



Star Surgeon

James White

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This is the second installment of the Sector General series, about a huge multi-species hospital on the edges of the galaxy.

Sector General is a hospital station -- a place where all kinds of patients and medics from all worlds are welcome. But for the first time, the hospital is threatened by creatures too different its purpose, and so powerful that they can cause utter havoc! The book tells the story of the events that culminated in the Etlan War.

Here are all the strange and not so strange creatures who inhabit James White's hospital in space as both doctors and patients: the human doctor ZConway, plus two-ton doctors with four-ton patients, creatures which are multi-legged and telepathic, gas breathers, underwater behemoths--a wild and wooly assortment of denizens from all parts of the galaxy.

"Sector General" is a mercy station--a place where all kinds from all worlds are welcome. But for the first time, the hospital itself is threatened by creatures too different to understand its purpose and so powerful that they can cause utter havoc!

Star Surgeon Details

Date : Published August 12th 1970 by Del Rey (first published 1963)

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Author : James White

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From Reader Review Star Surgeon for online ebook

Andrea says

The second in a short series of Doctor in Space stories by James White. The strength of the stories overall is one of problem-solving. The Doctor faces some strange, alien-related medical problem, and comes up with an obvious or not-so-obvious solution. The first problem faced in this book is a good example of this - unconscious, possibly criminal alien appears to be dying of minor skin infection, but seems to automatically defend against any attempt to cure it. Main character Conway thinks outside the box, and comes up with a solution.

Yeah, it's House in space, with aliens.

This particular story goes off the rails halfway through, losing the interest of the puzzle-solving while retaining the more general problems of the books. The galaxy of widely diverse species has a 'monitor corps' made up entirely of humans, for a start. The role of women is to be hot, or to be nurses (Conway, of course, is romantically involved with the hottest nurse). No female doctors are sighted at all, and where the doctors are alien gender isn't mentioned (the only mentions of alien gender in this book is one genderless friend of Conway's, and a female nurse). At one point the nurses are told not to worry "their silly little heads" about something.

Conway is ridiculously valorised in this book - he figures out what's up before the genius, demi-god alien whose lifelong purpose is meddling with the motives of other races. The book ends after a cringeworthy "oh shucks" scene where everyone is standing around telling Conway how wonderful he is.

Other books in the series are stronger for sticking to the short story puzzle solving format. If you're going to read one of this short series of books, this is definitely the one to avoid.

Eri says

This was brilliant and it could have been even better, if not for the hero gets the girl trope that I find incredibly annoying.

Space politics, hospitals, mind hacking / blowing stuff, dealing with aliens, extra terrestrials, waging war among humans, you know, the usual.

Carol. says

Part of the omnibus

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Laura says

I didn't like it quite as much as the first book. The sexism of the 1960s showed through pretty strongly and soured the book. Examples:

- All the doctors are male and all the nurses are female, even in a future that includes mind-bogglingly massive sociological, medical, and technological progress
- The nurses are called girls, even though they have clearly reached an adult age
- Nurse Murchison is continually sexually harassed by her boss, Dr. Conway, including unwanted physical touching
- Nurse Murchison's wishes to keep the relationship professional and platonic are disregarded by Dr. Conway, and he repeatedly tries to manipulate her into a sexual relationship
- Continuous references to Nurse Murchison's huge tits throughout the book

It may be a book about various advanced lifeforms set in the far future, but it was written by a human male in the 1960s and has some hack writing to prove it.

Emperador Spock says

This novel is okay, mostly, although it clearly is weaker than the first book. It's quite entertaining, with a couple of nice twists (the charity scam gets gold), and great star battle scenes. However, there are problems: I might suspect that the author was simply trying new things with a book that is a proper novel (sort of), not a collection of stories, but many of the flaws seem more like lazy writing:

- compared to the previous book (and as far as I know, the rest of the series), the novel is annoyingly human-centred, and after all the betentacled alien craziness, the human-like (and similarly cultured) Etlans stink of cardboard props and brown ridges on foreheads.
 - this novel makes one seriously ask how a writer, who manages to imagine great and many alien races, so badly fails at introducing women anywhere? This was already noticeable in 'Hospital Station', but in 'Star Surgeon' it reaches in-your-face levels. All women in the novel are horribly flat (not in that sense), and are only there for eye-candy. Murchison is the only moderately prominent female character, and she is nothing but a rubber doll for Conway to have schmaltzy romance with.
 - There are a few plot-related annoyances, like the rather weak demise of Lonvellin (probably the best and most interesting character in the novel, I really hoped for him not to turn out dead), and the rushed ending — it is fine on its own, but it is introduced way too early.
-

Patrick Scheele says

This is a fun series so far. The first book read like a cross between E.R. and Star Trek. This second one has more of a "MASH in Space" feel to it.

I like the characters. They're nicely old-fashioned and don't go off into a dramatic frenzy every time someone

dies. They're also not too deep. I hate deep characters. Real people don't have 20,000 layers you have to peel back like an onion before you get to their "inner self". You can tell this was written in simpler times. Better times, if you ask me.

Although this book centers on the hospital, the glimpses we get of the world outside is upbeat. There are lots of different aliens around and they live peacefully with humans. Very Star Trek!

The plot was good and it moved along fast enough. For such a small book there was plenty of story.

There were a few things I didn't care for:

* At a minimum I would have liked it acknowledged that knowing the locations of the Empire worlds gave the good guys the option of striking back. Just the threat of orbital bombardments on the Empire's home world should have been able to turn this hot war cold.

* I didn't get why the doctors, nurses and patients thought they needed guns to persuade the commander to negotiate a cease-fire. At that point, there wasn't much else he could do!

* The relationship between the doctor and the nurse didn't seem to go anywhere. There was never much time for them to have a good talk and at the end I still had no idea if he was wasting his time with her. She didn't seem to be playing hard to get, she was playing impossible to get.

Rebecca says

Really a 4.5. Overall, I really got drawn into this book, and kept reading it frantically through the last half, wanting to know how it would turn out despite the incredibly sexist overtones of some of it.

The tension really ramped up in this book, compared to the previous book that was more lackadaisically paced and broken up into several novella-sized episodes. This book had an overarching plot, followed by a nail-biting siege of the hospital by a fanatical enemy force. It's very obvious that the author had a good handle both on war-time psychology and on the touching determination of medical staff to treat and protect their patients. The science and psychology seems solid, with some rather dated exceptions (no use of anything involving DNA sequencing, for instance, which is understandable given how old this series is, and under-use of wireless communication or personal technology). The pacing is good, and overall it was just SOLID.

Only one thing really kept it from a 5-star rating for me: holy sexism, Batman! What had been hinted at in the first book (lack of female doctors, occasional discussion of pretty nurses) was just...made very explicit here. The worst example revolves around the training tapes. The training tapes are a way that doctors of one race can learn quickly how to treat another race: it's a download of an alien doctor's memories, which lets them use that expertise. It's revealed in this book that females can't take memory tapes. That something sex-based about their "pretty little heads" won't allow it. There's no science behind this, no real reason. This is just the author's decision: there can never be a female physician or Diagnostician because they can't use the major learning method because Female Minds Are Inferior.

Ugh. UGH!

There's other examples. The main character is dating a nurse, and for pretty much the whole book she utterly fails to pass the Lampshade Test: she is a goal and an object to be pursued, protected, and pulled into rough

embraces when convenient, with very little care for or discussion of her own feelings on the matter. She is also written very...cooly? Neither the MC nor she are honest about what they feel for much of the book, being cool or harsh with each other to express displeasure at their treatment of each other rather than talking like adults. She comes across as inscrutable, vacillating wildly between coolness and "I was so worried for you" and between "No, now's not the time" and "Oh, i don't want you mad at me, just tell me what to do!" It's all very, very dated. It was no doubt a common view of women for the time period the book was originally published, but it was just incredibly sad to read now, because it seems like such crappy characterization in the middle of an otherwise excellent book.

John says

1983 grade B+
2005 grade B

series book SG2

Calvin says

Pretty kewl idea. Lots of typos but that's probably just the edition.

byAx says

Guerra e cure

White ci riporta tra le corsie della sua stazione ospedale, unico e straordinario centro per la cura delle infinite specie che popolano l'universo, caratterizzato dalla competenza dei suoi medici e infermieri nell'adottare soluzioni differenti a seconda del caso clinico da affrontare.

Questa volta, però, oltre all'onere di un lavoro sempre al limite dell'urgenza, le loro vite stanno per essere sconvolte da una guerra imminente causata da alcune trame politiche stanate casualmente, trasformando di fatto il centro in un ospedale da combattimento.

Il messaggio pacifista e umanitario di White, così come la sua ironia, servono a bilanciare una trama debole e veloce che adombra l'interesse verso la valida idea che sta alla base del lavoro dell'autore; in questo, Stazione Ospedale riesce meglio.

Valerie says

This is the edition I have, and like all well-loved books, it's chipped, cracked, and worn. Halfway through I had to mount a search for the back cover and reattach it. But it's still legible, and you can turn the pages without them flaking off in your hands, so it's in good enough condition.

This one book in the series is in the Ballantine 'Bal-Hi' series. This means, I gather, that it's intended to be a cheap edition, aimed at people who are not very literate. Well, it's cheap all right. It's very poorly proofread (so that, at one point, a reference to o'Mara as being inexhaustible, short only of 'metal fatigue' is significantly reduced in poignance by the addition of an extraneous 'n': we're all of us subject to mental fatigue, after all). As for being aimed at people with limited literacy, I have my doubts. The very first patient is, after all, suffering from 'epithelioma'.

The Introduction (titled 'a note to teachers and parents', as if those were the only people involved in a child's learning) can be safely skipped. It's clear from context that the person who wrote the introduction had never encountered the series before, and really didn't understand it.

As with most of White's books, this one is episodic. In a sense, there are only two episodes in this one: but since one acts as a prequel, and the other is many chapters long, it's worth treating them as if this were multiple short stories, stitched together into sequential and parallel continuity by a common narrative thread.

SECTION I (CHAPTERS 1-5)

A new patient, mysteriously unconscious from a minor skin cancer, is described by the newly arrived Ian doctors as a god, although the more cynical and world-weary of the two dragonflies qualifies this. Then it's just a matter of resolving the patient's quarrel with its personal physician...

SECTION II (CHAPTERS 5-8)

After Lonvellin leaves the hospital to continue its mission (still carrying its personal physician--and don't lose track of that physician, by the way), things return to bizarre normal, until Lonvellin realizes that the medical problem is beyond its solo resolution. It's a mistake to impress VIPs, if you want a quiet life. Lonvellin demands the aid of Conway and the Monitors. This is the episode, btw, in which a frustrated Conway, escorting newbies around the hospital, directs them to several places other than the exit).

SECTION III (CHAPTERS 8-12)

On Etna The Sick, Conway and his Monitor colleagues try to convince themselves that they just have nasty, suspicious minds. Even for the Monitors, this isn't particularly likely. The Etnan Empire is pretty seriously (and obviously) implicated in the problem from the start. This is the point where Conway is informed that if you genuinely mean well, it's easy to act as a spy, because you won't act suspiciously.

SECTION IV (CHAPTERS 12-18)

Realizing that though the Etnan Empire can't find the Federation (too diffuse) without coordinates, but they CAN find Sector General, the Monitor Corps prepare to evacuate and fortify the hospital for a siege. This involves removing the patients and the doctors who know the coordinates of Federation worlds. This chapter includes a discussion of why people will do the most suicidal things rather than disappoint their friends. Prilicla, as usual, hits the nail on the head by arguing that, if its friends would not think it was cowardly, it would be on the second transport out. Asked why the second, Prilicla explains "I am not completely without valor".

SECTION V (CHAPTERS 18-24)

In general, communications problems at Sector General are evaded by the rather nebulously defined 'Translator computer'. It's anything but a universal translator, but even with its flaws and failures, it's essential for communications: and it takes up a large part of the computing power of the hospital. So when it fails...Conway eventually has to abandon medicine, using seven Educator Tapes for translation. Because the

other Senior Physicians and all the Diagnosticians are out of action for one reason or another (many of the Diagnosticians had to leave because they knew the coordinates for Federation planets, installations, etc. Others, like Thornnastor, are injured), Conway effectively becomes the only Diagnostician in the hospital.

The defenders and the field medics wonder, at first, why the Etlan Empire don't just try to destroy the hospital, rather than try to capture it. But they figure out, eventually, that the corrupt Imperial officials have to have a Triumph/Show Trial, to justify the war. This means that the Federation forces have a better chance of mounting a defense, but it also means that there are many more casualties: and the wards and medical staff are significantly overwhelmed. I should point out, by the way, that I hope nobody ever DOES develop a weapon as fearsome as the 'rattler' described herein.

EPILOGUE (CHAPTERS 24-25)

It's been obvious from the beginning how this has to end. The problem has always been how to bring the necessary ending about. The Monitors insist that if the late Lonvellin (whom they describe as a 'talented amateur') hadn't meddled, they'd have achieved the same end by more subtle, longer-term measures. In fact, they argue, the Etlans would eventually have resolved the matter themselves. But in the event, if Conway hadn't ignored Commander Dermod's unacceptable advice, the matter would likely not have been resolved before the Etlans succeeded in capturing the hospital. I never have thought much of Dermod.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I should include two points which most readers seem to miss. One is the never really explained argument that the Monitor Corps recruits almost solely from Earth-human DBDGs. This isn't comprehensible in any way. The Federation was founded by DBDGs, from Earth and Orligia. But other species (most NOT DBDGs), joined with their colony worlds very early on. If the ships are almost always Tralthan designed and built, why wouldn't Tralthans, for one, be included in their crews?

Second, there's the question of sex roles. Most people, reading fairly casually, (it's easy to decide to skip the expository bits, which are identical from story to story: but they should be read carefully at least once, because they're critical to the plots), tend to assume that there are no females on staff--or if there are, that they're confined to subordinate roles. In fact, among species which are bisexual in their reproductive patterns (meaning, in this case, not the Hudlars, who change sex with every child, so that the mother of the first child is the father of the second...), the evidence is that female staff members are about equal the number of males. This isn't obvious, because ets are deliberately not referred to with sexed pronouns. The stated rationale for this is to avoid embarrassing misattributions. This doesn't really hold water, because the term 'it' isn't much better. One would think that in developing the 'Universal' languages that are used for communication in the absence of Translators, a personal, nonsexed pronoun would have been included. A major oversight, especially since doctors must awkwardly balance empathy and objectivity when dealing with patients...

There is one exception. In this book as in several others, it is stated without evidence or attribution that females of any species cannot use the Educator Tape system, because they cannot adapt to sharing their minds with the donor minds. This is never justified, it is simply stated axiomatically.

I put this on more or less the same level as the assertion that Monitors are all (or almost all) Earth-human DBDGs, because of some supposed mental traits that make only them able to do the work. I'd like to see some more research, if you please, and parse it thoroughly before I accept any such assertions.

One other quirk, which White eventually more or less phased out: the members of the various species are often casually referred to as 'races'. To the extent that the term 'race' EVER had any biological validity, it wouldn't apply here. The Kelgians, for example, are not a 'race': they're a SPECIES, and no other term should be used.

Matt Kelland says

Re-reading this book for the first time since I was a teenager, I'm remembering how much I loved it then. It's still wonderful. It instilled in me the basic concept that just because people are different, there's no reason to treat them with anything less than respect, and what looks like bizarre behaviour is often perfectly explicable if you take the time to see their view of the world. It was probably why I became an anthropologist: there weren't any jobs studying aliens, so I had to study humans.

Volodymyr Yatsevsky says

Not as entertaining as the first novel and seems repetitive at times. But still worth reading and fits well in the series.

Mark Schlatter says

I've got a few of these Sector General novels or collections, and they've been a fixture in my "fun read" collection. In many ways, they resemble the classic puzzle stories in early science fiction (think Asimov's robot stories), except with a medical background. Our protagonist Conway is always trying to work out a medical mystery and does so at the last minute with some unorthodox thinking.

This volume starts with a puzzle story and then moves to an interstellar war involving the space station hospital. I found the whole thing pretty readable, although White's conclusion happens a little too quickly for me.

One note: this book reflects the sexism of the early 1960's. All the doctors, administrators, and soldiers are male. The only human females are nurses, and only one (Murchison, Conway's romantic interest) is dealt with in any detail. Murchison is highly competent and professional, but she's also described in almost every appearance as doing a good job of filling out her outfit. (White's not that crude, but the emphasis got tiring.) And there's some romantic dialogue near the end that's highly cringe-worthy.
