The detailed outline and notes he created for this project lay forgotten for decades, only to be rediscovered almost a half century later. Now the Heinlein estate has authorized award-winning author Spider Robinson to expand that outline into a full-length novel. The result is vintage Heinlein, faithful in style and spirit to the Grand Master's original vision.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book, like many posthumous 'collaborations' that are attempts to complete an unfinished work, has both good and bad things about it. First, yes, Heinlein's touch is definitely evident, mainly in the basic story setting and its main characters. Clearly the outline and notes that Spider worked from defined these elements unambiguously, and anyone familiar with Heinlein's work will find much here that will evoke that feeling that so many of his YA books from the fifties had. The story is very definitely set in the 'Future History' line, with references to *Red Planet*, *If This Goes On*, *Coventry*, *Time for the Stars*, *Starman Jones*, *Space Cadet*, and multiple other stories. Its protagonist is, at least at the start of this book, a rather typical Heinlein older teen, a young man who starts with no clear idea of what he wants from life, and while quite intelligent has a tendency to leap without fully

considering all the consequences. But it is also true that this is Spider writing, and as such it's told in Spider's voice, with his own very distinctive style, which includes his penchant for punning, and to some extent, mysticism, neither of which Heinlein would normally touch. This is not necessarily a bad thing - I've enjoyed many of Spider's other books, and his style normally complements his story material very well. But here I found some of this a little jarring, as it simply didn't match my expectation of how Heinlein's voice would have told this story. Not that Spider either should or could have really matched Heinlein's voice - any attempt to do so would have probably been a disaster.

First the bad news. According to the afterword, all Spider started with was 7 pages of notes (there were more, but any additional pages have been lost) and 14 3x5 cards with more notes. So the plot in broad terms is recognizably Heinleinesque, but he didn't have much to go on. But the real disappointment is that Spider's agent told him not to write the novel in a Heinlein style, but in his own. Understandable, sure. But it just doesn't feel like a Heinlein book (much less a Heinlein Juvenile, which the *Publisher's Weekly* semi-compares it to in their review). It has a fair amount of profanity, multiple drug references (soft, hard and alcohol) and sentences like "Damned souls condemned to yearn forever, and destroy all they touched, knowing it was pointless." As a Spider Robinson book it's OK, but he's really pushing it to include RAH's name on it (no matter how lovingly he tried to do him justice). OK, now onto the good parts. Throughout the first, oh, half of the book (but then it peters out), Spider peppers the story liberally with RAH allusions. For example: The story starts with Joel (the hero) and Jinny (as in Mrs. Ginny Heinlein?) dancing. Afterwards, she says, "After dancing like that ... a couple really ought to get married". Sound familiar? It should. The *Number of the Beast* (with its own ton of allusions) starts the same way -- "After a tango like that the couple ought to get married." In both books they go to (Jinny's home) which "isn't anywhere" and (Deety's/Jake's cabin) "It's ... a nowhere place." And there are many, many more. If you're like me and have read and re-read Heinlein's works so often you've practically got them memorized, you'll have fun picking out the references. Trivia question: In *Variable Star*, on several occasions people use the phrase "Crave pardon."

Variable Star was not written by Robert Heinlein. Its plot, characters, and setting may have been devised and drawn out by the late Science Fiction master, but the gaps most certainly show whenever Robinson attempts to fill them in. I'll admit that I'm quite a Heinlein fan, and I loved the first half of this book more than any another Heinlein I've read. It has a catchy premise that reels you into a fantastic world, with a main character that is perfect in his quirkiness and authenticity. Most

good works of fiction make the reader grip the page during the climax, putting all other responsibilities aside until the plot is resolved. Variable Star is the first book I've read in recent memory that made me feel this way during the exposition and the initial chapters. The setting, the characters, and other elements in the novel are fascinating, especially because it deals heavily with one man's internal struggle to make sense of his own world, instead of the bloody (and predictable) conflict-based plots that are all-too-common in SciFi today. However, halfway through the book, this came screeching to a halt. The trademark Heinlein references (including everyone's favorite, line marriages) still kept flowing, but the writing seemed rushed, the plot seemed forced, and the characters simply became less believable. I won't ruin it, but the climax of the novel was brought on by one of the worst plot devices I've ever read in published fiction and solved by a deus ex machina that was only slightly better. I finished the book with my jaw agape, trying to piece together the sheer ridiculousness of the events I had just read.

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