



## R.U.R. & War with the Newts

*Karel Čapek*

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### **R.U.R. & War with the Newts** Karel Čapek

Two dystopian satires from one of the most distinguished writers of 20th-century European science fiction.

R.U.R. is the work that first introduced the word 'robot' into popular usage.

Written against the background of the rise of Nazism, War With the Newts concerns the discovery in the South Pacific of a sea-dwelling race, which is enslaved and exploited by mankind. In time they rebel, laying siege to the strongholds of their former masters in a global war for supremacy.

R.U.R., or Rossum's Universal Robots, seen by many as a modern interpretation of the 'golem' myth, is regarded as the most important play in the history of SF. It introduced the word 'robot' and gave the genre one of its most enduring tropes.

### **R.U.R. & War with the Newts Details**

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## Koen Crolla says

*R.U.R.* (or *Rossum's Universal Robots*) may be the play that gave the world the word "robot", but that doesn't make it hard science fiction. The best description that comes to mind is "technophobic mysticism"; it's a Luddite slur against modern progress distinguishable from Crichton only in the quality of its dialogue. *War with the Newts*, on the other hand, has redeeming features. It's a novella rather than a play, and apparently mostly included because *R.U.R.* itself is only about seventy pages long, but its style is halfway between Lovecraft and Verne (closer to Lovecraft when it comes to racism, unfortunately) and it has intelligent enslaved newts conquering Earth. Its theme may be broadly the same as *R.U.R.*'s (man's inhumanity and hubris lead to bad things), but it doesn't have the technophobic overtones or the lazy delivery of the former, and it's more clearly satirical; it was, after all, written in 1932, and to its credit, it doesn't just deal with rising fascism and reckless militarisation, but also with European colonialism and American segregation.

(I do find it amusing that *War with the Newts* had nations building whole new continents using enslaved newts, and the most ambitious thing he could think of for the Dutch to do was to drain Zeeland. If he'd only known.)

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## Aurélien Thomas says

I really enjoyed 'R.U.R.'. It surely is a naïve play with a simplistic plot and one-dimensional characters but, it's playful, witty, fun and highly entertaining. I don't know if Capek wanted here to raise an alarm or if, on the contrary, he just wanted to dabble and amuse himself with the usual technophobic fears. In any case he managed to pack into a few pages and in a fun way some serious questions about technological progress, its means, and possible (I personally don't think so, but?) consequences. Here are indeed some clever darts being thrown around and, it would be a pity to miss such a read.

'War with the Newts' is in the same vein -an humour both dark and plain silly serving an intelligent satire. Written during the rise of Nazism and its obsession with 'lebensraum', it's also a merciless slap into greed's face and what capitalism's worst aspects have to offer. The human race itself is here not portrayed kindly! It's too long at times but, Capek had so much fun writing it (it feels on every page!) that it always remains entertaining.

Don't be fooled by its omnipresent humour (at turns dark or quite childish), here's the work of a writer who knows how to make his readers laugh while, at the same time, giving them food for thoughts. Highly recommended!

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## Israeliano says

How can we declare war against ISIS, if ISIS is not a state? How can declare war against insurgents, if they are not a country? How can we declare war against the Newts, then?

It is quite incredible that "War with the Newts" described many of the political problems of today in such a clear way. Who is providing the weapons to the Newts (ISIS)? What about the Syria conflict, doesn't it look familiar to the Channel conflict?

## Rhys says

I wish that *\*War with the Newts\** had been printed on its own or that the play *\*RUR\** had been positioned at the end of this book rather than the beginning. I think that casual browsers who pick up this book and turn the first few pages only to encounter a play from 1920 might be put off. After all, I am a voracious reader but I only rarely read plays. Plays are for performing and watching. This isn't to say that *\*RUR\** isn't an important piece of work. It manifestly is.

But the novel that follows it, *\*War with the Newts\**, is one of the finest political, social, economic and philosophical satires written during the 20th century. The story tells of how mankind becomes the agent of its own destruction thanks to greed and the unstoppable engines of big business. It's partly also a satire against the rise of the Nazis (it was published in 1936). The writing is crisp, clever, funny, exquisite; and the structure of the novel, full of differing viewpoints and fake newspaper cuttings, is technically ingenious.

Žapek was one of the best writers from a small nation that produced a brace of phenomenal writers. For years I was discouraged from reading his works by disparaging references made to him in an Isaac Asimov article. By chance, I read one of Žapek's humorous travel articles in an anthology of Traveller's Tales and I was immediately hooked by his engaging, comical and absurdist style. Asimov was wrong (as he was so often). Like Bulgakov, Karinthy and Zamyatin, Žapek is proof that 1920s and 1930s Continental European science-fiction and fantasy was the most advanced in the world at that time...

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## M.J. Ryder says

RUR: 4/5

War with the Newts: 1.5/5

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## Dane Cobain says

This book was on course for a 5/5 but then about a third of the way through it did the same thing that George Orwell did in 1984 where the action suddenly cuts out so there can be pages and pages of background information. In 1984, it was a detailed history of the different nations in the postapocalyptic future. In this book, the equivalent is a lengthy section that reads like an essay on how the newts reproduce and how they act during scientific experiments.

Still, this is a great little read, and there's something here for everyone – but particularly for fans of classic science fiction. It also has the benefit of basically being two books in one. Let's take a look at each of them.

RUR is short for 'Rossum's Universal Robots' and it's credited with introducing the word 'robot' to our vocabulary. It's also a stage play, which makes it easy to absorb and highly entertaining, and I just flew through the pages and loved the whole thing from start to finish. I particularly liked how it posed the question of who's ultimately responsible for the actions of a piece of software or a machine. Is it the machine itself, or is it the human who designed and created it?

War With the Newts contains many of the same themes, except this time it's focusing on a species of

intelligent newts that humanity discovers and subsequently takes advantage of until they eventually rise up against them. What's interesting here is that the war itself doesn't take up much of the book, but rather it tends to focus on the events that led up to the war and humanity's role in them. It's very cleverly done, but like I said – there's a lengthy bit in the middle that gets kind of tedious, and I found it difficult to pick up momentum again after that.

Still, though, this is definitely worth reading – especially for hardcore sci-fi fans. I'm definitely glad I picked it up.

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### Jason says

"The questions runs: Is and has man ever been capable of happiness?? A man, certainly, like every other living creature; but mankind not. All unhappiness of the man lies in the fact that he was compelled to become mankind, or that he became mankind too late, after he had already been irrevocably divided into nations, races, faiths, professions, and classes, into rich and poor, into educated and uneducated, into the rulers and the ruled..."Pg299 War with Newts

It's rare to find something as profound and unique as War with the Newts. RUR is an interesting play from the 1920s and the first recorded mention of the term "robot". The real gem in this collection is War with the Newts. It's clever in the most dark and disturbing way. The Newts; a species of giant salamander which we allow to take over our world for economic gains. We educate the Newt, train them as slaves and then we arm them with weapons. The social undertones of this piece never dull the intensity of the narrative. The gross attention to detail and Capek's crystal-clear vision of our world post-Newts is rich and complex. This could be a great sci-fi movie and it reminds me of the Planet of the Apes. The novel is labeled "SF Masterworks" on the cover and I have to agree.

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### John says

Karel Čapek (1890-1938) was the Czech writer whose 1920 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* introduced the word 'robot' (originally meaning serf or forced labour) to the English language. Rossum's Robots – they would be called androids today – were created from protoplasm in order to perform all sorts of menial and repetitive tasks, liberating human beings from toil and bringing in an earthly paradise. Inevitably the mass-production of Robots and the low cost of using them lead to their employment in many other ways. They become indispensable to some and impossible to work with for others. Gradually some Robots are improved to be more like humans and to seek to be treated like them – and so the Robots learn to hate their creators. '...They couldn't hate us if they were only a little more human.' / 'Nobody can hate man more than man.'

The context of *War with the Newts* (1936) was the rise of National Socialism in Germany and the political insecurity of the inter-war years in Europe and throughout the world in general. The Newts are a newly discovered race of amphibious creatures which is taught to work for humans and exploited in order to exploit the resources of the sea. Newts can only live in shallow coastal waters, so vast colonies develop as the Newt population expands. The Newts' situation soon becomes a source of tension for many people, with some advocating the granting of full rights, while others wish them to be suppressed entirely. Meanwhile the Newts labour at their allotted tasks, but no-one really knows what they are doing under the sea. And then the earthquakes begin, with the inundation of large areas of coastline and low-lying land allowing the Newts to expand at the expense of the inhabitants of the land.

Both *R.U.R.* and *War with the Newts* look at the unintended consequences of 'progress' and mankind's manipulation of nature, and how mankind's institutions rise (or don't) to the new realities they and the race have to deal with. But while Capek certainly did have a serious intent behind his work, this shouldn't obscure their ironic wit and gentle wisdom (especially in *War with the Newts*). Both are tragic stories, but even in a world where nothing is secure it is yet possible for people to perform acts of humanity and meet the end with a wry smile. There are worse ways to go, as Capek himself would undoubtedly have found out if he hadn't died when he did.

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### **Jake Pointer says**

Firstly thank you to the very kind student of mine who bought me this book as a present, couldn't have asked for a better gift! I had wanted to read *R.U.R.* for quite a while and enjoyed it very much. It was a little strange to read as of course, it is a play but if the reader can bear this in mind there is still a large amount of pleasure to be gained from reading this. However, the second novel in here really is, as the series implies, a masterwork.

Mankind has exploited everything it has found, then good hearted people came along and often with success reversed the oppression such as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and a very modern version is, of course, animal oppression (something I myself take very seriously). The oppressors, almost always get away with it, so to read a fictionalized version of where this isn't the case, and man oversteps its boundary one time too many, only for, in this case, the Newts, to turn around and fight back, and with gusto, is an intriguing and thought provoking development. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and once again like Kafka and Hasek, Czech has produced another powerhouse of great literature.

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### **Tobias Taylor says**

4/5 *R.U.R.* // Rossum's Universal Robots (Reason's Universal Serfs) is almost an academic paper, formatted as a play, laying down the idea of robotics and theorising a likely outcome to the reality of the invention of humanoid robots and artificial intelligence (AI). Decades ahead of its time and somehow it still remains timeless.

"It was for myself that I worked, for my own satisfaction. I wanted man to become the master..."

3/5 *War with the Newts* // The newts become everything man needs to be to progress and yet they have nothing of humanity... but are they more perfect for it? In part a satirical reflection but mostly an endeavour to portray how humanity has treated and will continue to treat species it comes across, whether alien or animal, that are in a more vulnerable state - we exploit wherever we can ...much like any parasite.

Capek writes in a unique and bold manner, however one that suffers across translation.

5/5 *The Author Talks with Himself* (final chapter) // As the warring parts of the author's brain discourse we are led into an astounding reflection both on humanity and on writing and life. Firstly he puts forward an 'acceptable/nice/comfortable' way to end the book and then outright dismisses it for its shortcomings with an astounding human insight.

"Wouldn't it be possible for [the Newts] to die out somehow? Perhaps some disease or degeneration might develop among them.'

'Too cheap, my dear fellow. Must Nature always be asked to straighten out the mess that man has made?'"

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## **Simon Ford says**

Two stories in this book and both dealing with the subject of slavery.

R.U.R deals with the creation of Robots (Capek was the first to use this word) but were they Robots? Not as we now think of Robots, these weren't mechanical machines but made of flesh and bone, living beings.

Not clones or replicants, possibly a type of golem.

The factory on the island that created these creatures eventually became overrun, which leads to a revolution against the creators.

The language is dated and of it's time but for all that, it is a good story that deals with man-kinds inability to control its own appetites for power and its greed which ultimately leads to its demise. The ending got a bit too religious for me.

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War with the Newts is no different really, again, mans lust for wealth and power leads to its demise or does it? The ending where the author talks to himself was the first of its type that I've come across.

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## **Mark says**

Karel Capek's name may not be known that well outside the Czech Republic, though he has the distinction of being the originator of one of SF's most endearing tropes – the word 'robot'.

In this re-release we have two tales: the first is a script for Capek's play which introduced us to that term, Rossum's Universal Robots, or R.U.R., first published in 1920.

The second is a traditional novel. The War of the Newts was written in 1936, and though it may seem quite different to R.U.R., does have some common themes.

To be honest, RUR's reputation beyond that of creating and using the word 'robot' is fairly unimpressive. What is interesting though is the fact that the robots in the play are not metal nor manufactured, as you would perhaps expect these days (and the cover rather misleadingly portrays), but are rather what we would these days call bio-engineered: that is, they are biological, created by biotechnology and, unlike R2-D2 or C-3PO, can be seen as human in appearance, even mistaken for human.

There are debates, as in Shelley's Frankenstein, on the morality of such creatures and Science versus God along the way.

Other than that, the tale is one that is typical of its time, that of robots revolting in order to escape their slave-

like existence whilst advocating freedom and independence. This was a common story-trope with the metal robots in the early days of pulp SF, as people felt intimidated by new technology. Asimov wrote his Robot stories as an alternate response to this idea of robots running amok.

Echoes of Metropolis (film, released 1927) are here.

War of the Newts follows a similar theme in that there is a revolution against oppression. This time the tale deals with an alien subspecies, an intelligent sea-dwelling race of newts, who rebel against slavery and exploitation and end up in a global war against the humans.

Though the book is titled War with the Newts, most of it deals with how the Newts were first met, how they became servile to humans and what led to the war, which actually only take up the last thirty-five pages or so. However when it does happen the war is both sad and weirdly affecting in that such catastrophic events are recounted in such a matter-of-fact manner. The last two sentences of the novel describes what must have been a common feeling at the time of writing: "And then?" "...Then I don't know what comes next." (page 349.)

The interesting thing for me here were the alien newts, who actually come across as tolerant, rational and quite sympathetic, perhaps even more so than the overbearing humans. The newts are clearly put into a situation that they feel is intolerable and the ensuing consequences are unfortunate but necessary. It may be that there are parallels here to Capek's own life situation at the time. As a citizen of the Czech Republic in the mid-thirties they were experiencing the threat of Nazi occupation (which did occur in 1939.) It may not be that far-fetched to see the allegorical similarity between the Czech 'newts' and the Nazi 'humans' in this dystopian satire. Capek sadly died on December 25, 1938, of double pneumonia, shortly after part of Czechoslovakia was annexed by Nazi Germany.

All in all, an interesting read, though a book definitely of two halves. Capek is often ranked with Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Though much less well known, on the strength of this it's not hard to see why.