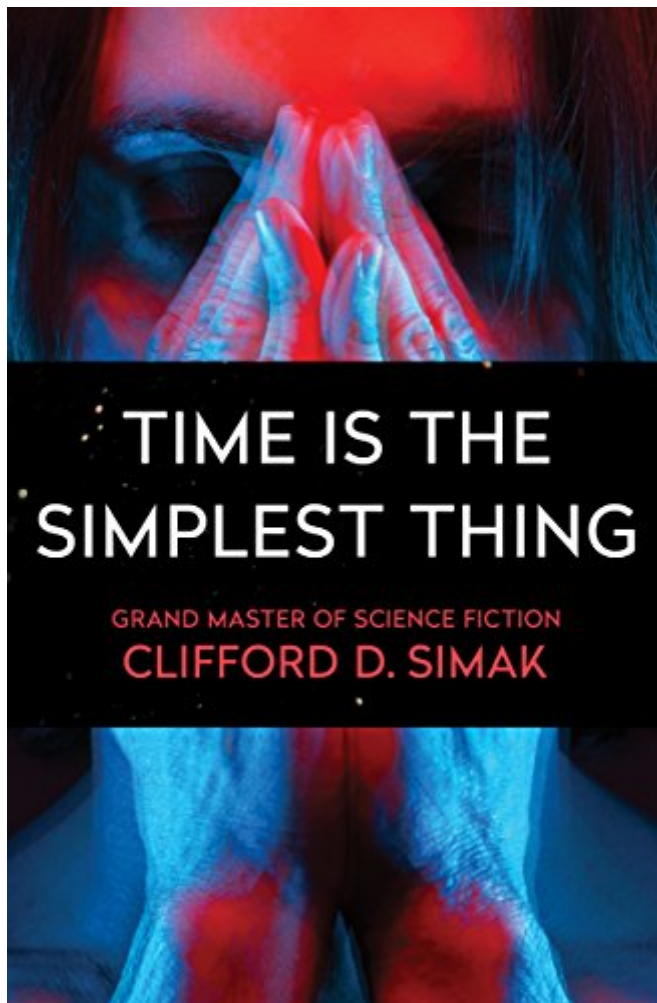


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Time Is The Simplest Thing



Synopsis

A telepath acquires a powerful alien consciousness and must run to escape corporate assassins and angry mobs in this novel by the author of *Way Station*. Space travel has been abandoned in the twenty-second century. It is deemed too dangerous, expensive, and inconvenient and now the all-powerful Fishhook company holds the monopoly on interstellar exploration for commercial gain. Their secret is the use of "parries," human beings with the remarkable telepathic ability to expand their minds throughout the universe. On what should have been a routine assignment, however, loyal Fishhook employee Shepherd Blaine is inadvertently implanted with a copy of an alien consciousness, becoming something more than human. Now he's a company pariah, forced to flee the safe confines of the Fishhook complex. But the world he escapes into is not a safe sanctuary; its people have been taught to hate and fear his parapsychological gifts and there is nowhere on Earth, or elsewhere, for Shepherd Blaine to hide. A Hugo Award nominee, *Time Is the Simplest Thing* showcases the enormous talents of one of the true greats of twentieth-century science fiction. This richly imagined tale of prejudice, corporate greed, oppression, and, ultimately, transcendence stands tall among Simak's most enduring works.

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Customer Reviews

What a story! I simply could not stop reading it. VERY different, and well worth reading. I really enjoyed this book.

Read this years ago in paperback. Bought the ebook to read again. A good hypothesis, good characters. A fun, quick read.

I've been a Big Fan of Simak for as long as I can remember. (Dating myself here, but) I first read this novel when it was a newly-issued paperback in the early 1960's. In my long life since then, I can think of few books that have so influenced the way I look at the world. As a young teenager back then, I of course enjoyed the story itself and the way the author pulled the reader along, always anxious for the next revelation and/or plot twist. Many, many scenes stand out for their wonder and awe, but head and shoulders above the rest is Blaine's second visit to the Pinkness (at about the halfway point in the book), where the awesomely knowledgeable yet definitely far from wise alien being spins yarn after yard in an Olaf Stapledon-like manner for our hero's (and our) entertainment. Simak builds his plot along the age-old "quest theme", à la The Odyssey, The Grail Quest, Moby Dick, and The Lord of the Rings. Shepard Blaine, paranormal star explorer for the Fishhook Corporation, returns from one fateful mission "contaminated". Knowing full well that such people are not tolerated, he makes a run for it - seeking he knows not what in a place he's never been. The contrast between Blaine's effortless exploration of the distant reaches of the galaxy with his painful, mile-by-mile trek across a post-apocalyptic North America is a big reason for this novel's immense power. Blaine's is a quest in search of a quest. He begins by merely running away, but not toward anything. This is precisely what he discovers along his torturous journey. Over the years, I've come back to this novel time and again, and it has never grown old or lost any of its magic. Even today, more than 50 years after my first reading, I cannot come to a bridge without the mysterious phrase "Roads are real, but bridges aren't" coming unbidden to mind. The biggest difference between now and then is I find it hard to believe how short the book is. (Maybe I read things more slowly way back then.) There is so much packed into so short a space. As a footnote, it seems that Simak was more prophetic than he could have ever realized in his one-page opening chapter. It is now apparent that interplanetary travel by human beings will be far more hazardous than realized by most science fiction writers in the mid 20th Century, due to the deadly effects on the body from solar and other forms of radiation future astronauts will be exposed to. Except that instead of paranormal explorers, we have robots.

It's said that Simak is the grandfather of Science Fiction, and it's easy to see why. He's got a unique yet easy-to-read writing style, paints vivid pictures in the mind, and has a knack for taking the almost-mundane and making it into something so much more. It's hard to put his books down once you've started them, and this one is no different. The story is told from the perspective of one person who ends up interacting with an alien intelligence (and who is already part of a larger group of slightly-more-evolved-than-the-rest-of-humanity humans) and the efforts he makes to deal with that both within himself and in the larger context of the society in which he lives. It's a riveting story and well worth a read.

I have a very limited number of books I will read over and over again. This is one of them - the other two (at least for now) are the Lord of the Rings and the Riddle Master of Hed. There is something about the fundamental humanity of each of these that resonates for me and makes me hopeful for the future. This book, especially, spreads to me because of its core message: that all human beings matter! It's gentle and not in your face like many books. It's not strident or loud. It simply affirms the basic dignity of us as humans. A book to be treasured, read and re-read many times. In light of the hate in the world today, I wish I could shake Mr. Simak's hand and thank him for a plain and simple, but compelling, tale.

Written smack-dab in the middle of the American Civil Rights Movement, Clifford D. Simak's "Time Is the Simplest Thing" utilizes the tools of science fiction to make poignant comments on the issues of the day. The novel, the author's sixth out of an eventual 29, was initially serialized in the May-July 1961 issues of "Analog" magazine with the equally appropriate title "The Fisherman," and went on to be nominated for that year's Hugo Award. (It lost, to Robert A. Heinlein's "Stranger In a Strange Land.") Later that year, it made its first book appearance as a Doubleday hardcover, the selfsame edition that this reader was fortunate enough to acquire at NYC bookstore extraordinaire The Strand. Simak, it should be mentioned, was actually only a part-time writer at this stage of his lengthy career. From 1939-'76, the Wisconsin-born author held a full-time job on the "Minneapolis Star," where he worked as news editor from 1949 on. Nevertheless, by 1961, Simak had already written those five earlier novels, not to mention some 95 short stories, and had already copped his first Hugo (for 1959's Best Novelette, "The Big Front Yard"); he would go on to win two more Hugos and a Nebula, and be proclaimed sci-fi's third official Grand Master, before his career was through. "Time Is the Simplest Thing" was written when the author was 57, and finds

him in very fine form, indeed. It is a fast-moving, imaginative tale, and one that had--as I mentioned--the added benefit of being socially relevant, as well. In Simak's novel, mankind has finally admitted defeat, as far as ever traveling to the stars is concerned, that pesky Van Allen radiation belt seeming to be a practically unpassable obstacle. Thus, around 100 years from the present day, an organization known as Fishhook comes into being. Headquartered in northern Mexico, the group makes use of telepathically gifted individuals who can explore other worlds by projecting outward with their minds! And so, mankind can safely wander over the worlds of the galaxy while its "paranormals" lie safely in their "star machines" at Fishhook HQ. Shepherd Blaine is one such paranormal, one whose life is upended one day when he shares minds with a gigantic, pink, bloblike alien as he mentally explores a planet around 5,000 light-years distant. When he is revived at Fishhook, Blaine discovers that the alien mentality is still sharing part of his noggin, making him a suspected, infected target for the organization's security force. Shep thus takes it on the lam, along with sympathetic, telepathic newswoman Harriet Quimby. The two manage to make it to the U.S., where Blaine is almost lynched in a small border town. The entire populace, it seems, is in great fear of all "parries," branding them witches and werewolves. Fortunately, as Blaine continues to flee across the country, hunted by the Fishhook people and the frightened populace, he discovers that he now possesses some unusual new abilities, thanks to that alien residue in his mind: the ability to speed up or slow down time, the ability to divine an object's history by merely staring at it (psychometry), and...one other crucial ability, that comes in very handy when he discovers that another Fishhook ex-employee, Lambert Finn, is planning a genocidal pogrom against all the parries in the world. But will even these godlike abilities be enough to quell worldwide discrimination and unrest? As "Time Is the Simplest Thing" proceeds, it becomes evident that all these folks with paranormal abilities--be they telepaths or teleporters or psychokineticists--are stand-in symbols for all those folks who are discriminated against in modern-day, real-life society. Whether they are blacks, Jews, gays...or Muslims, Simak has this to say on the subject: "How much ability and genius might be lying barren, ability and genius that the world could use but would never know because of the intolerance and hate which was held against the very people who were least qualified as the targets of it." And later in the book: "Someday...the world would look back and wonder at the madness...at the blindness and the folly and the sheer intolerance. Someday there would be vindication. Someday sanity." And later still: "The darkness of the mind, the bleakness of the thought, the shallowness of purpose. These were the werewolves of the world." For its right-on central message alone, regarding the evils of intolerance of those who are different, "Time Is the Simplest Thing" would get my heartiest recommendation. But the book offers the reader many other

pleasures, as well. As I said before, the book gallops along at a rapid pace, and Blaine's predicament is an interesting one. As Scottish critic David Pringle mentions in his "Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction," the novel is "a shade tougher than this sentimental/pastoral author's normal fare," and I suppose that this is true, with any number of violent confrontations, fistfights, murders, suicide and assorted mayhem on display. Simak was a wonderful writer, need I even mention, and adds pleasing, futuristic grace notes throughout his book, such as automobiles with air jets and nuclear engines, not to mention all the many wonders that Fishhook has managed to bring back to Earth (becoming at the same time more of a venal, capitalistic monopoly than a space exploration agency): the "Dimensino" entertainment program; the "transo" booth for instantaneous transportation; the Gobathian drug, used by an insect race to repair broken bodies; and that straitjacket-like robe, made from the striped skin of an alien creature. Simak's writing style is simple, clean and compulsively readable, and yet still capable of delivering a choice line such as "a face that looked as if it were a place where chickens scratched in their search for grubs and worms." As had Alfred Bester in his 1953 masterpiece "The Demolished Man," Simak here utilizes different typefaces very effectively to convey spoken and telepathed conversations, often mixing the two in the same paragraph. He's not above coining his own words --such as "smuggery"--to suit his needs, and even seems to have beaten Patrick McGoohan's classic television program "The Prisoner" to the punch when he describes the idyllic Fishhook pleasure village by the sea, in which it holds captive those who attempt to escape the organization! All of which is not to say that Simak's novel is a perfect affair. Indeed, this reader had two problems with "Time Is the Simplest Thing," one large and one small. The minor complaint is that it is a bit too dependent on (double) coincidence; I'll let you find out just where and when yourself. My main problem with Simak's story, however, is that we never learn precisely just how Fishhook has managed to bring back all those alien goods to Earth, when our explorers are only visiting those planets mentally. It is an aspect of the story that is hardly touched on, and yet one that plays a central role in Fishhook's position in Earth society. This reader wanted to know more, to put it mildly. Simak's book ends with matters not completely resolved, either, with the fate of many of the parries still very much in jeopardy, and with Blaine thinking that a lot of work remains to be done. Simak could easily have revisited this fascinating story line of his for a justifiable follow-up tale, but no; this was one author who never wrote a sequel to any of his 29 novels, preferring to always come up with something fresh and original. Still, for what it is, "Time Is the Simplest Thing" remains a satisfying experience, and, as I say, a right-on one. It is a book whose central message--a plea for understanding and acceptance for those who are different--is more needed today than ever. (By the way, this review initially appeared on the Fantasy Literature

website ... a most excellent destination for all fans of Clifford D. Simak....)

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