



Houston, Houston, Do You Read?

James Tiptree Jr. , Bob Eggleton (Illustrator)

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The astronauts had the "right stuff" to deal with almost anything...

A ship of male astronauts, who may be off course for their return trip home, are intercepted by a space vessel controlled by only women. Who's off course now?

Houston, Houston, Do You Read? Details

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Author : James Tiptree Jr. , Bob Eggleton (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review Houston, Houston, Do You Read? for online ebook

Amy says

This one I came across quite by accident, but the oddness of it endeared it to me. A mission into space ends up flung way out of their own time, and they get recovered by a ship with a mostly female crew and a very strange little secret.

Odd, somewhat unexpected, and a fun read.

Kelly says

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1. I agree, super-confusing at first, in a way that feels little coy with its writing style, like, there are really three different timelines going on, the present moment where Lorimer is drugged up, the flashbacks to wh

Ed [Redacted] says

Tiptree was, in my opinion, a national treasure. She was at her best in the short form and this novella is one of her best works. Tiptree has written some of my favorite short stories (I was blown away by "Beam Us Home"). There is no way to really explain the plot without spoiling it so suffice to say it is funny and dark and grim all at once, everything I love in a story. Well plotted and written in an easy, readable style that almost lulls you into a state of calm while the grim reality is slowly, inexorably revealed. A first rate story by a first rate author.

Raegan Butcher says

Excellent sci fi novel with plenty to say about race and gender and the war between the sexes and many other thoughtful and illuminating subjects. Also pretty funny.

Bad Horse says

This story is vile hate speech which claims that all men are rapists who can't stop themselves from raping women the moment they meet them, and the world is better off without them. It's obscene that it won the Hugo and the Nebula, obscene that Alice Sheldon published it pretending to be a man, and even more obscene that the Tiptree Award, for fiction about gender, is named after such a vicious sexist.

Em says

Lulled me into a false sense of security and then hit me with decades of potent feminist rage over the terrible existence of men. Definitely a story of its time and its author, but I loved it.

Emily says

Once again, Tiptree terrifies me with the possible lifespan of gender roles and what the consequences may be. Impressively paced storytelling.

Lit Bug says

I'm even more convinced that the English canon has been highly unfair to Tiptree by putting her in a little box called "feminist science fiction". It is accurate, alright, but facts sometimes obscure the truth. Being a devoted student of the restrictive, conservative canon, I never took up anything other than *classic* literature, and somehow, a few amazing recent SF movies compelled me to take it up for my 5-year long research sentence. I picked up SF because I didn't find anything else better than feminist cyberpunk that would sustain my interest for half-a-decade. So I got to someone called James Tiptree, Jr. who was in reality Alice Sheldon and had written some terrific works that were once praised for being "masculine" and are now read as "feminist".

This is only the second work by her that I've read, and I'm already in awe. I've never seen a woman (apart from C.L. Moore) to write so powerfully, employ elements of hard SF and/or cyberpunk and yet, without overt sentimentality, write something explicitly feminist, and still extremely relevant.

This novella won both the Hugo and the Nebula in late '70s. It is about three male astronauts who have embarked upon a circumsolar journey in their space shuttle, trying hard to make contact with their base in Houston. Houston does not reply, but they pick up, instead, strange transmissions with women talking to each other in Aussie accents. They soon realize that the voices are radio transmissions from another space shuttle, and the women tell them that the men have been flung off-course not only across *space*, but *time* as well, and that they've been floating in space since two centuries.

In a bid to go back to the Earth, or whatever is left of it now, they reluctantly board the women's shuttle. They soon realize, however, that an epidemic on Earth had wiped out almost its entire population, leaving the survivors sterile, and the population is now devoid of men. The women reproduced through cloning, and injected some women with testosterone for works that demanded greater physical strength. They had never seen a man.

While Bud, one of the astronauts dreams of fornicating with all the women he has suddenly chanced upon after two hundred years, Dave plans to bring back Christ, and with the Lord, the patriarchal system that shall once again, presumably, recreate Earth as it was and should have been, according to him. Lorimer, the only one who seems to see things the way they are, is too powerless to stop them. Or the women, who, he learns, have no intention of keeping the men alive.

While male writers of that era lauded Tiptree's works as fiction that "summed up men's experiences", her works are no longer read in that respect. It would require a reader to be blind not to pick up the feminist

concerns that drive her stories and novellas. While in *The Girl Who Was Plugged In/Screwtop* she charts the female body through technology, in this novella, she examines the conservative male stereotypical wish of "conquest".

While Bud dreams of conquering women's bodies into submission by forcing himself upon one of the twin Judys, ecstatic at the baseless thoughts of women clamoring for him in a land where there were no males, Dave prepares to conquer the women by making them submissive to Christ, and through Christ, to men.

The males are easily disturbed, even before they aboard the women's craft on account of the absence of references to men and institutions they supposed arose on account of the existence of men:

"You notice they never talk about their husbands?" Bud laughs. "I asked a couple of them what their husbands did and I swear they had to think. And they all have kids. Believe me, it's a swinging scene down there, even if old. Andy acts like he hasn't found out what it's for."

"Maybe they don't have families. You ever hear'em mention anybody getting married? That has to be the one thing on a chick's mind. Mark my words, there's been some changes made."

It even talks about the "ethics" of cloning – while Lorimer is aghast at the idea that none of the people he has seen after a space of two hundred years are "real" and yet they seem perfectly natural, real and different, one of the Judys, who had volunteered the information, extols the virtues of having multiple selves, as opposed to having only one.

"How do you know who you are? Or who anybody is? All alone, no sisters (clones) to share with! You don't know what you can do, or what would be interesting to try. All you poor singletons, you why, you just have to blunder along and die, all for nothing!" - the idea being that it must be so lonely for us not to realize the potentialities of our different selves, which Lorimer ruminates over as:

Bemused, Lorimer tries to think how it would be, hearing the voices of three hundred years of Orren Lorimers. Lorimers who were mathematicians or plumbers or artists or bums or criminals, maybe. The continuing exploration and completion of self. And a dozen living doubles; aged Lorimers, infant Lorimers. And other Lorimers' women and children . . . would he enjoy it or resent it? He doesn't know.

I was in splits at this idea – obviously, I've never thought of cloning that way – the only 'good' use of it in my mind up to now was resurrecting a dead loved one, only to realize s/he was the same only in body, not in mind. And a movie (*The Island*) gave me the 'bad' idea that I could clone myself and keep her in captivity and use her organs when mine failed – but I'm not going to do that. And I have no idea if, like Lorimer, I'd like to see a dozen Lit Bugs strolling around the city as pilots, beggars, gangsters, homemakers, assassins or schizophrenics.

All through the work, Lorimer, however, is the only one who seems sane. Unsuccessfully, he tries to get Bud off Judy and later maintains that the women were doing just fine by themselves when Dave calls them '*lost children... who have forgotten He who made them... and who, for generations have lived in the darkness*'.

Like Bud's attempt to rape Judy, Dave's rhetoric of "*Women are not capable of running anything. You should know that, Lorimer. Look what they've done here, it's pathetic. Marking time, that's all. Poor souls.*" Dave sighs gravely. "*It is not their fault. I recognize that. Nobody has given them any guidance for three hundred years. Like a chicken with its head off.*" is full of chilling implications. The comic, amusing, slightly sarcastic tone of the novella suddenly turns grim with the possibility of Bud and Dave taking over the two million women.

But the scene turns even grimmer with the until now reasonable Lorimer's argument when the women kill

Bud and Dave:

"They were good men," Lorimer repeats elegiacally. He knows he is speaking for it all, for Dave's Father, for Bud's manhood, for himself, for Cro-Magnon, for the dinosaurs too, maybe. "I'm a man. By god yes, I'm angry. I have a right. We gave you all this, we made it all. We built your precious civilization and your knowledge and comfort and medicines and your dreams. All of it. We protected you, we worked our balls off keeping you and your kids. It was hard. It was a fight, a bloody fight all the way. We're tough. We had to be, can't you understand? Can't you for Christ's sake understand that?"

"We're trying." Lady Blue sighs. "We are trying, Dr. Lorimer. Of course we enjoy your inventions and we do appreciate your evolutionary role. But you must see there's a problem. As I understand it, what you protected people from was largely other males, wasn't it? We've just had an extraordinary demonstration. You have brought history to life for usBut the fighting is long over. It ended when you did, I believe. We can hardly turn you loose on Earth, and we simply have no facilities for people with your emotional problems"

(view spoiler)

What disturbs me here is the implication of the exchange. I'm uncomfortable with the idea that men are "essentially" violent, creating nuisance and domination wherever they go, while women are team-players, spreading peace whenever they are left alone. It is this particular thing that irks me more because I hadn't expected it from Tiptree. I think it more as a result of Radical Feminism that was in vogue in the '70s when this work was published. Like Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, which features a peaceful future Earth rechristened *Whileaway* that is men-free for 400 years, this story/novella too comes across as a bit misandrist. Which is as bad as being misogynist.

Apart from this one big issue I have from this short work, I found it hilarious, sarcastic and powerful in terms of narrative style. I am so much in love with this particular choice of words. Tiptree and Moore have adopted a peculiarly strong, sharp style that is so in sync with hard SF and satire. It is curt, unsentimental, un-descriptive, wary of lengthy expositions and bare. I haven't seen any female writer after them write so well – I do love Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ (only a bit), Linda Nagata and Melissa Scott – but none of them sting so hard.

In fact, they're the female counterparts of Kurt Vonnegut and William Gibson. I don't think I can make out who I'm reading without knowing it beforehand.

Stephanie says

An excellent sci-fi novella, written in the 1970s by Alice Sheldon. Tiptree was her pen name. Three male astronauts encounter a strange space craft after their own ship is damaged by a solar flare. They are unable to return to the planet as planned, but they're rescued by this other crew. The crew is human, but something's a little different about them.

The overall question is: what would society look like, function like, if there were no males? Can males introduced to such a society adapt, or will their essential sexual-aggressive-warlike male nature always dominate?

It's hard to believe Sheldon/Tiptree was around 60 when she wrote this story, and that the story is nearly 40

years old. It feels very contemporary. It reminds me of a sort of inverse Handmaid's Tale.

Andreas says

Full review at my blog.

Almeta says

Chauvinistic Pigs meet I Am Woman! Hear me roar!?

Renée says

The heavy dose of biological determinism didn't sit too well with me. The whole piece discusses nature vs. nurture, both in the contexts of gender and personality types, and lands almost aggressively in the "nature" camp.

I'm also not at all fond of the idea that women would somehow create a wonderfully peaceful society if left to themselves. I gather, though, this is an older feminist concept that's thankfully faded in recent years.

Like many other readers, I found multiple timelines confusing. Certainly representative of a drugged state, but a little too hazy to keep track of.

I still enjoyed 'Houston, Houston', especially as it was my first real exposure to Tiptree, but it only gets three stars.

martha says

Virtual book club with Kelly!

This story starts out annoyingly and intentionally confusingly (yeah, that's a lot of adverbs in a row, suck it Stephen King), but once it got going I really liked it. However I wanted FAR FAR FAR more exploration of the society the book presents. As in, there needs to be a novel about this world and all its negative implications and rough edges and details. Not gonna say any more because of spoilers, but oh, how I want someone to run with this idea today.

Ethan Everhart says

There's a lot in here that has not aged well. The discourse around gender has changed a lot, but I was still able to really appreciate what Tiptree/Sheldon was trying to accomplish here. There's a bit too much biological determinism for my liking, but the question of whether the concepts of "men" and "male" are redeemable is a compelling one. My takeaway as a cisgender man reading this is that there is hope, but not for us. Masculinity is a prison and in this story, Tiptree/Sheldon rejects the idea that it can be rehabilitated. I've thought as much for a while; so it goes.

As to the structure of the book, it took me a little bit to grasp what was happening regarding flashbacks and viewpoint shifts. Also, there's a lengthy sexual assault scene that made me hugely uncomfortable, but when I finished the novella I realized that its presence is integral to Tiptree/Sheldon's themes.

Derek says

Read this in an Asimov SF omnibus I was given as a teenager, and it was a transformative experience. The story "Houston, Houston," that is. Had no idea until I got to grad school that it was an "important" story. I just thought it was good. Who knew. Now I have to go back and read it again all these years later, because it's pretty hazy. I'll come back and edit this when I do.
