

Cosmic War: Light Versus Darkness

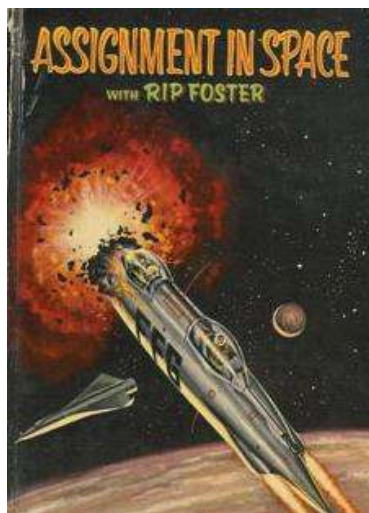
*War in Science Fiction Series Books
with special insight into the Starman series*

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The three of us (Mike Dodd, David Baumann, and Jon Cooper) turned ourselves into series book author Michael D. Cooper back in 1998 when we began to work on producing the Starman series. Since we wanted our series to be like the books we loved growing up, one of the first things we determined to do was to fit our stories into the unwritten guidelines followed in the classic series books. Among these was that violence and bloodshed were not to be excessive or overdone. Fistfights were okay and added excitement, but cruelty, torture, and amputation were inappropriate. Gunfights could be allowed to elevate the heartbeats of the readers, but only if the shots missed or “winged” the combatants. There are plenty of “flesh wounds” and unscathed barn doors in the X Bar X Boys series, for example. Fight scenes in series books could be vehement, but no one could be allowed to have an eye gouged, get his head bashed in with a two-by-four, or be maimed in any way. The one or two exceptions (the Skippy Dare book *Prisoners in Devil’s Bog*, for example) are seriously disturbing, especially when we consider that these books were to be read by juveniles.

Series books that were written in wartime addressed the issues of their era in different ways. When it came to war in series books, the tale customarily became an adventure

story or inspiration for patriotism rather than an all-out account of bloody battles and wholesale destruction. Such horrors, if they were brought into the story at all, were described from a distance. The five books of the Tom Slade series that were composed during World War I relate Tom's exploits as a doughboy. The account is riveting, but is very clearly an adventure story that takes place in wartime rather than a story about battles. The Hardy Boys books that were written in the first part of the 1940s were unusual in the genre by hardly mentioning World War II at all. In Rick Brant, readers learn early in the first volume that Scotty is an ex-marine who served heroically in the south Pacific (where author Hal Goodwin had served himself); in the fourth Rick, *100 Fathoms Under*, published only two years after the end of the war, the Japanese character Hashimo is presented as a deceptive, contemptible villain. In the early 1960s, the Biff Brewster series takes note of the cold war, especially in its particularly strong entry *Mystery of the Chinese Ring*.

Girls' series books did not ignore wartime either. Margaret Sutton in her Judy Bolton series addressed the issue in a clever fashion by having her hero serve in the FBI rather than in the armed forces. This encouraged patriotism without overly dating the books or having to introduce battlefield scenes.

When it comes to science fiction in series books, we enter a special category. Jules Verne has been recognized as the first writer of what later came to be called "science fiction," and H. G. Wells was not far behind. However, the genre really didn't take off until about the 1920s or '30s. At that time the term "science fiction" became popular, replacing the earlier term "scientifiction." Therefore the early books of the original Tom Swift series (1910-1942), about scientific inventions and the adventures that their inventor and his friends had with them, may not fit into the "science fiction" category, but they are at the least a precursor to those series that are indisputably of that genre.

Tom Swift most definitely engaged the Great War. The first entry in the series that dealt with war was the twenty-first: *Tom Swift and His War Tank*, published in 1918. The series books of that era used secondary titles, and the one for this book is "Doing His Bit for Uncle Sam." It details Tom's efforts to build the best war tank of his time to do his "bit" to aid his country in the war.

Tom Swift and his associates were unabashedly red-blooded Americans. The author went to great lengths to make it clear that the Swifts were doing everything they could to back the government in the war, but there is no real description of the war or bloodshed. Mention is made of an army construction plant where aircraft are being turned out by the hundreds, but that is about it. Their friend Ned Newton does get enthusiastic about the idea of a war tank:

"This is, without exception, the greatest thing out since an airship. It will win the war for us and the Allies, too, and don't you forget it! Fritz's barbed wire and dugouts and machine gun emplacements can't stand for a minute against these tanks! Why, Tom, they can crawl on their back as well as any other way, and they don't mind a shower of

shrapnel or a burst of machine gun lead, any more than an alligator minds a swarm of gnats. The only thing that makes them hesitate a bit is a Jack Johnson or a Bertha shell, and it's got to be a pretty big one, and in the right place, to do much damage. These tanks are great, and there's nothing like them."

No discussion of any kind is made as to why the war started, or what each side believes; the Germans are just the bad guys and need to be mowed down with tanks. THEY ARE BAD and WE ARE GOOD, and that is how it is presented throughout the series—this is not the series for subtle nuances.

The war tank wasn't the extent of Tom's efforts. There are mentions in other books, although not quite as specific as those that were produced during wartime. The author wants to make it clear that Tom is patriotic, Tom builds great weapons of war and gives them away to the government, and is doing all he can to aid the nation in a time of war. He is behind the government 100%, and anyone who is not should be ashamed. The message couldn't be more clear.

One could classify the Tom Swift Jr. series (1954-1973) as science fiction without too much stretching. This series, written in the years of the space race and the cold war, is most definitely a product of its time. Young Tom's adversaries, the Brungarians, are clearly eastern European iron curtain types that readers of the books would not have any difficulty morphing into Soviets.

It has been pointed out more than once that the bad guys in *Assignment in Space With Rip Foster* (also known as *Rip Foster Rides the Gray Planet*) are identified as the Consolidation of People's Governments or "Consops," but commonly known as "Connies." This book first appeared in 1952. Again, readers of that era need no more than a gram or two of imagination to hear this word as "Commies," the slang term for Communists. (The illustration at the beginning of this article is a thumbnail of one version of the cover illustration of this story.)

The authors of these series rightly assumed that freedom is right and tyranny and oppression are wrong, but unless today's reader is a history buff, the politics of these times are history lessons if not downright obscure. Readers of the original Tom Swift series do not find out why Tom feels the way he does. However, readers in our time may ask, What is Tom supporting? Why does he believe that his country is right? What are they fighting for? What are they afraid of losing? What are the stakes?

War can be seen as a political occurrence, entered into with mixed motives—even when one's nation is responding to attack. Wars, in themselves, are horrible realities, but at times they are forced upon us, and then cannot be avoided. But when wartime appears in fiction, it can be a means of addressing a deeper issue: goodness versus evil, or to put it poetically, light versus darkness. The *Star Wars* epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, and similar sagas treat war in this fashion, and in the Starman series we have chosen to address war on the same ground.

The Starman series debuted in 2000. Nine novels and several short stories brought the series to its end in 2005, although several short stories were added in 2007. Naturally, as its creators, we know it inside out. We have definitely addressed the issue of war in our series, but we have presented conflict as a moral or even spiritual issue, not political: What is the meaning of life, What is eternally significant, How do we know what is true and right, What is heroic and what is truly evil? Books set in the future, i.e. science fiction, have a freer hand in addressing these issues.

In wartime, propaganda tries to make the enemy faceless by the use of epithets, generalizations, etc. that reduce human beings, who may indeed be unconscionably evil, to subhuman objects deserving of enmity. In science fiction, this is often done completely by introducing a non-human enemy. The Starmen and their civilization in the middle years of the 22nd century engage an enemy that is literally “faceless.” This passage in *Journey to the Tenth Planet* describes the first encounter with the Xenobots:

With a determined shake of his head, Bors pushed his way to the front of the crowd and stepped forward, facing the creatures that had come from the cavern's mouth. As he stepped out, the circle of creatures stopped moving, but those whom Bors faced continued their approach. When they were about twenty feet away, Bors focused his attention on where their heads had to be. He could tell that there was something different at that place from the rest of the creatures' bodies. As they came closer, he squinted, turned slightly aside, shook his cottony head once again, and stared.

When he finally realized what he was seeing, his head cleared instantly. The rush of adrenaline that surged through him eradicated all traces of the drug that had been put into his coffee.

They have no faces! he thought. He wanted to laugh and shriek at the same time. Inside the viewports were things that looked like the bottom of a snail's foot. *Like raw liver with some sort of shiny gelatin on it!*

When the great war of the Solar System's history is described in the Starman series, it is done in a way intended to be shocking and frightening, not by any means to inspire patriotism or present the “glory” of battle. Here is an excerpt from *The Lost Race of Mars*.

“In Omega Centauri, many warships lifted off from the Xenobots' home planet and made their last stand, but our fleet fought masterfully and reduced the planet of the Xenobots to a primitive condition.”

Stenafi smiled with fondness, and then sighed deeply. "It was a great triumph, for the Xenobots had never been defeated in war."

Then the Ahmanyen lost control. She placed her hands over her face and, through her long slender fingers, began to weep silently. Her shoulders shook. The men from Earth did not know what to say or do. They waited in acute discomfort for Stenafi to continue her tale.

After a moment she sighed again. "I am sorry, Starmen. It is a tale that, though now thousands of years old, still seems to us almost to have happened in our own time." She gathered her resolve, exhaled, and then picked up the narrative, her voice straining with the effort.

"Unknown to us the Xenobots had kept back a small but monstrously armed fleet, which none of us had discovered," she continued. "When this fleet observed that their fellows had been defeated and that most of our ships had pursued the enemy to their home planet, they launched a second attack. This time fertile Ahmanya itself was the target, and against this second wave of ships we were almost defenseless. When it came, the strike was far fiercer than we had anticipated in our worst imaginings. The Xenobots clearly wanted not only to exterminate our entire people, but also intended to wipe out any trace that we had ever lived. The vehemence of the attack was overwhelming."

Our intention is to contrast evil and goodness. Descriptions of hostilities between political adversaries cannot do this effectively, since human beings, no matter how evil or altruistic their motives, will always be a mixture of good and bad. Of course, in real wartime, true evil will always be present; the atrocities committed by the Nazis, for example, are evidence of unspeakable evil, not just fruits of a political conviction. I think it is safe to contend that the terrorist attacks engineered by Al Qaeda are evil rather than religious or political acts. Sadly, atrocities are not perpetrated solely by one side in most if not all wars.

The ultimate battle between goodness and evil is something we sincerely hope we are getting across in the Starman Series. What are the Starmen risking their lives to save? Why do they feel the way they do? What are they fighting for? Our motivating axiom is, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." The quotation is from the Gospel of John, and the philosophy is stated clearly in our first book:

Richard Starlight said, "When my father dropped his surname and took the name 'Starlight,' it was a symbol to himself and to his generation. Born in the last days of the Collapse, he took a name to signify light in the great darkness, as stars are points of light in the darkness of space. Maybe overwhelming darkness, but still characterized

by light, the inspiring light of beauty and adventure, which the darkness cannot overcome. No one had ever borne that name before. It was a new name in the chronicle of human history, a deliberate choice to begin anew." ...

"Evil always fails, no matter how powerful it may seem to be or how much damage it can do," said Richard. "Look to the Collapse for that lesson. Earth will prevail over Captain Troy Putnam. The only question is how and when. There is no doubt of that, but we must minimize the damage he can do. A little light will always overcome even the most stygian darkness."

It is the responsibility of the fiction writer to resolve these issues so that goodness wins. In spite of whatever tensions may be wrought during the telling of the tale, there can never be any real doubt that the good guys will triumph. Edith Louisa Cavell, an English nurse in Belgium executed by the Germans during World War I for providing nursing aid to all soldiers, but allowing the Allies to escape to their own lines, put it well before she was lined up before a firing squad: "Patriotism is not enough." In science fiction—at least in the Starman series—we extol total dedication to goodness and truth and renunciation of evil, regardless of cost. And we do so while presenting a saga that we hope is thrilling.