

Lecture #20 April 15, 2010 *Red Mars*

Kim Stanley Robinson b. 1953. Studied at UCSD, PhD English Lit in 1982:
Doctoral thesis: *The Novels of Phillip K. Dick*.

Major novels:

The Mars trilogy: *Red Mars* (1992), 1993 Nebula,
Green Mars (1993) 1994 Hugo, and *Blue Mars* (1996) 1997 Hugo;
The Three Californias Trilogy: *The Wild Shore* (1984), a dystopia; *The Gold Coast*
(1988), ambiguous; and *Pacific Edge* (1990), a utopia).

Literary / “humanist” SF but with careful research on science.

Major themes: cyclic nature of history (one short story collection is titled *Remaking History*), the question of identity, the intersection of science, scientists, and history (a major theme of *Icehenge* is: what happens to scientific progress if the “old guard” do not die off?); sociological and ecological concerns.

Synopsis of *Red Mars*

The story covers the colonization and early terraforming of Mars, during the years 2026-2061. It follows the adventures of the “First Hundred” colonists.

The novel begins decades later, with the assassination of John Boone, then goes back to the original days of the first colony.

Red Mars traces the human and physical changes to Mars, in particular the arguments over whether to preserve Mars (the position of the “reds” led by Ann Clayborne) or to radically terraform it (the position of the “greens”).

Over the period of thirty-five years tens of thousands of colonists follow the First Hundred. A “space elevator” is built to facilitate transportation of people *and* precious minerals mined on Mars.

The resources of Mars are strained; political tensions build. Eventually revolution breaks out, the space elevator is destroyed (as is the moon Phobos); many Martian cities are destroyed, thousands die, and the remnants of the First Hundred flee for their lives. Underground aquifers are tapped and create gigantic floods, forever altering the surface of Mars.

Main Characters

John Boone, first man on Mars (on a previous journey), charismatic, informal leader.

Frank Chalmers, leader of the American contingent, becomes political leader. Speaks many languages.

Maya Toitovna, leader of the Russian contingent, charming and volatile, lover of both John and Frank.

Saxifrage Russell, physicist, a “green,” drives technical aspects of terraforming.

“saxifrage” = “rock breaker,” a kind of plant. Introverted.

Ann Clayborne, geologist, a “red,” wants to preserve Mars as we found it.

Nadia Cherneshevsky, engineer, experienced in harsh climates.

Hiroko Ai, ecological engineer, quiet but commanding matriarch. Disappears and forms her own colony. Somewhere between the Greens and the Reds.

Arkady Bogdanov, happy-go-lucky anarchist

Michel Duval, psychologist with his own problems.

Important themes of the novel (and of Robinson’s writings in general):

the question and unstable nature of identity; the cyclic nature of history.

The colonists view Mars as an empty landscape on which to either discover their “true” selves (the Reds) or reinvent (terraform) themselves (the Greens). Events in the novel suggests *both* are false: humans cannot escape their history, they *are* their history.

The marscape cannot be preserved pristine, nor can it be changed without great cost and calamity. In the same way we cannot conserve an imaginary past, nor can we evolve painlessly into a better society.

Each viewpoint character brings his or her own lens to Mars, as seen in each section

Part 1. **Festival Night**

Frank : Mars as a political landscape to be negotiated and manipulated.

Opening: *Mars was empty before we came.*

Part 2. **The Voyage Out**

Maya: Mars as a role to be played. “...among those tendencies was an instinct to hide, to play a role, and to disguise their [the colonists’] real selves...”

Part 3. **The Crucible**

Nadia : Mars as a machine, and she is a cog in the gears. Does not hold her own opinion.

Part 4. **Homesick**

Michel: Mars as a place to hide from one’s own flaws, failures, and griefs.

Part 5. **Falling into History**

John Boone, the explorer, the first man on Mars, plays detective: Mars (the universe) and the self as a mystery to be explored.

Part 6. **Guns under the Table.** (*Frank Chalmers*; more politics and negotiations)

Part 7. **Senzeni Na** (Xhosa, “What have we done?” anti-apartheid song.)

Nadia, the engineer: Revolution as re-engineering the political machine.

Part 8. **Shikata Ga Nai**: (Japanese, “There is no other choice,” or “It can’t be helped.”)

Ann, the Red. Mars as a museum. Geological revolution. “The past is wiped out, all that matters is now.”

Scientists in *Red Mars*

The two main scientists in *Red Mars* are Sax Russell and Ann Clayborne.

Although they are politically opposite (Green vs. Red), they share similar (stereotyped) characteristics:

- highly introverted
- poor interpersonal skills: oblivious to other people's feelings
- poor political skills

Quotes:

Part 2: "But we're scientists! We're trained to weigh the evidence!"

Arkady: "... you cannot just stick your head in the sand crying, 'I am a scientist! I am a scientist!'"

Part 3: "Science was many things, Nadia thought, including a weapon with which to hit other scientists."

Marsscape as Metaphor

The marsscape is a metaphor for history and the human unconscious: overwhelmingly huge and detailed.

Part 3: 'And there's more [water] underground,' Phyllis said.

Part 4: Consciousness was just a thin lithosphere over a big hot core, after all.

Part 5: The unpredicted, 2-year global dust storm.

Part 8: Massive floods (from underground aquifers) ripping the marsscape to pieces.

Red Mars is a novel about exploration:

Exploration of the physical universe (the realm of science)

Exploration of politics and society

Exploration of the self

All of these are interconnected and have a history

Science does not occur without a historical, political, and personal context

Comparing our novels

Timescape and *The Dispossessed* are both about the intersection of science and politics in the search for meaning.

Red Mars uses the colonization and terraforming of Mars to examine human personalities in the face of history.

Ringworld is... a heck of an adventure story!

Classicism: external conflict with outside forces. Clearly defined success or failure.

Modernism: internal conflict of values, self vs society

Postmodernism: internal views themselves are fragmented and tribalized.

Ringworld: classical mode. Louis Wu & friends try to escape the Ringworld, and succeed. No real change in personalities. Heroes and villains clear.

Timescape: modernist mode. Main conflict is Gordon's self determination. Success in one universe superimposed over failure in other. No real villains, only flawed humans. (Similar for *The Dispossessed*)

Red Mars: postmodernist mode. Society—and the individuals who compose society—are fragmented, divided against themselves.

Red Mars as a postmodern novel

Both *Timescape* and *The Dispossessed* used themes and techniques from modernism. Both are about internal struggles, but narrowly focused on one or two individuals. In particular the characters search for *meaning* and *connectedness*.

Red Mars has no single point of view, no single conflict—it is fragmented among different points of view and different struggles. The novel (and the trilogy) has neither a clear triumph nor a clear failure – much like real history.

The novel is not concerned with *finding* meaning (prescriptive); rather with *describing* a future political and scientific history.

Why is *Ringworld* considered hard SF, and not *Red Mars*? (This tells us more about attitudes in SF than about actual categories.)

“Hard SF” (implicitly) has technology, science, and knowledge of science as *primary focus*.

Despite the vivid characters, *Ringworld* is really about showing off ... the Ringworld, a tour de force of inventiveness.

Despite the detailed research on science, *Red Mars* is really about history and how we live through it.

Questions to think about:

Do you think that Robinson agrees with the Reds or the Greens? Or neither?

Who do you agree with, the Reds or the Greens? Why?

How are science and technology viewed in *Red Mars*?

Does the novel even have a single viewpoint on science?

When SF visits a detailed extraterrestrial world, it implicitly comments on Earth and humanity's relation to Earth, through a variety of techniques: analogy, metaphor, contrast, and so on. How does *Red Mars* comment on Earth and humans?

SF can be considered a subversive or disruptive genre, by assuming there are alternatives, to our current world. Is *Red Mars* subversive or disruptive? If so, how? More or less so than the other novels?