A Pastoral Philosophy of

Clifford D. Simak

All We Do Is Live

Photography from Simak's bluff by Bill Sharp

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PREFACE

Clifford Donald Simak wrote about an astonishing assortment of worlds and creatures, sentient life forms, organic, mechanical and otherwise. He wrote about parallel universes and alternative worlds and trips through time. He was one of the most celebrated and successful science fiction authors of his day.

Many of these stories come out of the setting of his own youth. Simak was born on a farm in rural Wisconsin at the beginning of the twentieth century, a world of horses and oil lamps. The house he grew up in is on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River a few miles from where it flowed into the Mississippi. It is a spectacularly beautiful landscape. Young Cliff roamed the bluffs, the washes, the valleys and woods around his home with a boyhood delight that never left him. There is truly a magical quality about that little corner of the world, remote yet with a prospect of a world still wild, with the closed comfort of a fire in a family hearth but with a vision extending to the far horizons. It was a land lost in time but with a sense of the potential of the future of what was to be called the American Century.

Simak fell in love with words at an early age. This love drew him into his professor of newspaper reporter and editor and as a writer of science fiction—stories of an imaginable future. He worked as a highly successful senior news editor for a major metropolitan newspaper, writing award-winning features about the latest news in science and world affairs.

The mid-century passage of the Great Depression and World War II seem to have worked a transformation on him. At first, he expressed a growing despair and then, out of a powerful imagination, came new worlds, not of conquest and progress, but rather a struggle for the soul. At stake was the very survival of one of nature's experiments: Humankind.

Simak often returned to the pastoral settings of his youth and created a new, pastoral, genre of science fiction with rural settings and common people. There were often abandoned landscapes, once filled with people who inexplicably disappeared, or who were at such a remove as to be little more than a vexation to the routine course of days and seasons of a place lost in the drift of time. There is a stark contrast between his sense of a settled life and rootlessness. His star characters are often a small group, of diverse and interesting forms, recently arrived or cast into strange lands, who must seek their destiny.

There is a place called Millville, itself at a psychological remove from the greater world. Simak was born in Millville township. The family farm is set on a narrow strip of land, a plateau, something of a remote island, surrounded by trees, elevated by millennia of erosion, and defined by washes and gullies. From one point on the farm, described in *Way Station*, you stand on a promontory and look into the valley of the Wisconsin River. This is what I call 'Simak's Prospect.' That setting defines the landscape, the architecture, of many of his stories. He described that setting many times, from many different perspectives, including in one story from across the river. I have stood on these prospects, these bluffs, and gazed upon a wonderful landscape.

I started reading Simak more than a half century ago. I remember a haunting feeling that persisted after reading his novels, especially *A Choice of Gods*, *Time is the Simplest*

Thing, Way Station, the classic *City*, and other books. These stuck in my mind. I've read all of his books, some of them time and again, an honor I bestow on few authors. In part because the landscape reminds me of the place I grew up. I remember many of his stories as well, those that struck some deep and vibrant cord in my soul. Simak speaks to me of a deep, underlying philosophy. He was a man in search of meaning. And his search resonates with my own.

Did Simak intend to convey a personal philosophy or was he just a clever story-teller? Fiction was a sideline for him. He was first and foremost a journalist, a science journalist. He wrote several non-fiction books, mostly collections of his science features; but never anything explicitly speculative. He was a plain and simple man in a very ordinary profession. He found a niche, indeed created his own, in a vast constellation of popular fiction. He was a leading writer in his genre the length of his adult life. His fame was on par with his friends Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, great writers who often paid tribute to his genius, but unlike them he did not achieve a lasting public celebrity. I believe it was not his style. Certainly, it was not the style of his characters. There is nothing flamboyant about him or his characters. Today, in a world defined by hurry, assaulted by a vast array of attention grabbers, a growing publishing industry, and a demand for novelty, only, *City* and *Way Station*, seem to occasionally come back into print[1].

Why do I seek to bring Simak back? Perhaps my reader doesn't need to ask. But if they don't, I must. It is in part due to my love of his writing. I want others, naturally, to share my pleasure. In part I wish to honor the memory of a good man. But more than any other reason, I believe he has something important to say for our modern age. It is something I feel the need to fathom for my own appreciation of life.

My working hypothesis is that Simak had a systematic personal philosophy about the condition and fate of humanity that came out of his experience of an important span of history. It was never implicitly stated but rather evolved in successive books and stories. Woven into the stories there are features that strongly suggest a personal philosophy which over the course of years demonstrate a consistent, elemental, insight into the world and human nature.

While there is a deep sense of despair in many of his stories, others came to offer a hope that a saving remnant of humanity would have a second chance. In *City*, published originally as a series of short stories under the shadow of that terrible expression of inhumanity called World War II, our species fails one test after another, and the world is inherited by an intelligent race of dogs. Simak said in one interview that he just couldn't bear a future dominated by humans. After that, bit by bit, he worked his way back to a more optimistic stance. It has been suggested that Simak was seeking to create a world he would like to live in. It wasn't easy.

The salvation of humanity in his stories comes from a tiny minority, most of whom have a gift, a gift of paranormal abilities. They are genetic anomalies. The term 'mutant,' would apply to them. Simak suggested that perhaps we all have these gifts but our current, technological, mode of life smothers their expression. At times Simak went beyond the

[1] Simak's literary executor, David Wixon, has been bringing back a collection of his short stories, many published only in ancient pulp magazines and hard to find. These are available in digital and bound format from Amazon.

paranormal into the realm of myth, fairies, trolls, and beasts that would have done Tolkien proud. He had these weird creatures explain their own alternative existence. Often, however, a small handful of involuntary adventurers would undertake a quest, a quest for a grail, for an ultimate truth, or at least the truth of their own true essence. These are heroic journeys, the stuff of legends. In many of his short stories tiny fragments of these truths are revealed but over the years they accumulated.

I'm going to try to briefly retell some of these stories as they filter through my own imagination. Robert Ewald's 2006 book about Simak does an excellent job of describing Simak's plots and characters. There are several excellent nicely annotated bibliographies, several insightful articles, and a growing number of websites that address Simak's work. None have attempted to plumb the depths of Simak's personal philosophy. That is the task I will undertake and leave it to my reader to judge how well I succeed. My fondest hope is to encourage others to undertake this mission in their own terms, to bring Simak and his work back into a broader public view.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to express my appreciation for our international Simak group who have shared a passion for Clifford D. Simak over the years. Several of us have visited Simak Country. One of them is Francis Lyall, in Scotland, who visited Simak and has published his excellent biography, *Clifford D. Simak: An Affectionate Appreciation*. Several of our group, and others, have made valuable contributions to the Simak legacy and I am particularly appreciative of those who have done the painstaking and meticulous bibliographies, which can be found on Google. Kudos go to David Wixon, Simak's friend and now literary executor who has brought us volumes of Simak's short fiction, including his war and western stories.

Chapter One: Simak's Prospect

I will attempt to write not the philosophy of Clifford D. Simak, but a philosophy. Simak, as noted, made no attempt to leave a systemized philosophy. He wasn't alone in this trait. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a great man of literature. A lot of books have been written about him. One thing they almost all agree on is that he left no systematic philosophy. He left it to each of us to piece together our own philosophy. He spoke of his own life as a voyage of "a thousand tacks," which, by successive turns, by repeated misdirection, took him closer to a port where he hoped to find some truth.

I believe, first of all, that Clifford Simak, like Emerson, was also on a 'voyage' of discovery that moved him, as the winds willed, into unknown realms in which he hoped to find some truth of his own, some deeper understanding of the mysteries of life, some herald of human destiny. This quest drew him on, through his stories, to the end of his long life. How far Simak traveled we will have to explore for ourselves. That he did not systemize a philosophy is in no way unusual. If, like Emerson, he never felt compelled to do so it may be by choice, or perhaps he simply never got it all sorted out. Few of us ever arrive at a point of clarity and certainty in our own lives, and those who do tend not to tarry. Simak, I firmly believe, had the landscape of his world rather well mapped out but he never stopped moving beyond the boundaries into new territories any more than the rest of us.

We know very little of Simak's life. We don't know what he read, what influenced his world view. His story, like Shakespeare's, is in what he wrote. Every story, every book an author pens, is to some degree autobiographical. More importantly, what draws us to stories is something that speaks to our own heart. Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury once said that every book we bring home contains something of ourselves. That doesn't mean that we understand the reason we are drawn to the book, or other objects that draw us. If we understood, we would probably just smile and walk on. A lingering, subtle mystery takes hold of us. To fill an unknown emptiness, we take the book. Sometimes we even read it.

Psychotherapists might say that we are only acting out fantasies or even dramatizing traumas. Others say that we attribute to those we esteem, including the writers we admire, much of our own unmet potential. I think there is more to it than that. The ancients told us that a life well lived is one of introspection. Indeed, an unexamined life, they said, is not worth living. We gain understanding about ourselves by carefully paying attention to what draws our interest. As psychologist William James said, we are that to which we come alive. The novels and stories we love must work that kind of magic.

The two books by Simak that most captured my imagination in youth were *Way Station* and *A Choice of Gods*. Both are sited on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River, the former in sight of the point at which it empties into the Mississippi Rivers and the latter at that confluence. They are very different stories but each evokes an image of a small piece of landscape, isolated in time and space, long-lived characters who have time to reflect on the meaning of life, and, against their will, forced into a cosmic drama. Like in *City*, the stories center around a house that has stood for centuries, even millennia. In fact, that spot, however idealized, is where Clifford Simak grew up.

I traveled that corner of Wisconsin in search of an understanding of the mystery of the place. I found it representative of something many of us perhaps have experienced. As my wife and I traveled all over the country, hundreds of thousands of miles, mostly on back roads, we have found many 'Simak' places. They aren't all on a bluff. They don't all have wonderful houses. They aren't all in sight of a river. They are each very different places. Indeed, Simak himself wrote of many 'magical' places; some cloistered by trees, others in ravines, some in glades, some in mountains, some on the Great Plains, some in deserts and badlands. I've found the world full of such (almost supernatural) places.

Why the bluff? What makes this image so compelling to me? In part because I grew up in a rolling countryside, an ancient landscape that dinosaurs once walked. The "mountains" just to the north were the stumps of a range that once rivaled the Himalayas. Today they are mere hilltops, between which are valleys like places Simak described. I read his stories as I grew up there and, like him, wandered the woods and fields. The bluff was an important image to Simak and it is to me[2].I now live on the brow of a hilltop, with a prospect I love, between two streams. This is my bluff today.

For many years I lived in a stark desert through which I hiked several thousands of miles. The desert, in mythology, and in some of Simak's stories, is the landscape of searching souls. I've found many wonderful overlooks in the desert. On one mountaintop there was a day I sat with two Golden Eagles keeping me company. On another I watched two "Top Gun" fighters in a mock dogfight, throwing out the flares used to decoy missiles. I've walked on rocks over a billion years old, found Indian artifacts and dwellings, old horseshoes and discarded or lost tools, and occasionally a small meteorite. I have a favorite overlook in Death Valley that evokes the prospect of the mythical quest I so often find in Simak's books. More recently I found a bluff in Pennsylvania, where I now live, in a place named Wyalusing, which is the name of a place only a few miles from the Simak farm in Wisconsin, another river-carved bluff overlooking a beautiful farming valley. There is a house on a hill with a view over that bluff that is nothing short of glorious. I have been in little valleys in Pennsylvania with a stream and tall hemlocks and oaks and a mist with sun streaming down that seem unearthly[3]. I have found such places in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado where I once lived, and in the Sierras, on the Great Lakes, in Maine and the California Big Sur near where I was born. The list could go on and on.

I've chosen the title "From the Bluff" because of that deep appeal of high places, of prospects. I spent much of my youth in a place named after a bluff along the Arkansas River, a small agricultural community at the time I first read Simak. For me today it is a place more of memory than of fact, much like Simak's Millville. It is little more than an empty shell of what it once was, in either reality or memory.

The people who gave it an almost mystical appeal are gone—teachers, mentors, neighbors, local merchants, doctors and lawyers, and politicos. During my youth the key to the house was in the envelope with the mortgage. The key to the car was in the ignition, where it belonged. My bicycle sat unlocked at school, in town or on the edge of a dirt road with never a thought it would not be there when I returned to it. There were magical places

[2] It was to Frank Lloyd Wright who built his famous house on the brow of a hill not far up river from where Simak grew up; another place that draws my imagination.
[3] One photograph of which is on the cover of my Amazon Kindle book: A Visit to the Hobbit Shire.

near my home, an old-growth forest with giant trees, some not more than a few minutes away, where I wandered and played and hunted and camped for many years. Across the river, to the East, and to the south, is flat, mostly featureless farmland carved by the slow, westward, wanderings of the Arkansas River, and just beyond the Mississippi River a thousand miles south of where it is joined by Simak's Wisconsin River: It is the largest level landscape in North America with vast fields cultivated for rice, cotton and soybeans. It is Johnny Cash country. I don't like it there. To the west, however, are rolling hills and valleys with streams, a country I came to love; a landscape I found in Simak's books.

Today my home town is the most economically distressed community in America. For me it is the story of *City* and other of Simak's stories: it is the story of the end of an era. Downtown is a virtual ghost town with lots of vacant lots and collapsing buildings. The wonderful Carnegie-era library was refurbished into modernistic offices and now abandoned. The old brick school was torn down and replaced with steel and glass and concrete. The house I grew up in is boarded up. The wondrous old trees, remnants of old-growth forest, were cut down. The ancient stretches of forest were clear-cut to feed the paper mills. But I seem to come home when Simak writes to me about Millville and I meet the characters, the "Neighbors," in "The Big Front Yard" and other stories. Yes, they too are long gone memories.

Progress killed the romanticized memory of my youth, a place Ronald Reagan cherished as "main street" America but worked to kill. As my wife and I travel we are both drawn to small towns like moths to a flame. We find most of the old main streets largely empty and decaying. There are hundreds of "shrinking," "forgotten," places in America today.

I have always been interested in the idea of community, perhaps in search of something I feel lost. From my study of history and sociology I've learned much about social change and the idea of 'progress.' My wife is a master genealogist who has delved into the lives of those in our family tree and the communities they lived in. We've spent a great deal of time exploring the places our ancestors once lived[4]. We are drawn to writers who have left vivid descriptions of lives in a now lost past, lives that spoke to us of the values, the essence, of human life. August Derleth, who sometimes wrote science fiction, and did a marvelous takeoff on a Sherlock Holmes character he called Solar Pons, wrote extensively about his home country in Wisconsin, indeed on the Wisconsin River just upstream from the Simak farm.

Wendell Berry has written novels about the people who once lived along the Kentucky River, when farmers plowed with horses, where he grew up and where he has chosen to live out his life after a university career. He fictionalized his home town in his novels but there is a tiny rundown village behind which I found a cemetery filled with Berry's and the names of other characters in his stories, on a bluff above the Kentucky River.

I have even found a strong candidate for the 'Simak' house. Between Millville and the town Derleth grew up in there is a legendary stone house on a hill, on the brow of the

[4] She wrote a book about a period before the Civil War, Priscilla Stone Sharp, *Langhorn and Mary*. It is about two common people, long forgotten, who lived an epoch-making life. Mary was the daughter of a prosperous German farmer. Langhorn, her husband, was a free Black.

hill, facing away from the Wisconsin River toward a lovely valley. It was the home and studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin. The house, as Wright intended, seems to have grown there. It is well cared for and could last for centuries. I see that house when I read Simak's stories, especially *City*.

Simak also wrote of a town I have often tried to visualize, a place where "downtown" is about three blocks of small locally owned businesses. There is an old-fashioned hardware store, mom and pop grocery, sometimes a diner, maybe a five and dime store[5], and perhaps a lawyer in an old office with the window opened for air. The town has a brick high school, two stories, and neighborhoods with distinctive pre-and post-war home styles. In Simak's stories man has gone to the stars but there is still a drug store with a soda fountain where the kids hang out. This is the town of "The Sitters," where a little nest of aliens reshaped, and gave meaning to the lives of those around them. The place was called Millville.

Prairie du Chien, just a few miles northwest of the Simak farm, seems a good candidate. There are several others in Simak's Grant County. During his early newspaper days Simak lived in several suitable small towns spread out across the Midwest. I've found lots of 'Simak Towns' in my travels. They are places that were, at least at one time, first and foremost about people who live on a human scale. Their stories are today often preserved in tiny libraries and by historical associations. They are the stuff of Simak's pastoral stories. They are part of an Americana Simak and many of us knew intimately in bygone days.

What can we really say about the influence such places had on Simak? Does a study of such places give us a better insight into his life and writing? Derleth wrote, in *Walden West*, "I truly believe that every creative mind is the essential outgrowth of its own native soil, and that no material is quite so perfectly adapted to it as the rich color and background of that soil[6]." There can be no doubt that Simak was deeply affected by his childhood life and carried something of the beauty and magic of that 'Millville' landscape with him through his long life; the countryside, the farm and the prospect and especially the bluff on the edge of the Simak farm. He treats it almost like a vision of paradise. Let me illustrate this in Simak's own words. In *Way Station*, Enoch Wallace walked the path near his home as he had done every day for over a century:

> *He went down across the field and through the strip of woods and came out on a great outthrust of rock that stood atop the cliff that faced the river. He stood there, as he had stood on thousands of other mornings, and stared out at the river, sweeping in majestic blue-and-silver through the wooded bottomland.*
>
> *Old, ancient water, he said, talking silently to the river, you have seen it happen—the mile-high faces of the glaciers that came and stayed and left, creeping back toward the pole inch by stubborn inch, carrying the melting water from those very glaciers in a flood that filled this valley with a tide such as now is never known; the mastodon and saber tooth and the bear-sized beaver that ranged these olden hills and made the night clamorous with trumpeting and screaming; the silent little bands of men who trotted in the woods or clambered up the cliffs or paddled on your surface, woods-wise and water-wise, weak in body, strong in purpose, and persistent in a way no other thing ever was persistent, and just a little time ago that other breed of men who carried dreams within their skulls and cruelty in their hands and the awful sureness of an even greater purpose in their hearts. And before that, for this is ancient country*

[5] Now gone, victims of Wal-Mart and shopping malls.
[6] There are so few of us who have that experience today.

beyond what is often found, the other kinds of life and the many turns of climate and changes that came upon the Earth itself. And what think you of it? He asked the river. For yours is the memory and the perspective and the time and by now you should have answers, or at least some of the answers.

A Man might have some of the answers had he lived for several million years—as he might have the answers several million years from this very summer morning if he still should be around."

That spot exists, more or less. Simak grew up there; but he shunned returning in later life. It became increasingly a place in his imagination. Much of the scenery in Simak's works is certainly fictionalized. I've been there several times, so it is easy for me to get into the scene in a number of Simak's books and stories, especially as Enoch described, as old Cliff and Asher and John Sutton described it in even greater detail in *Time and Again* and Jason Whitney did, albeit likely on the Mississippi River just a few miles to the west, in *A Choice of Gods*. But I also notice the differences.

I have come to several important conclusions about the localities described by Simak (and also applies to other writers in fact and fiction). First, each is a dust mote on the stage of American life. There are thousands upon thousands of such places and stories, mostly forever untold. Second, they are universal. There is something distinctive, homey, about them, at least there was until the cookie-cutter retail outlets and strip malls took over. Third, I find a special genius in the way Simak tells his stories. In those stories the people, except the main characters, are shadows. Ditto much of the landscape. I've come to the conclusion that his way of rendering the background, the people and the landscape and towns, into a hazy and indistinct blur while spotlighting his major characters was a masterful use of gestalt psychology figure and ground.

In Simak's stories, there are good and decent people, albeit many flawed in forgivable ways, and many aliens who are also good and decent. Above all, there is a profound feeling of aloneness. It's not pathological loneliness. It's not a yearning or hunger for human companionship. Simak's characters were happy and fulfilled in their solitude and the wondrous prospect it gave on the world around them. But when in the company of others, human or otherwise, they found deep and abiding friendships the like of which most of us would die for.

Simak's landscapes leave a vivid trace in the reader's mind, and there are a number of variations that take a dramatic form in our own minds, elaborating a basic theme. There is a house on a hill and bluffs surrounded by autumn leaves, wood smoke from a warm and cheery fire and, often, robots with real personalities and stories of their own. There are hills and valleys and meadows and trees and rivers and streams and misty hollows, and there are barren places of trial and quest, deserts upon which a soul must journey.

If very little remains of my hometown, much less remains of farms and villages of previous centuries. But the experience is instructive: First, to try to get a sense of what changed; and second, to try to understand the impact of those changes on the formation of the modern mind. Those changes are real and they are significant. In some of my workshops I have often asked people to tell about how they grew up, especially those of the boomer generation. I then ask them to describe the lives of their children and then compare the two visions. The outcome is fairly consistent: The change has not been for the better.

What word describes their experience of life today? I hear two most often: Chaos and Confusion. Simak was a generation or two older than my group. He was an adult through the Great Depression and World War II, two defining events in the life of his generation. He was more fortunate than many because he had a job through the Depression. He wrote intimate stories of people in the Depression, people he lived with in Middle America. He edited the news of a world at war, blow by blow, a war he was too old to have to fight but which took him to every battlefield. He wrote or edited numerous articles on the rapid advances of science, technology and industry following the war. He reflected deeply on the nature of the life of our ancient ancestors. We may never learn the full range of the things that influenced and shaped him, but his stories were not really about the past, not about the preparation, but about the present moment, the crisis's that his characters, none naturally heroes, are drawn into, suddenly and without warning, and that is how I will treat his life and writing. I don't think this story is over.

LIFE AND CAREER

An excellent biography of Simak is Francis Lyall's *Clifford D. Simak: An Affectionate Appreciation* (2020). Lyall had visited Simak and provided personal insights into his character. I will provide a summary of his life based largely on my own earlier research.

Simak was a private individual. Prior to Lyall, the details were sketchy and indeed not entirely accurate. David Wixon, who knew Simak well and is his literary executor, has given sketches, drawn from his personal experiences and Simak's journals, about Simak in each of his volumes of the short stories. What we know of him came from close friends, fellow writers, and a few who knew him only briefly near the end of his life (See bibliography for sources). Sam Moskowitz, Thomas Clarkson, Paul Walker, Poul Anderson, Francis Lyall, wrote of his life in articles and memorial introductions to collections of Simak's stories. Muriel Becker composed a fabulous bibliography (book length) up to 1972, which includes an insightful interview with Simak. Phil Stephensen-Payne published an excellent and affordable and complete bibliography (available online). Robert Ewald wrote the only book-length treatment of Simak and his work before this volume (and he too took up the theme of Simak's pastoral philosophy).

Simak was born August 3, 1904 in rural, southwestern Wisconsin, on his grandfather's (Edward Wiseman) farm, in Grant County, Millville Township[7]. Census records say that Wiseman emigrated from Cork County Ireland. Simak said Wiseman was born in England[8]. Wiseman was living in Millville Township in 1880 The farm is at the extreme northwest corner of Millville Township. The farm is indeed perched on a narrow bluff top that gives it a sense of isolation. The title photograph was taken from that farm site. I doubt there was much "gossiping over the fence." Wiseman married Ellen Nagle. He made his living breaking tough prairie sod with a team of powerful horses and a strong, deep-cutting, plow. He was buried in the Nagel cemetery in Patch Grove Township.

Simak's father, John Lewis Simak, immigrated to the US in 1885 from Eastern Europe. In 1900 John was a farmhand on Edward Wiseman's farm. John married Maggie, farmer Wiseman's daughter, in 1903 and Clifford was born in the Simak's first home, a log

[7] Today, Millville Township, with nearly 22 square miles, has a population of 147 people.
[8] This England to Ireland to America route of emigration is not uncommon.

cabin. In 1910 the Simak family address was in Patch Grove Township, which is immediately south of Millville Township and close to the Wiseman farm. In 1917 they had an RFD out of Bridgeport, which is on the north side of the Wisconsin River within sight of the bluff on which the farm is located just as Old Cliff, in Simak's *Time and Again*, described it.

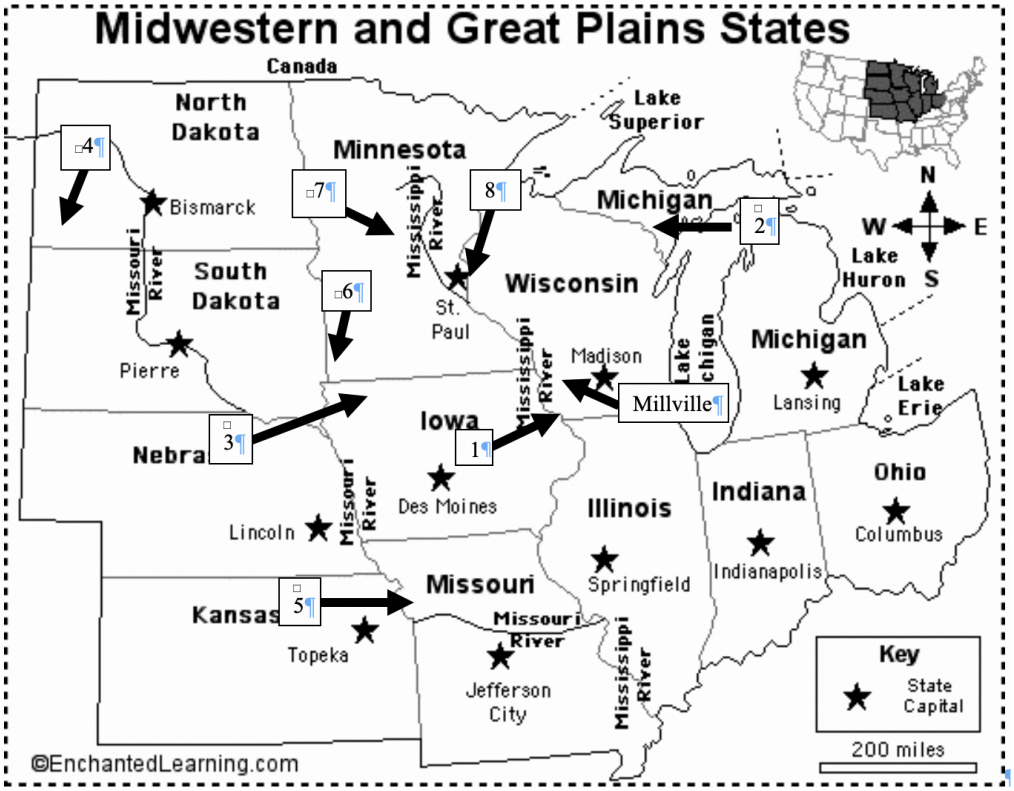
In many ways Simak's childhood was indeed idealistic. Simak compared his early life to the stories Robert Ruark told in his wonderful and warm classic *The Old Man and the Boy*, and *The Old Man's Boy Grows Up*. As a farm boy he did his share of work. He said he walked a mile and a half to a one room school for his first eight years of school and then rode a horse cross-country to high school in Patch Grove, a small, cross-roads farming village. There is an old one-room schoolhouse preserved at the village of Millville, which may be the one he attended, or one much like it.

Simak did well in school and got along well with the other boys but had little interest in athletics. He enjoyed the life of all the seasons as only a country boy or girl could. There wasn't a lot of money, but he said the family was "close knit and devoted." The family would, as many farm families did, read aloud at night from newspapers and books. He learned to love words. When he was five, Moskowitz related, after watching his mother read the newspaper, he asked, first, if they printed news from all over the world, and second if they printed the truth. To both of these questions she answered in the affirmative. Simak said he knew at that point he wanted to be a newspaperman.

Simak completed perhaps one year at the University of Wisconsin. He took a teacher preparation course and taught school for a while in Cassville, Wisconsin, where he met Agnes (Kay) Kuchenberg. He started his career as a reporter with the Iron River Reporter (Upper Peninsula, Michigan) in 1929 and was soon promoted to Editor. He married Kay on April 13, 1929. They had two children, Scott and Shelly. He joined the Spencer Reporter, in Spencer, Iowa, as editor, in 1934. He was hired by the McGiffin Newspaper Company after they bought the newspaper and McGiffin moved him to the Dickinson Press, Dickinson, North Dakota; then to the Excelsior Standard, Excelsior Springs, Missouri (Outside Kansas City); then to Worthington, Minnesota[9] (Southwest); and finally, to the Brainerd Dispatch, Brainerd Minnesota (Central Minnesota). All were small town daily and weekly papers. He joined the Minneapolis Star in 1939 and rapidly rose through the ranks. He started as a copy editor, became chief of the copy desk and then news editor in 1949. He stayed on as news editor when the Star merged with the Tribune. In 1959 he began weekly science columns and became coordinator of the Tribune's Science Reading Series. In 1976 he retired and for the first time took up fiction writing full-time. Kay died in 1985. Simak was seriously ill since 1983, suffering from emphysema and leukemia, and stopped writing in 1983. But he had one last novel, Highway of Eternity, and was working on a new short story when he died April 25, 1988, age 83.

[9] Near a town and its people Ken Burn's featured in his documentary "The War."

- Taught school in Cassville, Wisconsin, where he met Agnes (Kay) Kuchenberg.
- *Iron River Reporter* in 1926
- *Spencer Reporter*, Spencer, Iowa 1934.
- *Dickinson Press,* Dickinson, North Dakota
- *Excelsior Standard*, Excelsior Springs, Missouri
- Worthington, Minnesota
- *Brainerd Dispatch,* Brainerd Minnesota
- *Minneapolis Star* in 1939



Chapter Two: A Map of Simak's Worlds

Like many young boys, Simak was fascinated with science fiction. He read Verne, Wells, Burroughs, Haggard, and others. He had an inborn yearning to write. His first accepted story, for a science fiction pulp magazine, "The Cubes of Ganymede," was never published and has been lost. His first published piece appeared in Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* in 1931, "World of the Red Sun". He published four more stories in 1932. In 1933 *Astounding Stories*, to which Simak was selling his stories, ceased publication and other pulps floundered as the Great Depression reached its nadir. He published one short novel in 1935 and nothing more until 1937 when he began to work for John W. Campbell.

Campbell played a tremendously influential role in the transformation of the science fiction genre. He began writing and selling science fiction while a student at MIT (he later graduated from Duke). During the Depression he worked a variety of jobs until 1937 when he was offered the job as editor of *Astounding*. His readers were bright, educated and curious, and he carefully chose writers who would attract and hold them. They included Simak, A. E. van Vogt, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, L. Ron Hubbard, Lester del Ray, L. Sprague de Camp, and others. Campbell challenged and mentored many of his writers. Campbell set about to shape the magazine in his own vision, mobilized his stable of writers (mostly young, new to the game and loyal to him), changed the name to *Astounding Science Fiction*, adopted the policy of presenting science in a plausible, fictionalized form, and with the July 1939 issue brought his dream to fruition.

Campbell had a penetrating and powerful mind. He studied the sciences and many other fields in an effort to create a plausible fiction based on science and the prospects for human progress. He frequently published non-fiction pieces on the latest in science. In the years before the war, Campbell and others wrote about the control of atomic energy. Once the Manhattan Project started the FBI showed up to investigate potential security leaks. They learned that Campbell had been printing stories about atomic energy and computers and space travel long before any of them were demonstrated[10].

Simak had actually stopped writing for a while until Campbell came on the scene. Simak found in Campbell a unique editorship that brought out his best. Simak, an editor (newspapers) himself, was excited about and thrived on writing for Campbell. He became one of the leading writers and one of the great names of the Golden Age of Science Fiction (1938 until 1950), a movement Campbell sought to make a new "empire of the imagination". Simak was a regular contributor, publishing much of his work for Campbell, until 1950.

Most of Simak's early stories were well within the genre standardized by Campbell. It was 'science' fiction' (fictionalized science), space opera, man against nature, the universe and hostile aliens, with lots of spaceships, ray guns, technology and controlled atomic power and computers[11]. It was a monthly pulp magazine widely available at newsstands and drug stores almost anywhere in the country. Campbell worked diligently to expand his circulation. He drove his writers, often suggesting story lines, sometimes the same idea to several different writers to see how they handled it, and sometimes printed several of the

[10] H. G. Wells, A Merritt and others were writing about atomic power and weapons before 1920.
[11] A good history of that movement can be found in Alexei and Cory Panshin's *The World Beyond the Hill.*

resulting stories. Local writers, like Asimov, hung out at his office. He wrote long letters to his writers, even when he rejected a story. Simak was keenly aware that he was writing to a market and happily crafted his stories to sell. Campbell admitted he didn't understand much of what Simak wrote but he loved and bought it.

Simak's "World of the Red Sun," was pure pulp. It had a couple of .45 pistol toting scientist-adventurers, flying their time-traveling airplane into the distant future. They find themselves in the ruins of a civilization with a downtrodden people ruled by a creature of pure evil, a creature little more than a brain, criminally insane, who has enslaved the last remnants of a decayed humankind. The monster is impervious to physical force, but our heroes discover they can beat him by laughing at him. Trying to return back in time, they find they can only go forward and end up at the end of the world, a world of a swollen, red sun near the end of its life. All that is left of humanity is ruins. In Simak's very first published story, the human experiment has come to a bad end. We will see this theme in many of his stories over the years.

Some critics have stated that Simak was at the beginning of technological criticism, a theme that would occupy him throughout his career, but I do not believe it so. This type of story was very much the genre of the time. Verne and Wells wrote along this line much earlier. It was Campbell's own personal style. A powerful undercurrent of disenchantment with science and technology had come out of the mechanized horror of World War I. Advancing industry had been making war ever gorier since the first modern, technological, war, the American Civil War. A growing literature projected a grim future for humankind. Many science fiction writers wrote along this line and would add atomic annihilation and other technological horrors after World War II). Movie theaters screened stories of mad scientists and their evil influence on civilization, opposed by daring heroes and heroines.

This dark line of thought started about that time Darwin published his *Origin of the Species* and later *The Descent of Man*. Herbert Spencer in England, Nietzsche in Germany, Sumner in America and others, picked up the dog-eat-dog tone of "survival of the fittest." Many, and this included existentialist philosophers and novelists, gravely lamented the inevitable doom of mankind. The professions of sociology and psychology formed in no small part due to the growing dysfunction of industrial society.

Freud did his part depicted modern man as driven by dark, subconscious forces. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918) predicted the fall of civilization and I often wonder if Simak read Spengler? Well's scripted a 'grammar' of the fallen future in his science fiction. Verne had portrayed any number of fallen anti-heroes, masters of science and technology, and for that matter, the decay of the world in his time. I believe, however, that Simak came up with his own, unique, vision of the future of technology that would evolve over the years, driven by the emotional impact of the Second World War. But this came later. Nonetheless, it was the foundation of his pastoral philosophy, many stories set on his bluff and in small towns, perhaps such as he worked in as a news editor.

Four more short stories followed "The Red Sun." In "Voice in the Void," Simak first addressed religion. His hero explored a Martian religion that he learned originated from Earth a million years before. It has been related that Simak was raised a Catholic, but Wixon disputed this and the evidence supports this. Edward Wiseman, Wixon related, left

the Church and consequently is buried in a public cemetery, along with Cliff's mother, father and brother. Simak, with this story, began his skeptical exploration into the origin and fate of religion, and of humanity, a theme that would recur in his stories many times over his career. In the other three stories, which I will treat in greater scope, he also explored supernatural phenomena and the question of values in human affairs.

The sixth story, *The Creator*, published in1935, is a short novel. Simak continued to explore the problem of god as creator. The god of this story, the Creator, is not a pretty one. The Creator is a ten-foot, cone-shaped, "mad-scientist" of the future. Simak said he had written this piece for personal amusement, thinking it would never be published. It was thus not slanted to a market. Publisher William Crawford found out about it while searching for stories for a new science fiction magazine, *Marvel Tales*[12].

This is another story that ends with a red sun at the end of the earth. It is an earth populated by a primitive "half-men and women" who eke out a bare existence. It is another story of two scientists who spend their lives developing time travel and pop into the laboratory of the Creator. The Creator has powerful telekinetic and telepathic powers: Totally commanding. In the lab it shows them their universe in a small container, the universe it created. And now it wants to destroy the creation. So, the two heroes, with the help of three aliens who had also made it to the laboratory, move the tiny universe to a safe place. One of the young scientists makes a mental error trying to return home and ends up at the end of the earth where the story is written on animal skins.

And so the stories go. There are trips to Mars, the asteroids, Ganymede, Mercury and more "Twilight Zone" style stories over the next ten years. In 1938 Simak published four stories, including three for Campbell, and the following year two additional stories and the three-part serial of *Cosmic Engineers* which later came out as a novel. There were thirty-four more stories during the war years, followed by 22 through 1951.

An interesting side story about Simak during this period. In 1938 a very young, self-styled critic by the name of Isaac Asimov found Simak's story "Rule 18," wanting, indeed "incoherent," and wrote to complain about it. Simak responded with a polite letter asking for his reasoning. Asimov, on rereading the story again, realized that he simply had not caught Simak's style of writing. That style involved a number of separate scenes without explicit transitional passages. Asimov first apologized and then adopted the style himself and became a master at.

But already we see the emergency of a distinctive aspect of his style. While most of Simak's early stories were of the space opera genre, reviewers were already seeing that he was characterizing the down-to-earth, "just folks" ambience that became the foundation of his pastoral science fiction.

Simak would write yet another 100 or so short stories, some of them top award winners, but in 1950 he turned to the novel and over the next 36 years wrote 30 of them. Switching into high gear writing novels starting with *Cosmic Engineers* (1950), *Empire* (1951), *Time and Again* (1951), and in 1952, *Ring Around the Sun* and his classic collection

[12] The story has been reprinted at least three more times. I have a 1946 edition of *The Creator* printed and published by Crawford Publications, which gives an original copyright date of 1933.

of eight of his stories, organized in *City* (1952)[13]. I find these early novels insightful. It is in them that I first begin to perceive a "philosophy," and it is this ambiance that drew me into being a loyal follower while a young boy.

Cosmic Engineers

I do not consider Cosmic Engineers one of the pastoral stories, but it gives a good perspective on Simak's form at the beginning of his career and is, indeed, a good harbinger of certain elements of his style that would appear in his writing throughout his career. It is a novel very much of the Campbell and highly popular E. E. "Doc" Smith genre: science, spaceships, hostile aliens, vast battles and heroic deeds. It also strongly portrayed Simak's human side.

The story first appeared in three issues of *Astounding*, February, March and April 1939. The stories were published as a novel in 1950 and again, as a paperback, in 1964. I should note that the year 1939 was a turning point in history. The World's Fair polarized the popular imagination in its depiction of a scientifically guided future. I believe it was this popular science background that helped sell *Astounding* and propelled science fiction into a major literary role. It is also still early in the year Hitler invaded Poland and started World War II.

The then ninth planet, Pluto, had only been discovered in 1930. It was only a tiny dot on an astronomer's photographic plates. It was believed to be about the size of the Earth until the discovery of Pluto's moon Charon in 1978 which allowed its mass to be determined. Pluto is only about 2/3rds the size of Earth's Moon. After a long debate, in 2006, it lost its status as a "planet." That year the New Horizons probe was launched and on July 14, 2014, passed within less than 8,000 miles of Pluto and gave us the first clear picture of what the surface of the planet looked like. Simak set several of his stories on the surface of that planet.

Simak's story is a space opera set in the year 6948. The story opens with two men on a small spaceship, the Space Pup, in transit from Saturn to Pluto. The Space Pup is moving along at a clip of 1,000 miles per second[14] driven by 'geosectors' that warp space, invented a century before, using rockets only for landing and takeoff. The equipment absorbs energy and the tenuous matter from the vacuum of space to make air, water and food, "transmutes them into steak and potatoes—or at least their equivalent."

The men are Gary Nelson, reporter[15], and his rather simple minded but full of bravado sidekick, Herb Harper, his news photographer. They have been away from Earth for a year doing a series entitled "Know Your Solar System" for the *Evening Rocket*. Their contact with the *Evening Rocket* is through a space writer, essentially a radio-teletype machine. They are on their way to visit Pluto to interview a scientist working there, Dr. Kingsley, who "has been fooling around with cosmics." They learn that Tommy Evans planned expedition to Alpha Centauri, the first interstellar attempt, has been delayed on Pluto. They have received orders hurry to catch Evans before he departs

[13] Some do not consider *City* a novel but the common theme and doggish narration satisfies me that it should be considered as more than a collection of short stories. I, on the other hand, do not consider *The Creator* a novel.
[14] Compared to some 14 miles per second peak for the Pluto probe New Horizon, a ten-year voyage.
[15] Simak used a lot of newspaper reporters in his stories.

Still half a billion miles, but only a few days, from Pluto, they discover a drifting spaceship. On board is a young woman in a suspended animation tank. Nelson is able to revive her. She is Caroline Martin. She had been a member of the Mars-Earth Research commission during the war with Jupiter, a thousand years ago. She had been sentenced to exile alone in the orbit of Pluto and chose to go into suspended animation for a time.

She made one mistake, however. She did not put her mind to sleep. Rather than succumb to insanity she set out to develop mathematical and scientific theories in her mind. She also developed telepathic powers, the ability to read minds, and heard voices from space. She had a twenty-year-old body and a 1,000-year-old brain.

One outstanding feature of Simak's style was the use of a number of themes repeatedly in his stories. They were like a cook's favorite spices used in a variety of recipes. The red sun at the end of time was one, he would use it again in this story. In this scene we get three other what would become oft-used devices. First is the absolutely incredible coincidence of finding just the right person or the right idea to make the plot one. Finding Caroline is a one in a billion, or billions, chance. The second is that of an extended lifetime, a creative individual could advance knowledge far beyond the capacity of the life of an ordinary person. She had, it turned out, been thinking for the equivalent of some 40 or 50 human lifetimes. The third is that given the time and freedom from distraction, we could also develop psychic abilities. These themes are integral to Simak's philosophy and prospects for a human future.

On Pluto, Dr. Kingsley had built a receiver to tune into the "cosmics," a patterned form of energy which appears to have intelligent origin. Caroline found these similar to the voices she had heard in suspended animation, and that she could communicate with the source. They were the Cosmic Engineers and they were calling volunteers to help them save the universe. They transmitted a design for a space warp machine to allow the travelers to reach them at the edge of the universe. Caroline, it turned out, had worked on just the principles involved. Indeed, they were the physics of the geosector drive that she had in fact invented. Like I said, incredible coincidence.

Caroline's great genius, miraculously sane, stabilized by her scientific discipline, made her the natural leader of the group. She had "a woman's intuition, the burning zeal of a scientist, the devil-may-care, adventuresome spirit of mankind. No reason, no logic …mere emotion. A throwback to the old day of chivalry." Natural leaders have a way of emerging in Simak's stories. They were being called to a cosmic crusade: "Man answering the clarion call to arms. Man again taking up the sword on faith alone. Man pitting his puny strength, his little brain, against great cosmic forces. Man…the damn fool… sticking out his neck." They installed the space warp device on Tommy Evan's starship and took off.

Arriving at the planet of the Cosmic Engineers they find an incredibly vast city, built for billions but empty. Guided to a landing they are greeted by one of the Engineers, a metal man, in human form, a robot. Here is another Simak archetype. The Engineer briefs them and, after they refresh themselves with a good meal, takes them to a gathering of the intelligent races that had answered the call. They are few in number as the universe does not care for life. None are of human form, mostly grotesque and loathsome to the human senses.

There are two dangers. First, our universe is about to collide with another universe, an event that will release a vast energy that will destroy both. The second was an ancient enemy of the Engineers, the Hellhounds, a vicious, technologically advanced, brutal, reptilian race. They are innovative and effective savage Killers. Egomaniacs who would destroy the universe to achieve their own supremacy." They planned to wait for the new universe to form then totally dominate it. This at the cost of all other life forms, of course.

Given the facts Caroline quickly formulated a solution. The hope of the universe now lay in her mind. But it also lay with the human race. The Engineers sent all the other races back home. Why us? Humans possess the quality of imagination. While we are not of the highest intelligence, only we possess this quality – another recurring Simak theme. The ancient Engineers, as machines, have no imagination. Vast knowledge yes, but only that which they inherited from "the greatest race that ever lived," whose memory they served in loyal stewardship. Humans are a young race and have not fallen into a groove. Human minds are free and full of imagination and incentive. Only humans had the ability to work together cooperatively for a common good.

The Hellhounds attack the city again. The Engineers destroy hordes of their ships but are shot down in their turn, losing ground to overwhelming numbers. This is the final battle. Caroline needs more information, knowledge the Engineers lack, to complete a weapon. They tell her that the knowledge might be found in another time, far into the future. She and Gary take off in Tommy's ship, engage the warp field and come out to find an ancient planet, its mountains weathered away, its seas shallow, its atmosphere thin, and the sun feeble. It is a desert planet. This is Earth in its final days, millions of years into the future. It is the birthplace of Man. They find one remaining city, in ruins, and land there.

In the city they find an old man in human form but with a great doomed head and bulging chest, who invites them into his small but comfortable quarters. He is the only one left. He had the information they sought, very advanced principles of science and mathematics, and was surprised that Caroline understood him. As they walked back to the ship the old man gave them something of a benediction:

> *"I've lived with ghost," he said. "Ghosts of men and events and great ideals that built a mighty race." But, he added, men had remained true to their form. "We kept our balance. We kept our feet on the ground when dreams filled our heads." The city behind them had been the greatest ever built, famous throughout the universe, a place of vast commerce. It has fallen into ruins. "But man is different. Man marches on and one. He outgrows cities and builds others. He outgrows planets. He is creating a heritage, a mighty heritage, that in time will make him master of the universe."*
>
> *"But there will be interludes of defeat…that Man will slip back…. Times when the way seems too hard and the price too great to pay. But always there will be…a challenge on the horizon and the bright beckoning of ideals far away. And man will go ahead to greater triumphs, always pushing back the frontier, always moving up and outward." The "Last Man" says he is proud to have been of service to the "First Men." He turns and walks back to his city with a quiet dignity.*

On the way back to their time, Gary and Caroline are trapped by a disembodied intelligence. It is a collective intelligence, a race that pursued mental rather than mechanical development. But, it admitted, it was insane – another of Simak's distorted, if not entirely evil in this case, entities. To amuse itself it brought in a small ship with two

Hellhounds and decreed that the humans must fight them. Their weapons were deactivated. They would have to face the superior reptilian strength and military training of the Hellhounds with their bare hands. Gary, using that special human quality of ingenuity, fabricates a bow and arrows and kills the two Hellhounds. In a moment of lucidity, the intelligence releases them and they enter the warp again to arrive back at the blasted city of the Engineers, still under attack.

With her new knowledge, Caroline created an accumulator of fifth dimension energy, and projected that energy against the Hellhounds, utterly destroying them once and for all. The Engineers then inform her that a decision has been made to sacrifice the other universe. There is no time left for any other solution. The beings in that universe will use the knowledge she has won to travel to ours. They are ancient. Their universe is old, declining into the inevitable heat death and already nearly depopulated. It will be used to absorb the energy of the collision. It does and as the mass-energy builds up, collapses and shrank away. Man has again triumphed: Puny man, and his ingenuity destroyed one universe to save another. For the first time Man had taken a firm hold on the universes' destiny.

> *Henceforward Man…would no longer be mere pawns in the grime tide of cosmic forces. Henceforward life would rule these forces, bend them to its will, put them to work, change them, shift them about." Life was now ascendant in an indifferent and hostile universe. "Life itself was triumphant. In the end the universe would not destroy it…it would rule the universe.*

It is time to return home. The Engineer praised each of them for having a part to do and doing it. He is proud. Proud? The Engineer then shared an ancient secret, the secret of their Origin. He explained that the Earth came into being as a result of the encounter of the Sun with the star of the planet of the people who had created him. They built a vast spaceship upon which to survive and then built the robots and sent them out to find a new home. But planets are few and, returning to the Sun, they found that one of the planets had survived the collision, Pluto. They decided to settle on Pluto while new planets formed as our solar system cooled. The old race, those that had survived the collision, knowing that their time was limited, seeded the Earth with the spores from which life sprang, a life that formed in their own image, as attested by Man's humanoid form.

The Engineer was one of the original robots, now three billion years old. He related that his kind had been made to serve the now vanished people and that Man was their heir, in many ways like them. Man had the qualities of the old race, especially imagination: "The ability to see beyond the facts, to probe into probabilities, to visualize what might be and then attempt to make it so." The Engineers had labored to prepare a place for Man, this vast city. They existed for the joy and satisfaction of service and took pride in being good stewards. Caroline responded that she saw the robots as real entities, independent entities, with "brain power, the ability to think and reason, [that] seems to be all that counts when everything is balanced out", and who followed the dictates of conscience, added Gary. Kingsley offered his hand, in a gesture, he told the Engineer, of respect and friendship, as an equal.

Man, however, Gary concluded, was not ready for the city of the Engineers, not ready to handle the great power. We would only destroy ourselves, he added. Caroline agreed. We must wait until we have "lost some of the lustiness of our youth" she added. When we

have wiped out our primal passions, Gary told the Engineer, Man would come. It would take a few million more years. "There is a lot of good in humanity, but we aren't ready yet. … Not so long as Man carried the old dead weight of primal savagery and hate, not so long as he was mean and vicious and petty, could he set foot here." There would be great triumph and sorrow and bitter dust along the way; he reflected, great Creeds would come and vanish; great leaders, great deeds and great defeats. For now they are going home, to a world Caroline has not seen for a thousand years, and from which the others have been away from for far too long. Reflecting on home, Gary thought about "the smell of fresh-plowed fields and the scent of hay fields at harvest time and the beauty of trees against the skyline at evening." To him, home was the world in which Clifford Simak grew up as a boy.

Simak was nearly done with space opera. He had shown a real sense of the scientific vision so loved by Campbell but that was only the start. He had already begun to show the elements of a unique style that would mark his maturation as a writer and artist. He had, as noted, already developed themes of coincidence, astronomically improbable sequences of events that gave unexpected twists and turns to the stories, such as the finding of Caroline who is the only human capable of comprehending the science of the Engineers, just as Kingsley begins to communicate with them by chance encounter in the remote reaches of space. They have a ship equipped for interstellar exploration ready but delayed. They are the heirs to the race that built the Engineers, robots selflessly dedicated to service to human beings, but accepted as equals by the humans. There are also aliens but these are unappealing and lack the qualities of reason, imagination and the cooperation that.

The characters also exhibit the quaint and homey qualities of that pastoral longing. There is an almost childlike optimism. Gary is an ordinary man but resourceful. He is an idealist and like Simak a newspaperman. Prophetically he is writing science articles along the lines Simak himself would later write. He has a simple-minded sidekick. He meets a woman of heroic proportions. Her mind has been alive for centuries, probing and learning and developing its potentiality. She has telepathic powers, rare but logically inevitable in a human being. Between them they have a collective capacity to realize the human potential, not for their own benefit but for the advancement of the entire race. They have reason and imagination and a willfulness that distinguishes them from other races. They are on a quest to save humankind and all other life. They are all unselfconsciously courageous. But there is a dark side to human nature. We are immature and unfit for great power. We must win our spurs through millions of years to come before we can go to that place prepared for us. And at the end is a fragment of the farm life so dear to Simak.

In summary I see at least five principles of Simak's style coming out of this novel:

1. The Hellhounds, and this anticipates World War II, represent man's innate brutality, which threatens to doom the race.
2. The universe is inherently indifferent.
3. A small group of people who have disciplined their minds and possess an ethical motivation to aid the progress of humanity, give us another chance. This becomes the leitmotif of Simak's quest stories.
4. The tragic "last man" who draws a moral lesson from man's failure.

5. The loyal and immortal robot. While aliens don't make the cut in this story, a man offers his hand to a robot in respect and friendship and equality.
6. The war in Europe, while threatening, had not yet begun. That war would reshape Simak's style.

Chapter Three: The Epic of City

In *Time and Again*, 1951, Simak took us to his ancestral homestead on the bluff along the Wisconsin River and gave us scenery that he would revisit and which gives us a unique backdrop, an ambience, that clings in the imagination. A number of years earlier Simak began penning a cluster of short stories that would become the award-winning *City* that appeared the year after *Time and Again*. These I consider the foundation of his pastoral philosophy. But I take them up first also because they seem to me to represent a catharsis in Simak's view of the world.

City was composed of a number of independent but linked short stories beginning with "City" first published in *Astounding* in 1944. The stories were brought together as a book through the device of storytellers, in this case the sentient race of dogs created in the course of the stories. The dogs, I should add, live in a very distant future, tens of thousands of years distant. For them the idea of men, of cities, of war, are totally alien. All they have in common with the old stories are their personal robots. But they have cherished the stories that described their origin and the tragic end of the race of men.

The earlier stories are well dated. The first story takes place nearly fifty years in the future (from 1944), in 1990. In it we meet Gramp Stevens and his son John J. Webster. With them Simak established the Webster dynasty, the fragile human element of this sequence of stories.

The story opened in a nearly empty suburban neighborhood in which Gramp and John, John's wife Betty and son Charles live. Most of the houses around them have been abandoned and are falling into ruin. Atomic energy has become a household commodity. Atomics power personal airplanes and helicopters that have replaced the automobile and allow people to travel 100 miles in less time than a car could make five miles. Hydroponics had closed down farms, making cheap land abundant and attractive to city dwellers who made an exodus out of the city to estates on the empty land.

Simak anticipated an atomic energy industry to emerge right after World War II. "City" was first published well over a year before the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan and the world became aware of atomic energy. Simak, in 1944, was writing about compact, personal, atomic power. As noted above, Campbell had been writing and publishing stories about atomic energy in the 1930s and in 1938 Bucky Fuller proposed peaceful use of atomic energy in his *Nine Chains to the Moon*." The first sustained nuclear reaction, however, didn't happen until December 1942 and atomic research was very secret during the war until the first bomb was dropped on Japan in 1945. This story also makes mention of atomic bombs and that the demise of the city made atomic warfare obsolete – possibly an editorial change from the original story. The story opens with Gramp recollecting that his friend and neighbor, Adams, made a fortune in it[16]. This scene is a coincidence in the development of the plot.

Left behind in the ruins of the city is a collection of misfits who had moved into the abandoned houses, the squatters. The police chief considered them a nuisance and wants to clean them out. He decided to burn down the houses to get rid of them. John Webster,

[16] Personal atomic energy was just one of the unfulfilled promises of this gee-whiz age.

secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, decided to make a final appeal to the City Council. It wasn't about the squatters so much, he thought they should be left alone. It was about the institution of the city. He told them that the city was a "dead human institution."

The end of the city was already in popular literature. There had been political and social conflict between urban and rural dwellers since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Lewis Mumford and other urban reformers say the need for transformation. Frank Lloyd Wright designed a city that was open and filled with homesteads. Greenbelt city developers advocated small, open, close to nature towns. Ralph Borsodi pitched in with his *This Ugly Civilization* in 1929 and led a back-to-the-land movement. Sociologists and novels were lamenting the plight of city life. The end of cities was an inevitable stage in the collapse of civilizations in several popular histories such as Toynbee's and Spengler's. With the atomic bomb and ICBMs, cities became targets and much apocalyptic science fiction was printed.

Webster continued with the fact that there is no need for the administrative machinery to care for a million people who no longer live there and the rising tax burden that drives out the few remaining businesses. He said that he could no longer participate in the hypocrisy of pretending he had a real job. Webster burns his bridges as he leaves by telling the Council that they are clinging to the city myth, and that they are "not ready for the truth." They no longer provide "service and honest value," but are rather boot-licking, opportunistic, tinhorn and loudmouthed politicians who no longer have a mob mentality to play to.

Webster is now jobless but is offered a position by the Bureau of Human Adjustment, an agency of the World Committee. The World Committee has succeeded the United Nations as the world administrative agency and is trying to maintain some semblance of order in a vastly changed world. Their job is to assist those displaced and left behind by progress. John started his job as the squatters took up arms to defend the houses; their homes.

The violent confrontation between squatters and police is narrowly averted by a coincidental encounter of Gramp and the grandson of his old friend and neighbor Adams who had picked just that moment to come to see his grandfather's house. The elder Adams had entered the atomic industry on the ground floor and reaped a fortune. Young Adams decided to pay the back taxes and penalties on the houses and filed a petition to dissolve the City Council. The Webster's move to wooded acreage from which John can fly into the city each day to perform his work for the World Committee, now supported by the Adams fortune, to help settle the squatters.

The estate John bought defined the new order of the world. Ralph Borsodi's 1933 *Flight From the City* might have influenced Simak. Borsodi, during the Great Depression, became a popular advocate of, as the title of his books suggested, that people leave the city for homesteads in the countryside. Borsodi formed communities with two to three acre lots, sufficient to provide much of a family's food. Simak's theme is rather more manorial. It draws on the Jeffersonian ideal of the independent personal estate. The first story provides the disconnection from the city and begins to tell the story of pastoral life. It also awakens the sense of peril in such living. There is a price to pay and it is the human soul.

The second story, “Huddling Place,” was also written in 1944, also published in *Astounding*. The date of the story is 2117. In it we get a sense of the life that developed on the country estates. It opens with the scene of the burial of Nelson F. Webster, 2034-2117 who is interred in the family plot. We meet Jerome Webster, his mother and his son Thomas, now 20, who is scheduled to leave for Mars in a week. They and the minister are the only humans in attendance. The household robots that had borne the coffin surrounded them. Jerome reflects on the family buried there, his late wife, William (Gramp) Stevens (1920-1999), John J. Webster (1951-2020), Charles F. Webster (1980-2060), and John J. Webster II (2004-2086).

Simak introduced a hallmark leitmotif of his pastoral fiction with a description of the Webster estate, just a taste at first. We are introduced to Jerome D. Webster, MD, the authority on Martian physiology. We meet Jenkins, the robot butler, when he brings Jerome a whiskey and it is here that we find the root of the plot. Jenkins told Webster that the minister has left, that he has paid him the customary fee and that he replied to the minister’s invitation that Jerome attend church that “You never go anywhere.” “That is quite right, Jenkins,” Webster replied. “None of us ever go anywhere.”

From here unfolds the features of a comfortable nature of totally independent life long established on the land. He also speaks to a pathological dependency.

Simak described Webster sitting next to his fire with a book and whiskey. The fire was an anachronism. With abundant energy there was no need to burn wood. But Jerome found it comforting, as would many of Simak’s characters over the years. Gazing into a fire one could dream “and build castles in the flames.”

Jerome sensed the depth of time and the close attachment of the Webster home. John J. had built a sprawling house, but most of it was now empty. John had chosen it for the trout stream, for the rocky ridge on which the house was perched and the surrounding woods and meadows. In the morning a mist would often drift in from the river. A very lovely place.

But there was something more. The Webster’s had become an organic part of the land, or perhaps the land had become a part of them. The land, the soil, the rocks and trees had all become soaked with something we might call a spiritual essence. It soaked into everything. There was a mystical sense of unity and of belonging.

As Jerome luxuriated beside his fire, he reflected that the city had been a huddling place, now forsaken. It had been a place where a tribal instinct, a herd instinct, the need to stick tighter in the face of common fears, had daunted men’s souls. Now there was a new sense of security, of sufficiency, that had, for nearly 200 years, made it possible to break away, to country homes to get fresh air and elbow room and graciousness in life that communal existence, in its strictest sense, never had given them.

And now, a new manorial existence, a family home long rooted in its lovely acreage, everything provided for, robots to attend to every need, atomic energy for power, abundant tasty food. A life of leisure.

The room, however, has closed in on him. He felt a profound sense of refuge. No, Jenkins had been entirely correct when he told the minister that he never went anywhere. Why? Everything was provided.

Why go anywhere when with a twirl of a dial you talk to anyone, browse libraries or museums or tune into a favored spot anywhere in the world. With the touch of a button the walls of the room faded, and you were, for all practical purposes there; without ever leaving your chair.

And that is just what Jerome Webster does. He picked a site on a hillside with golden grass and scattered trees and a lake and a ring of purple mountains. He could hear the wind, watch the fading rays of sun coloring the mountains. Here was "Solitude and grandeur" that reinforced his sense of power and mastery over life.

This scene sets the stage for the second element of the plot. He had gone to Mars in his youth. And now he is joined in his reverie by a Martian friend, Juwain. Juwain dialed in to offer his condolences.

Juwain is less than comfortable with the scene that absorbs Jerome. But it is more than the difference between the two planets. There is a profound difference in racial philosophy. Jerome Webster was a specialist on Martian physiology, the very best authority. The Martians had never thought of developing medicine or science and technology. They developed philosophy and Juwain was the leading philosopher on Mars, or, for that matter, anywhere. Unlike on Earth, where philosophy had become an academic pastime, the Martians had made it a practical tool for living. Juwain was on the threshold of a breakthrough that would advance both Earth and Mars.

A week later Webster accompanied his son to the spaceport. Thomas was going to Mars not for medicine but to build a starship. Following his son's departure, Jerome learns that the helicopter must be repaired, that he must wait in the spaceport lobby, and he experienced an intense, indefinable fear that left him physically shaking. Why this sudden horror? Jenkins, seeking to comfort him, told him that his father developed the same feeling at about the same age.

Jerome, as a medical man, undertook a study of the problem. Over the next months he invited 250 people to visit him. Only three had come. The conclusion of his paper was that the problem is agoraphobia. People simply feel unsafe in unfamiliar places. We all feel it at times. A similar condition is found in people who, like those in *City*, have gone back to the land in our time. Researchers who study them find they have an attitude of "just leave me alone."

Just in time to set up the crisis for the story plot. At that moment he received a call from Mars. Juwain is suddenly deathly ill and needs brain surgery. Webster is the only man who can perform it. Juwain cannot be moved. Webster must come to Mars. The World Committee will send a ship.

I can't begin to tell you the pathos Simak evoked in the last five or so pages of this story. Briefly, Webster is overcome again with horror at the very thought of leaving his home. The image of his friend's furry face and quiet voice comes to him. Juwain is on the verge of a breakthrough. It is a powerful moral struggle. Not only the life of a close friend

but the future of two races lies in his hands. He thinks back over 30 years of quiet life of daily habits and associations and trains of thought that have woven themselves into the fabric of his being. Five generations of Webster's rooted in this soil. Man had indeed left the tribal huddling place of the city but was now in another huddling place; a huddling place for body and mind. The huddling place is no longer the tribe and the city, it is the safe and secure manor protected by a loyal robot: splendid but pathological isolation.

He said he would try. He made a truly heroic effort. The World Committee sends a ship and Webster packs himself, not asking Jenkins. That was a fatal error. When Jenkins comes, it is to tell Webster he has sent the ship away.

The message of this story is about an utter breakdown of human morality; of the loss of an inbred feeling for mutual support. The cost of insular security is that they have lost the moral sense that defined human existence since the first of our kind appeared. This is a tragic story. Personally, I feel this plot line has all the tragedy of the greatest of the Greek tragedies and of Shakespeare. It sets the mood for the rest of the series.

Something important emerges about the robot Jenkins. He has served the Webster's since he was created some three decades earlier. He is programmed to utter devotion to his human charges. Jenkins has known three generations of aging Webster's. He has observed the malady of agoraphobia in them and that the older Webster's "never went anywhere." He knows they suffer severe mental distress at the very thought. He sent the ship's crew packing, refusing to let them even see Jerome.

A final note of irony about Jenkins. Programmed and conditioned to service as he was, that programming did not extend to the larger moral dimension of service to humanity. We might speculate that the programmers themselves were past that point, as suggested in the moral framework of this story. There will be more along this line in the following stories. It is something Jenkins, and other of Simak's robot and human characters, will struggle with to the end of Simak's writing career.

Psychologists have supported my thesis of "the bluff." They found that we prefer scenes from the top of hillsides, across open country. Such scenes leave us with a sense of security. As I noted, the Simak farm is on the end of a ridge. It is at the end of the road and isolated. You will find that scene in *Way Station* and other places. From the farm site there is a magnificent view to the north, across the valley of the Wisconsin River. This scene was vividly impressed in Simak's early memories. Growing up in hilly country, with native growth trees, in a place with the word "bluff" in its name. For me it resonates. It clearly did for Frank Lloyd Wright at his Taliesin (shining brow) home strategically placed near the top of a ridge, overlooking a valley, where he spent much of his youth, a short way up the Wisconsin River from Simak's Millville. It is from Wright that I came to understand the term "prospect."

In the third story, "Census," was also written in 1944 and published in *Astounding*. The (dog's) editorial notes on the story acknowledged a continued breakdown of the human race. The story itself tells us that there is some "groove of logic" humans have been caught in, a history of muddled thought going back 4,000 years; something there was hope Juwain's philosophy would have corrected. The dogs particularly admire this story because it is the first in which they appear. In this story we meet the first dog, modified by Bruce

Webster to talk, Nathaniel. We also meet Richard Grant, Joe the mutant, Bruce Webster, Thomas Webster at the end of his life and Jenkins once again. The chronology of this story is also precise. Thomas Webster is celebrating his 86th birthday. He was 20 when his grandfather was buried in 2117. It is 2183. This story is the turning point in the plot and puts the entire series into perspective.

Richard Grant works for the World Committee as a census taker, an observer, something of an anthropologist. In addition to the dwellers of the grand houses, there is a second group of people on the land, an independent and primitive folk who live by hunting and subsistence farming. They descended from the squatters in the first story. They couldn't afford the great estates and robots took over the labor they had done. With a steadily declining population (low birth rate) there is a lot of room for them. Grant has the job of wandering the wilderness to find out about them. Because the world is at peace, they are, unlike the earlier frontier folk, safe and secure, friendly and hospitable, and Grant, who admits he is, as they see it, snooping, is invited to share meals and stay nights. Grant reflects that they live their lives with great contentment. Their faces are unworried. In this sense of serenity, I find the essence of Simak's pastoral philosophy and for this reason it is one of my favorite stories in this series. I think he made his best statement of this close-to-the-Earth sentiment in his short story "The Answers," from which I take the theme, "all we do is live."

Early in the story Grant encountered Nathaniel, a small dog, who greeted him pleasantly and invited him to stay at the Webster house. Grant is at first shocked by a talking dog but then remembers that Bruce Webster has been working with the dogs.

Over a glass of whiskey, after dinner, Grant and Bruce Webster talk. They talk of Bruce's grandfather who could not go to Mars, bound to the Webster estate that we learn is now a "few square miles." The reason Jerome could not go was by this time widely known but Bruce Webster still felt the stain on his family name for the loss of Juwain's philosophy.

The conversation turned to the dogs. Webster's work has as its purpose to relieve man of the burden of being alone in the universe. Bruce explained that dogs are intelligent but lack speech and hands. He had given them speech and constructed small robots to be the hands. He was teaching the dogs not to think like humans. They are to be a companion race, a second way of life. On the way to his room Grant stopped to talk with Thomas Webster. Thomas had designed a vessel that was at that time headed for the stars under the command of his other son Allen. Thomas told Grant of the time he was sitting in the yard, twenty years earlier, struggling with a problem with the star drive when Joe, the mutant, walked up, looked over the plans and pointed out the problem.

As Grant is settled into bed, Nathaniel comes to visit and they talk of the joined destiny of man and dogs. Nathaniel wants to know why Grant is worried. Grant replied that there is something missing in Man, something that causes an innate anxiety. Grant reminded Nathaniel that dogs must think for themselves. Nathaniel responded: "There's lots of things that dogs know that men don't know. We can see things and hear things that men can't see nor hear." The dogs are possessed of a psychic sense man lacks. Through this added power of perception, they attain a level of being not available to human beings.

Grant is also in pursuit of the new breed of mutants. A night or so after visiting the Websters Grant met Joe. Grant's atomic gun, a tool that serves to light a cigarette or as a deadly weapon, stopped working. He can't light his camp fire. Joe walked up, took and repaired the gun and handed it to Grant and walked away without a word.

Grant then stayed with a settler, a man whose weathered face shows no lines of worry, who told him about Joe showing up to fix things around the farm, and then just walking off. Grant talked to one of the children and learned of an anthill that Joe covered with a heated dome many years ago, and then took him to it. Joe had covered it with a glass dome to see if the ants would evolve. They did, the hill had chimneys belching smoke and ants with carts.

Joe walks up just then. Joe tells Grant a few things about himself. He is 163 (born 2020) and good for another thousand years at least. He can read Grant's mind. The mutants have superhuman intelligence. They are physically stronger and faster. Joe fixes things from the squatters' farm machinery to Grant's atomic gun to the problem with Thomas Webster's starship drive. These things amuse him. Joe had altered the destiny of the ants for no other reason than amusement. Grant told Joe he thought it important that Joe share what he learned about the ants. Joe laughed at him.

Grant knew something of the superior intellect of the mutants. He knew that there had always been mutants and that they had often channeled their talents for the good of society, for art and science and literature. Grant handed Joe the brief typescript of Juwain's unfinished philosophy that he carried in his backpack. Joe quickly read it and immediately found a problem. He doubts Juwain would have finished it had he lived. From their conversation,however, Grant learned something of the mutant character that disturbs him. Joe is a true individual, totally self-reliant and totally lacking in moral sentiment. In sharing the Juwainian philosophy Grant had asked Joe to do a favor for humanity. Joe said he has no interest in anything in the human world. Human gratitude, wealth, fame, means nothing to him. Why should he look beyond the years of my own life? Why should he do anything for people not yet born? Joe will live a long time but, he said, when he died that was the end of it. He cared nothing about honors and glories that might be bestowed on him. When a man dies, he dies and that is all of it. Joe dismissed Grant's plea to help humanity as none of his concern.

Joe tucked the Juwian manuscript into his pocket and in a final act defiance plowed a furrow through the anthill with his foot. Grant leapt up in anger. Joe hit him with a lightning blow.

Grant awakened to Nathaniel's tongue on his face. Mutants, Grant reflected to himself, usually conform to social norms and care about what people think of them. But Joe is different. He is totally self-sufficient. He just doesn't give a damn what anyone else thinks about him (sociopath a good word to describe him). He cares nothing about any other person or culture. There is something human lacking in him. He was immune to social pressure, that glue that held the human race together. Human beings needed approval from other human beings; they even died for it. Not Joe. Nothing mattered but his own life. Joe, and his fellow mutants, may indeed by humanity's future. That frightens him.

But the trend is already there in the previous story. – the loss of a sense of morality even in normal people. And it will be a leitmotif of Simak's fiction writing throughout his life.

In parting with Nathaniel, Grant tells the dog of this fear . It might not happen for a thousand years, but the trend was there. He told Nathaniel that the dogs must take their own path, to pass the word to the other dogs, to remember this lesson for generations to come.

Desertion and Paradise

The first three stories of *City* plot the decline of humankind. There is a trend in them, and each adds a little to that theme. But as the next two stories tell, the human destiny is not Joe's. It is not even remotely human.

The fourth and fifth story of *City* are connected. They per published two years apart: "Desertion" in 1944 and "Paradise" in 1946, both in *Astounding*. The first occurs on Jupiter, the second in a city on Earth (likely Geneva, the world capitol and only remaining city). The date of these stories would be about 3080.

As with Pluto in *Cosmic Engineers*, there were a lot of strange ideas about the other planets in Simak's day, before the space probes when they were merely fuzzy dots in even the largest telescopes. In the mid-1940s, many thought Mars was laced by canals carrying life-giving water, Venus covered by clouds and likely a rainforest beneath and that humans and aliens could be on the surface of these two planets.

Jupiter was always considered inhospitable. Simak located a research station on Jupiter and it is on a solid surface (which we know now there is not). To the men and women inside the dome, Jupiter is a deadly maelstrom. The pressure is 15,000 pounds per square inch. Alkaline rains, ammonia salts, monstrous thunderbolts, and 200 miles per hour winds make it a deadly place by human standards. Simak, in one of his relatively rare moments of technological innovation, gives us a machine for converting humans into creatures adapted to difficult environments. On Jupiter this life form is called a Loper. Five explorers have been sent out in this form, but none have returned and are presumed dead.

The station director, Kent Fowler, despite willing candidates, cannot commit others to an unknown fate so he decides he must go out and investigate on his own. He takes his aging dog. Towser with him. They are transformed into Lopers and step upon the Jovian landscape.

Simak would often write that a major barrier to human achievement, let alone evolution, is our limited sensory and mental ability. The dogs considered Man so poorly equipped they doubted our species could have existed. Emerging into Jupiter's environment, Fowler was amazed at the wondrous feel of the Loper body but even more astonished at the incredible beauty of the world it revealed. Towser came out behind him and greeted him, mind to mind. Fowler is at first shocked. Towser told him that he always talked to him, but that Fowler couldn't hear him.

In addition to coincidence, another characteristic of Simak's stories is discontinuity. Nathanial had appeared nearly a thousand years before. And talking dogs would appear before the end of these two stories. I don't think it is an oversite, just a dramatic expedient.

The Loper body is stronger, swifter and lives a very long time. Its senses are extremely acute. The two of them dash up a hill. They are drawn by bell-like music from a tumbling 'waterfall,' an ammonia-fall, down a cliff of solid, frozen oxygen, that broke into a rainbow of a hundred colors as it fell. But as he became aware of the physical beauty of the Jovian world he also awoke to a vast increase in his own mental powers as his new brain came alive. Everything took on a new, sharp clarity of thought: And he sensed a hint of even greater mysteries beyond the pale of human ability; things the limited human brain and senses simply could not embrace. Fowler achieves a certain sense of destiny, of new horizons, beyond human keen.

The very thought of being transformed back into a dog, for Towser, or a man, for Fowler, is unbearable; a return to dull-minded ignorance, to deadened senses, to squalor and ignorance. Now they know why others have failed to return. They cannot bear it.

The fifth tale is a sequel to the fourth. I can't begin to tell this as Simak did in the opening of this story. I will try to summarize. The context is set by the dogs in a very distant time on an Earth where Man is only a memory, a series of tales the dogs tell around the campfire, "when the fires burn high and wind is from the north." The dogs further discuss the paradox in the tales. They are puzzled by the contradictions they find in the mythical race of man. The logic of the human race as told in the tales raise serious questions: How could such a race rise to great heights? It is just so poorly equipped, so limited in communications, so occupied by mechanical culture, so lacking in worthy concepts of life, so devoid of character, the dogs think the story of man a pure fantasy. The dogs recognize that man is incapable of understanding and appreciating the experiences of others. The transformation of Fowler and Towser to superior forms confirms this idea. That issue is the point of this story. We will see this in many of Simak's stories.

After five years as a Loper, Fowler is finally driven by a sense of duty (which is contrary to the trend in the first, second and third stories) decides to go back. As Fowler returns to the dome, he laments what he will be giving up. But he has what I would call an evangelical zeal to descend into what he could only perceive as hell to share the good news of a paradise. He knows he can't tell the story of the beauty he senses, of the extraordinary richness of sensation, of clarity of mind no human could imagine, the total absence of neurosis, of never having to eat or sleep. How will he communicate this?

Back on Earth: Tyler Webster, Chairman of the World Committee, added a footnote comment to his press conference. It had been 125 years since the last murder was committed in the Solar System.

But to the news of Fowler's return he offered only "No comment." What Fowler had brought back was not good news to Webster. The human race had built a high culture across the solar system and was just then ready to launch out to the stars; the ancient Webster dream just about to come true. He saw human destiny written large in those stars.

It is more than a coincidence that Joe the mutant visits Jenkins at the Webster house and asks to speak to Tyler. After a thousand years Joe is showing just a little grey around the temples.

Webster still cherished the thought that humans and mutants could come to an understanding. The dogs had watched them constantly for centuries, but they had

remained distant. Like Grant, Webster knew they were an offshoot that had seemingly jumped ahead but they lacked a social instinct.

Webster returned to his office and Jenkins called and told him Joe wanted to talk to him. Webster and Joe bicker for a while over the long history of separation between human society and mutants. Joe told Webster that the failing of the human race was their incapacity to truly understand each other. Yes, we have social tolerance and friendships and work things out. The mutants didn't need it. They have telepathy to communicate more fully with each other (albeit without the need for the close company of others). With the Juwain philosophy we could actually achieve that understanding for the first time. It's not the same as telepathy but perhaps even better in some ways. There would be no misunderstandings, no quarreling and bickering.

Webster expresses hostility for the unforgivable "crime" of Joe stealing Juwain's philosophy (why does it sound like there was only one copy). Joe reminded him that the philosophy was badly flawed.

So why did Joe call? Joe is gloating. He has completed Juwain's philosophy and found a means to imprint it en masse. Fowler's discoveries on Jupiter give him the bait he needs to spring the trap on humanity. A kaleidoscopic display of lights in the sky, a moment's disorientation, and Juwain's philosophy, the capacity to fully understand another human being, is implanted in every human mind.

Webster can no longer stand in Fowler's way and the inevitable happens.

Could we ever bring an end to our humanity? More than a half century after this story there is a movement that proposes to do just that; that offers the same end to the human experiment. It is called the singularity. The idea was developed by another science fiction writer, and computer scientist, Vernor Venge. Venge's vision is a computer with human equivalent intelligence. With this technology, at some point in the not too distant future, computer chips will be built into which a total human personality might be transferred. There has been a million-fold increase in the processing speed of digital computers since the first was finished at about the time of the first *City* stories. What the singularity vision proposes is a paradise: Immortality at the speed of light. How many of us would refuse it, choose to remain mortal and human? That technology is likely within the grasp of computer scientists in the twenty-first century. Hi-tech entrepreneur and author Ray Kurzweil has been advocating just that. Kurzweil predicts we could be there by 2045.

End Game

The Sixth Tale, "Hobbies" (also in 1946, in *Astounding*), picks up a thousand years after the Jupiter Exodus. It had been a thousand years since anyone had called, since man had gone to Jupiter. The date is around 4,000 by what we today call the common calendar. The world has literally gone to the dogs. There are only 5,000 or so humans left on earth, all "huddling" in Geneva. They spend their lives in idle amusement, in hobbies. Many, out of boredom, are taking a long sleep, hoping to awaken to a life of greater interest. A small group of youth, including Jon Webster's son Tom, spend time outside the city living a primitive life.

Jon's former wife/partner, Sara came to visit to say goodbye. She is taking the Sleep, for several hundred years.

Jon Webster has studied the history of the city for twenty years. He had just finished his book about Geneva; a book he knew nobody would ever read. He was sixty, and middle age was creeping up. With everything taken care of by the robots there was no work, no family, no real purpose. With the Juwainian philosophy there was no longer conflict. Just hobbies: Life was an illusion, he reflected.

Settling in his study before his fire, the last such in Geneva, he looked at the painting hanging over the mantle. Sara's hobby was painting, and she had used the televisor to paint the Webster house in North America. She had spent long hours observing the house and the setting. The painting was realistic. She had a wispy plume of smoke coming from the chimney. She told John there were robots there, one big one and a lot of little ones, and lots of dogs.

In "Paradise," Taylor Webster had dialed into the house. He described the scene: A house that had crouched on a hilltop for a thousand years. It stood on a lawn, windswept, drowsed in morning light. A long line of Webster's had lived and died in that house including Bruce Webster, Thomas Webster. Thomas' son Allen disappeared so many years before in the first attempt to sail to the stars. And of course, the heavy weight of Jerome Webster. A Webster was the world's head of state, in whose hands the destiny of the human race had lain and with predictable certainty, passed.

I find this story of the Webster house haunting. I can't help but wonder how he might have been influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, as noted, just some 40 miles up the Wisconsin River from where Simak grew up. It was first built while Simak was a child, rebuilt in 1922 after a fire. It overlooks a beautiful valley, once owned by Wright. It sounds so familiar. Wright loved his fire. Rather than robots Wright was surrounded by willing students who built, rebuilt and maintained this fabulous structure, and still do. During the Great Depression they grew their own food. Wright was as independent and self-sufficient as the Websters. He lived a manorial life.

Sara told Jon she had sought the essence of the ancient house, one of a very few still standing. They never discussed what that might be. Looking at the picture, the house crouched on the hill like it had grown out of the ground itself, the thought came to Jon: Security. There was something comforting about the house and its setting. There was something else: The long identity of the house and the men who had lived in it, albeit abandoned for a thousand years. Looking closer he felt a bleakness of spirit.

On impulse Jon looked up the televisor code for the house and called. Jenkins was stunned. Jon asked if he could visit in person.

Jenkins had been conscious for 2,000 years. The first half of that time he served the Webster's, the second he sat in lonely isolation with the dogs in his charge. Now a Webster was home again. For Jenkins it was like a return of god. He was filled with peace: he would be doing for the Webster's again.

Jon sat before the fire in the Webster house with Ebenezer in his lap catching up on the story of the dogs. Jenkins had been working with the dogs for nearly his entire

existence, mentoring them, building small robots to assist them. He still dreamed of dog and man finding their destiny together. The dogs spend their time exercising their psychic sense, listening for the cobblies, dwellers in parallel worlds. They probed into mysteries man never thought worthy of science. The dogs had taken the path of nonviolence and were building a confederation of all the animals. There was no ruthlessness and brutality, no cynicism, no skepticism, in them as there had been in men.

Jon would be the last of the Websters to walk those grounds. Once again Jenkin inadvertently seals the fate of humans. Checking on Jon when he goes to bed, Jenkins tells him that the dogs and robots need man to return to lead them. The dogs, Jenkins assured him, would give up everything for the return of humans. Jon could only stare into the darkness and in that darkness the truth was written. Jon Webster understands what Jenkins does not.

Returning to Geneva Jon went to the room he had found labeled "defense." There he pulled a lever. Returning to the surface he found a haze over the city, a force field. There was some excitement, but he knew it wouldn't last. People never went outside the city, rarely even tuned in the televisor to look beyond its confines. Now they would never be able to leave. He went home, burned the map of the defense room and his notes and went to the Temple to take the Sleep; forever he told the robot attendant, and no dreams.

Post-Human

In AESOP, the Seventh Tale (1947, *Astounding*), Jenkins is 7,000 years old and the Dogs plan a birthday party for him. They had the robots make a fabulous new body for him. He is reluctant to wear it.

The brotherhood of the animals is fully in place. All the animals can now converse. The carnivores have given up killing although they still at times dream of the taste of flesh. But there is killing, animals killed in an unexplainable way but not eaten. The Dogs and Jenkins know about the untold parallel worlds but not how to cross over. One cobbly has worked it out and broken through. It is a predator living on the life-force of its victims.

Tom Webster and some friends were left outside Geneva when Jon Webster turned on the defense shield. Somehow, they are in North America with Jenkins and living in community with the Dogs. There are few of them and they have become a childish race. They are called websters (small w).

The mutants, by-the-way, have long gone. They built castles all around the world after the humans went to Jupiter. Jenkins found them deserted, filled with doors that opened to other worlds.

Jenkins likes to sit in a rocker in front of a fire in the Webster study, a needless affectation he had adopted in fond remembrance of those he served for so many centuries. That night he learned that one of the websters, Peter, had re-invented the bow and arrow and had killed a robin. Jenkins is saddened. As he goes to talk to Peter, he learns that his new body can sense mice sleeping in their dens and the thoughts of every creature around him. He reached Peter just after Peter and his friend Lupus, the wolf, had encountered the Cobbly. The Cobbly had just killed Lupus. Jenkins witnessed Peter firing his arrows into the Cobbly only to find it an insubstantial shadow. The bowstring broke but Peter's brain

burned with rage. "KILL—KILL—KILL…it roars and with hands hooked into claws he advanced on the Cobbly." The Cobbly was terrified and searched for the symbols of the formula to escape back into its own world. Jenkins' new senses recorded the formula—a simple mental exercise that opens a door between the worlds.

Jenkins now has a solution to the reawakening of human dominance and violence. He waited for the annual webster picnic, when they were all gathered, and introduced them to a game, the Cobblies mental exercise, transporting them and himself into the Cobbly world. The alternate world is so similar the websters don't know anything has happened, at first. He has packed baskets of seeds and other things they will need to make a new start. Jenkins thinks that he will soon have to warn them about the Cobblies but then reflects on man's vicious way of dealing with anything that stands in its path. Jenkins sighed. 'Lord help the Cobbles', he said."

"The Simple Way," The Eighth Tale, was originally entitled "The Trouble with Ants" (1951, Fantastic Adventures). In Geneva Jon Webster has passed 10,000 years of dreamless sleep. For 5,000 years Jenkins had walked the Webster hill in the Cobbly world. His human charges, "those last bothersome survivors," had been gone 4,000 of those years, escaping into some fantasy of the human mind. But finally, Jenkins had crossed back into the world of the Webster House. He walked in and introduced himself to the Dogs. The dogs are overwhelmed. Jenkins, like the humans, was little more than a remote myth. It has been their world alone for these thousands of years.

When Jenkins returned, he found that the ants, set on their course of evolution by Joe the mutant, were constructing a vast and growing building which was alarming the dogs. They were using robots he went to work for for some unknown reason. They would in time take over the entire world. The Dogs by now had perfected travel to the alternate worlds but this world was theirs and they had preserved the Webster house as a shrine. Now, Archie, the raccoon, had discovered a flea that was not a flea, a tiny mechanical robot made by the ants which bored into the braincase of their robots who then received "the call" to go work for the ants.

Jenkins remembered there was a way to control ants but could not remember what it was. He decided to penetrate Jon Webster's sleeping mind. Jon had slept dreamlessly for 5,000 years. Jon told him how to use poison to kill them. But there had been no killing in the world of the Dogs for 5,000 years. There was no way, he decided, to stop the ants.

A PHILOSOPHY OF CITY

A couple of things I would like to point out regarding the development of Simak as a writer. *City* was an important work for Simak's career, and it is a pessimistic work. We need to ask why it was so popular? The answer is in a widespread public attitude of the time, and this was reflected in Simak's own life.

When Simak began writing the "City" stories, Germany and Japan were on the road to defeat, holding out stubbornly but the war was going our way. The ultimate horror of the atomic bomb had yet to dawn. Simak, it should be clearly understood, spent his entire day with the news of the war. As a senior journalist he was immersed in it. He was the wire editor, reviewing news from around the world. He reported the victory as it unfolded. But he also witnessed the inhumanity of massive slaughter. He turned away from the human

nobility and dignity and destiny in *Cosmic Engineers* to an attitude of despair. Not a forlorn and distant despair but a real and current confrontation with a world bathed in blood. There is revealed in these stories a profoundly sensitive soul.

People I've talked to, and others I've read, who knew Simak, said he was a great guy to be around. There was nothing morbid about his personality; and there were some really troubled writers in his day. What drove him to the City vision?

The second point is that he got through this phase and went on to write stories I've found uplifting and inspired. He never lost his sense of caution about the human race but his stories after *City* have a lot of humanity in them. During the sixties and seventies, a lot of my generation were seeking to understand life and it is to these that I think Simak appealed.

In the first story of *City* there would seem to be the hope of a bright future but in fact the world of the mid-twentieth century had come apart. I will summarize some key points. The city, the home of the human race since the dawn of civilization, was defunct. Technology, especially atomic energy and hydroponics, solve all of mankind's problems. As the story unfolded, families settled into the manorial leisure of the countryside, the cities began to crumble into dust, the forests grew back to their primal state. Each household became completely self-sufficient, staffed with efficient and loyal robotic servants. There is no longer a need for human dependence or interdependence. Perhaps the sense of isolation is made more compelling by the lack of female presence in the stories. We know that the families shrink, typically to but a single child. Out of isolation and independence emerged a dark side to the dream of progress – agoraphobia. Humankind has lost its sense of fellowship and worse, became fearful of the world outside. That isolation is felt in the self-imposed confinement to the household estates, which become a virtual prison for people reaching a certain threshold age. This theme would further develop with Joe and the mutants.

I find a profound irony in the story of the Juwainian philosophy. Jerome Webster lost the philosophy because of a profound neurosis caused by the huddled way of life in the houses. He failed a friend and two races. He forfeited a cure for humanities' loss of relationship. The philosophy is recovered by Joe the Mutant who is autism on steroids, a representative of a totally social-pathological breed of mutants who represent, however, a potential destiny of humankind. They have powerful mental and physical abilities. The natural world provides for their needs. They say to hell with the human race. Joe times his bestowal of Juwain's gift, of the completed philosophy, as a way to remove humanity as a personal irritant. By restoring our ability to fully understand each other the human race embraced two final, mortal failings. First the bulk of humanity fled for paradise, surrendering their very humanity in pursuit of the sensory pleasure and virtual immortality of the Jovian Loper form.

Secondly, those remaining few are a bunch of effete dilatants with no purpose, no drive, no hope in life. They live wasted lives passed in meaningless and unappreciated art and then escape their innervating boredom in the not quite suicide of The Sleep that suspends them from their washed-out lives for centuries and eventually eternity. At first,

they dream and then they choose to sleep unconsciously forever. This is death for them and the human race.

The story of the flight to Paradise is at the heart of the stories. It takes two stories to unfold and another to come to a full conclusion. Fowler comes as a frightful messiah. He had for five years lived in a paradise converted to the Jovian Loper life form. He was blind and then he could see. Not only were his senses vastly extended but so were his mental powers. He came to understand that it is no wonder that humankind is failing. The race lacks the senses and the clarity of mind to perceive, let alone achieve, the greatness that might be its destiny. We lack the sensibility to recognize our inherent destiny and our inherent greatness. We lack the sensorium to feel the exhilaration that is the common life of the Loper. Our existence is as if drugged. Coming back to Earth, to human form, Fowler literally descended into a hell to bring the message of salvation, a message he admitted he felt an almost religious fervor about. All it takes to bring the human drama to a virtual end is to establish the empathy, the rapport, necessary for the world to understand, to fully comprehend, what Fowler has to say. That is Joe's opportunity. In the remaining stories Jon Webster and Jenkins clear away the last fragments of the human presence.

Simak often played with the ideas of gods and religions and of vastly superior intelligences. In *City*, man is in a fallen state. Fowler becomes the reluctant Messiah, Joe perhaps an "antichrist." The mass of humanity is transported to "heaven." Those left behind struggle for another little while before drifting into limbo forever.

The dogs are left alone for uncounted generations. They did not need Juwain's philosophy. They had innate superior senses. The doggish narrators, long after the disappearance of 'Man,' do not believe that such a creature could have ever lived, let alone achieve almost god-like attributes, indeed, the creator of the Dogs. Only Jenkins remembered and even he is eventually lost.

The dogs mull the story of man in endless story telling. They are totally mystified by the strange nature of man. Man had obviously aspired to great things, had built and then abandoned a civilization, had dreamed of the stars, and failed. For all the promising qualities, there is the dullness of sensibility, the inability to communicate, a grasping mechanicalization, and of ruthlessness and viciousness. Nothing that gets in man's way has a chance, not even the life-eating cobbles. Grant sees it early on and advises Nathaniel to lead the dogs to an independent existence. Jon Webster sees and tries to free the dogs of man's influence. The few degenerate humans left are finally dispatched by Jenkins to an alternate world.

Jenkins is himself a major player in the tragedy. He is a creation of man. He worshiped humanity, at least in the form of the Websters, and his salvation is his service to them. It is he who sent the ship away that Jerome Webster was painfully preparing to leave on to save his friend Juwain. Of course, his master would not want to travel. It is he who told Jon Webster that the dogs and animals needed the leadership of "Man," that moved Jon to seal Geneva for all time, to seal Man away from the dogs and their federation of animals. And it is Jenkins who works for more millennia to salvage man before finding the hope vanquished by the reinvention of the bow and arrow and the human's will to kill. And

finally, it is he who took the dogs away from the Earth itself and left Joe's ants to take it over because he could not poison them.

Here are the elements of a tragedy that would do the great Greek playwrights proud. He seeks to be human but is possessed of a power, in part his immortality, in part his simple-minded dedication to principle, that elevates him to god-like stature. It is this robot, not mortal man, that is the icon of *City*. I believe the reason why *City* is still in print is at least a subconscious recognition that Simak has told a really great human story, one with roots deep in the ground of the human psyche. I am inclined to believe that Simak plumbed at least as deeply into the core of the human essence as Tolkien and I think perhaps that Shakespeare would have enjoyed the story and I would have loved to hear what Jung and Freud would have thought of it.

In *City* we find the elements of many stories yet to come from Simak. It is thus essential. The book won him great acclaim and is still, often alone, in print seventy years on. But I believe it was the dark night of the soul in the development of his philosophy as it unfolded in the books and articles I will discuss below.

Chapter Four: Leitmotif: The Pastoral Setting

Cosmic Engineers and *City* set the backdrop for Simak's mature writing career. They begin to define what I see as his underlying philosophy, his leitmotif, that unfolded over the next decade. Two additional novels I believe deserve attention at this point, two additional pillars in his philosophy: *Time and Again* and *Ring Around the Sun*. *Time and Again* began as a short story "Time Quarry" in 1950 and appeared in book form in 1951 as *Time and Again*, renamed *First He Died* in 1953. Simak dedicated *Time and Again* "For Kay, without whom I'd never have written a line[17]."

As stated above, Asimov was impressed enough with Simak's style of bouncing around the story, from scene to scene. *Time and Again* is a masterful exercise of this style.

The story opens on the patio of the home of Christopher Adams. He is pondering a homicide on a distant planet. Three humans and two androids had been killed. Such crimes simply do not happen in his day. He has a mysterious visitor who tells him that he is his successor from the future and that Asher Sutton, who had disappeared on a mission to the seventh planet of 61 Cygni twenty years ago will return in five days and must be killed.

Sutton does indeed return, in a battered ship, without engines, without food or water, or for that matter, air. He had brought the ship in by the power of will, a power normally unused, that he had, as the story will tell, tapped. That will drive the ship across interstellar space. It kept his body "alive" and on landing, reanimated it. It is a mind that has absorbed a fundamental blueprint of being. That power would, of course, be a threat to the established order and he was to kill him.

Earth was the capital of a galactic empire. It grew no food, allowed no industry, every inch landscaped and tended. It was dedicated to ruling. Out on the field, near now what have been where Simak grew up, great ships soared into the sky bound for the stars. It is an empire of a small minority of humans supported by androids and robots, and vast numbers of aliens. Androids are artificial humans, biological creations made in laboratories, distinguished only by the tattoo on their foreheads. They are unable to reproduce. They are not considered human and have no rights.

When Sutton landed his ship, he is met by an android who takes him to the office of the Operations Chief who wants to know who he is, why he had no ID numbers on his ship (washed off in acid rains), and no radio contact (destroyed in the crash). Formalities nonetheless quickly concluded, the agent gives Sutton the teleporter (all local travel is by teleporter) coordinators to his hotel where his room has been kept for him. Sutton finds he yearns for his comfortable chair, the fountain with the Venusians mermaids, the life-paintings on the wall and the window through which he could gaze upon the wide, park-like landscape of Earth. One of the paintings he favored was a forest brook, with trees, with singing birds and babbling water. You could smell the forest mold.

Entering his room, he is rendered unconscious. He realizes later that someone had scanned his body, probed his mind and ransacked the attaché case which held notes for a book he intended to write.

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[17] Kay, however, didn't like science fiction and read only those stories she typed in the early days. Which of course does not diminish the debt of a man, and especially a writer, to his wife for the support she provides to him to pursue his craft. To that I can attest.

Later, after returning to consciousness and cleaning up, as he finished breakfast, he was visited by an android named Herkimer, who came to deliver a challenge to a duel from Mr. Geoffrey Benton. Sutton doesn't have a gun. Herkimer provides him with a .45. Sutton has never used a gun, but he picks it up and finds that it fits his hand, and his instinct, very well. He likes the sense of power and danger.

Why the challenge? Perhaps because Sutton is famous. Benton has killed 16 men. Sutton dials up a robot at the information desk to see if there is any way out of the duel. The robot tells him that the law allows him no way out. The law said no man under 100 can go unarmed. If challenged unarmed, you can just be shot down.

Simak allows that the robot has an attitude about human violence, which perhaps expresses his own. We find it in the *City* stories. There is no more crime, just new standards of violence, the robot observes reproachfully. Really? A robot with a moral conscience absent in human beings! Murder, the robot continues, has been legalized, indeed mandated. Man is "smart and brutal," a killer from the very beginning. We might be physically puny, but we made clubs and chipped stone to sharp edged weapons by which we overcame even the sabretooth tiger. We've wiped out the dangerous animals with ease and think nothing of the massive violence of war against other men, "man against man, nation against nation."

The robot is far from done. Civilization has advanced to the point there is no need for war but the old brutality and lust for power lingers. It is inherent in us. Yes, we have some sense that killing is wrong, but the duel has given the act respectability, something of chivalry "brave and noble." But it's all just words, just fine semantics to mask what humans really are.

And humans are? We return to Adams, who is a Supervisor, Alien Relations Bureau, Department of Galactic Investigation (Justice). There is, as the Greeks realized over 2,000 years ago, a hubris in human beings. Hubris is excessive pride or self-confidence and it invariably leads to a downfall. Biblically it reads "pride goeth before a fall."

Adams isn't far from what the robot was saying. He muses that man has expanded across much of the galaxy. That it has been too fast, and we are spread out too thin. There is conceit in this, an unshakable conviction that man is above all other things.

So what does this have to do with the killing of three humans and two androids on a far distant planet? On their bodies was found the charred flyleaf of a book by Asher Sutton, a book that had not yet been written.

So, who is Asher Sutton? Sutton had been sent to 61 Cigni VII. There is an impenetrable shield around the planet. Sutton had disappeared and given up for loss years before. Now he has returned. Sutton's file was missing. An expert team reported that the ship Sutton returned in was not only inoperative, but they concluded that Sutton could not have survived the crash that wrecked it. The body scan showed that he had two hearts, two circulatory systems, and a nervous system that was haywire[18]. Then the visitor from the future called to tell him that Sutton would be the cause of war. It will be a war in time as well as space. It would be precipitated by a book Sutton would write.

[18] It is clear that Adams agents attached Sutton when he first arrived in his hotel room.

Switching scenes: Sutton had a call from an android attorney representing his old family robot, Buster. Buster had been with the family for 4,000 years. After Sutton disappeared Buster took out a homestead on the edge of the galaxy. He requested his freedom. Sutton released him and wished him well.

Buster's attorney had an ancient trunk from the attic of the old family place. In it Sutton found old papers and letters and a strange tool, a wrench. One letter, addressed to John H. Sutton,[19] was postmarked Bridgeport, Wis., July 1987. Six thousand years old and unopened. He wondered about this man, his ancestor, so long dead, how he must have lived the days of his life, gone fishing, spent his declining days in the garden, when the Earth was a living place where, he thought, "not a thing is grown for its economic worth, not a wheel is turned for economic purpose." He opened the letter, looked quickly at it, and put it in his coat pocket.

Sutton had met a woman at his hotel named Eva. He took her to dinner and they went to a dream emporium. There Benton surprised them and began to draw his gun, fired but incredibly missed. Sutton fired and Benton fell dead. But he was only hit in the arm.

Sutton inherited, by law, one-third of Benton's estate. That included the android Herkimer, a hunting asteroid, money and a small and efficient ship. Herkimer, he learned, longs to be accepted as an equal to humans, but he knows that he was made, from a vat of chemicals, just for use, just as cattle were bred, and not allowed to stand on his own abilities.

Sutton visited an old professor, Dr. Raven, a specialist in comparative religion and the fine points of theology. The notes in the briefcase were for a book about a philosophy about Destiny. Sutton told Raven he had brought back these notes because it was something he had found that he thought important. Sutton wanted to know if Raven thought it was a religion. Sutton didn't want a faith. Man has lived by faith alone for 8,000 years, he reasoned. Faith, he believed, is a confession of weakness, of our inability to stand on our own feet. Religion makes us reliant on some external power which will come to our aid when called upon. Sutton rejected this. Raven agreed that what Sutton proposed was not a religion.

What then, is Destiny? There were always some who believed in destiny. Many didn't call it that. Some who believed in destiny were fatalist, some fanatical. They had but a glimmer of destiny. Sutton has something he doesn't tell Dr. Raven about, an inner presence, a second consciousness he called Johnny; a still-small voice. It was a voice of self-assurance. It was in fact an entity: Sutton, said Johnny, was not the first earthman he had lived with.

In a sequence of coincidence that is one of Simak's hallmarks, Sutton drives a back road and sees a small ship crash in flames. He pulled a dying man free of the wreckage and in his man's pocket he pulled a copy of a book, his book. The title page said Original Version. He read the beginning of the text:

> *We are not alone. No one ever is alone. Not since the first faint stirring of the first flicker of life on the first planet in the galaxy that knew the quickening of life, has there ever been a single entity that walked or crawled or slithered down the path of life alone.*

[19] Simak's father was named John.

Sutton is pursued. He, Eva and Herkimer leave Earth and journey to Benton's hunting asteroid. It was distant and isolated. There was a livable zone in a force field. There is a big lodge, comfortably furnished. Two men are staying at the lodge. They say they are friends of Benton's and express surprise that he has been killed. They offer to leave but Sutton bids them stay for the night.

Sutton went to his room. He pulled out the book he had found at the crash site but dare not read it. Then he took out the 6,000-year-old letter. John Sutton had written it to himself and left it sealed, with the postmark proving the date. He had enclosed a doctor's certificate that he was of sound mind, as if he were writing his will. He introduced himself and said that he had studied law but decided to return to farming,

> *For farming is an honest and a soul-warming job that gives one contact with the first essentials of living, and there is, I find, a satisfaction that is almost smug in the simple yet mystifying process of raising food from soil.*

This picks up on the thought already expressed when Asher first found the letter. This is the pastoral theme beginning to unfold.

John Sutton continued:

> *Through the years, I have grown to love this country, although it is rough and in many instances not suited to easy cultivation. In fact, I sometimes find myself viewing with pity the men who hold broad, flat acreages with no hills to rest their eyes. Their land may be more fertile and more easily worked than mine, but I have something that they do not have…a setting for my life where I am keenly aware of all the beauties of nature, all the changes of the seasons.*

John Sutton wrote of the places he found to sit and rest, in later years, as he made the rounds of his property. He wrote about looking forward to spending time in these places more than walking the fields, as much as he enjoyed that. But there is one spot that stands out above the others that has always been special: "If I were still a child I might best explain it by saying that it seems to be an enchanted place." He described a cleft in the bluff on the north end of the pasture, a rock at the top, a comfortable place for sitting[20]. The rock is surrounded by trees and is always shaded and comfortable (but overgrown today). He often sat there for an hour at a time, "doing absolutely nothing, thinking nothing, but at peace with the world and with myself."

I have stood there and seen this view. These passages, and the "old ancient water" meditation by Enoch Wallace in *Way Station* quoted elsewhere in this book, are what I might call my "Bluff Manifesto." I can think of no other way to express them than in Simak's words. I cannot imagine reaching into his soul without them.

> *From this boulder one may see the sweep of the river valley with a stressed third-dimensional quality, due no doubt to the height of the vantage point plus the clearness of the air, although at times the whole scene is enveloped with a blue mist of particularly tantalizing and lucid clarity.*
>
> *But there is a strangeness to the spot and this strangeness is one that I find hard to explain, for search as I may, I find no word at my command to adequately express the thing I wish to say or the condition which I would describe.*
>
> *It is as if the place were tingling…as if the place were waiting for something to happen, as if that one particular spot held great possibilities for drama or for revelation, and while*

[20] This is the spot Simak will take us to in Way Station and the theme from which I draw the title of this book.

revelation may seem a strange word to use, I find that it comes the closest of any to the thing I have felt many times as I sat upon the boulder and gazed across the valley.

It has often seemed to me that there on that one area of Earth, something could or might happen which could or might happen nowhere else on the entire planet. And I have at times, tried to imagine what that happening might be, and I shrink from telling some of the possibilities that I have imagined, although in truth, in other things I am perhaps not imaginative enough.

John Sutton then told of the arrival of a man and a strange machine on July 4, 1977. The man said he was making some minor repairs on the machine. He had some type of tool in his hand. They talked for some time – or he kept John Sutton talking. They talked until the dinner hour. Sutton invited him to eat but he declined. Sutton then returned home, ate and took a nap. He then walked back to the place but found only the strange tool, a wrench, with blood on it. He had found that tool amazingly useful over the years but had never shown it to anyone else. John Sutton believed that the man was a time traveler, and the craft is a time machine. He reflected that the man had pulled the wool over his eyes and must have surely been "well versed in semantics[21] and in psychology." There were many questions he wished he had asked.

But there is more to the story. A little over two weeks later a man named William Jones came by the house and asked for work. A hand was needed and Jones was hired. Jones asked far less than the going wage. He stayed for ten years. There was a difference about him – a quiet dignity. He worked well and was well liked by the neighbors. He didn't drink. With his first pay he bought a typewriter and for several years spent long hours tramping his room, thinking and typing. One day he took a big sheaf of papers out and burned them.

Sutton folded the letter and put it back in his pocket. Later he went down stairs and found the two men in the living room. They took him to their ship under threat but then offered him a fabulous payment for selling the rights of his book to them. They represent one of three leading parties of the future, the Revisionist. This party wants to revise Sutton's book to make Destiny the right of humans only. When Sutton refused the offer, they told him that one party wants him dead and they, mercenary at heart, see a good profit in his body. They shoot him but shortly Sutton's power assets itself and he revives and killed them. His body weakened from loss of blood, he crawled to the atomic engine where his inner power drew energy to nourish and heal him.

Reviving, he recalled his crash on 61 Cigni VII and his first death. He remembered that as he revived then he heard a new voice in him saying: "I am your destiny. I was with you when you came to life and I stay with you till you die. I do not control you and I do not coerce you, but I try to guide you, although you do not know it." No, it doesn't coerce him, just give him hunches, whispers and a thing called conscience – the sense of the right thing to do. He knew that there were two facets of his being: The human part but also that inner being called destiny that drove him to a higher plane if he let it.

[21] Alfred Korzybski's general semantics was popular at this time and read by many science fiction writers. A. E. van Vogt wrote three novels based on general semantics. I have posted a number of blogs about Korzybski and his system: https://korzybskiinstitute.blogspot.com/?view=magazine

What is destiny, the voice first asked him? It's not fatalism, it's not something foreordained. It is something inherent in the races of all worlds. You don't have to listen to it. If you do it will guide you at the crossroads of life. There is nothing that can make a being listen to the voice of its destiny. Men considered destiny an abstract philosophy, an idea. It is not. It is the inner essence, the surge, of life. So has it always been and so shall it always be.

Herkimer was laying on the bed in the lodge thinking about his station in life as an android. He knew he was a Man in every way, except he felt he had no soul. He was not a Man simply because he had been made in a laboratory, by virtue of the tattoo on his forehead, the fact that he was owned, and except he did not have the power to reproduce, to have children. But still he was a Man in every way that mattered. A robot was a machine and a caricature of Man. But robots were not flesh and blood. He pulled out a small book, Sutton's book, and read that line about no living being, "how born or how conceived or mad" goes alone. When he heard a ship depart, he jumped up and found that Sutton and the two visitors were gone.

Meanwhile Adams is sitting in his office trying to puzzle Sutton out. A psych tracer locked on Sutton chirps a steady signal, but Sutton keeps slipping from his grasp. The investigation was not going well. He knew there was a spy in his own organization and wondered who it might be. He had talked to Dr. Raven who told him that Sutton had found Destiny. Raven affirmed that it was not a religion, but that Sutton had found an agency that influenced the pursuit of destiny. Adams knew that a new idea could be dangerous. With Man spread so thin it could set off rebellion. Better one man, and the new idea, no matter how great, be snuffed out. He suddenly realized that the psych tracer had stopped. That could only mean that Sutton was dead.

Sometime later, fully recovered, Sutton found a copy of the revised edition of his book on one of the dead men. Two books, two antagonistic groups. And yet a third that wanted no book. He opened the book to the first passage. There is a footnote that Sutton should not be interpreted as meaning all life has the benefit of destiny. Half of this text consisted of footprints, interpretations, of his original. Sutton is incensed; here again was mere justification for a vicious race, the most vicious of all animals, to steal the right of all living things. And it is something he must stop

Back on Earth Adams was stunned that Sutton's psyche tracer had restarted.

Sutton landed on Earth, in a river. He swam ashore and walked up a path to a house. A man was sitting on the patio. It was Adams. They talk about destiny. Adams said he is afraid that the galaxy is only waiting for Man to crack, to weaken. It would only take an idea to light the fire. Sutton asked to use his visor and that he wants an hour to escape. Adams offers to roll the dice to see if he gets the hour. Adams rolled 11. Sutton, calling on the new powers of his mind, rolled 12. He wants to find Bridgeport. The information robot tells him that he is very near Bridgeport[22].

Traveling back to 1977 in the spaceship-time machine, Sutton found a path leading down to the river from the train station at Bridgeport. There is a bridge, but he chooses to swim. Below the bridge he found an old man with a two-week growth of graying beard, a

[22] Bridgeport is across the Wisconsin River from the Simak/Wiseman farm.

pipe in his mouth and an earthenware jug at his side with a corncob for a cork. Old Cliff[23] said he had been fishing for days but had caught nothing. It was too much trouble to clean the fish. He offered the jug to Sutton, who took a taste—moonshine—and then old Cliff took a long slug himself. Sutton asked for John Sutton's place. Old Cliff pointed to the ridge across the river. At that moment a fish broke the surface and caught a grasshopper. "Destiny," said Old Cliff. Startled, Sutton asked him what he meant about destiny? Old Cliff said he used to write and had written a story once about destiny.

I have visited that spot.

As he swam, he could feel the river talking to him. Bridges, he reflected, allowed Man to hurry on his path, to miss the voice of the river. Man misses too many things in his hurry, things he should take the time to study and understand. Perhaps someday he would travel this trail again and discover the things that had been lost.

Sutton crossed the river and climbed the bluff. He observed the land, so unlike the park-like Earth of his time. Stark bluffs, great trees that made it not quite to the top of the cliff – as if defeated in the effort, great clumps of stone that seemed to have been flung from above by some angry god. He noticed the summer flowers, mossy root mounds, and chattering squirrels. Reaching the top of the cliff, Sutton found the boulder and overlook John had written about. He sat on it, looking across the valley,

> *And there was peace. Peace and the quieting majesty of the scene before him…the strange third-dimensional quality of the space that hung, as if alive, above the river valley. Strangeness too, the strangeness of the expected...and unexpected…happening.*

By that incredible coincidence, he saw the tiny one-man ship land. He watched John Sutton come down the path "a big-bellied man with a trim white beard and an old black hat, and his walk was a waddle with some swagger in it." John Sutton visited with the man at the ship for a while and then walked on. Sutton then confronted the man, Arnold Dean, he said his name was, from the 84th century, 8386 to be exact. Dean told him the androids have made a religion out of his book. He said they believed they are the equal of man and spat on the ground. But they didn't have a chance, he explained, for androids could not reproduce. They were a deceptive lot. One day an android would fight you and the next day polish your shoes. There are no real battles, just skirmishes. Then Dean leaped suddenly at Sutton and clubbed him with the wrench. When Sutton awoke the ship was gone and the bloody wrench lay on the ground. He toed it and left it there. He saw John Sutton trudging up the path and slipped out of sight.

Asher Sutton went back to the ship under the river. He spent three days digging through the shifting sand only to find that he had lost the key to the airlock. He was stranded. His clothes had been washed away. He stole some. He went to the farm and asked John Sutton for a job. He would wait until someone came to look for him. He settled into the land. He learned peace and security living close to nature. One day, as he sat back against a tree staring out across the river,

> *In the field below him the corn stood in brown and golden shocks, like a village of wigwams that clustered tight and warm against the sure knowledge of the winter's coming. To the west the*

[23] Is there something more than just coincidence that the real Old Cliff passed in April 1988, just months following the date of John Suttons letter and this meeting with Asher Sutton? He wrote in a final appearance. The root of Destiny is the Hunch.

bluffs of the Mississippi were a purple cloud that crouched close against the land. To the north the golden land swept up in low hill rising on low hill until it reached a misty point where, somewhere, land stopped and sky began, although one could not find the definite dividing point, no clear-cut pencil mark that held the two apart."

He sensed the life around him. He sensed a brotherhood of life. As he watched a blue jay fly across the sky, a field mouse came by and then fled in fear. His mind reached out to the mouse. He became the mouse, entering into the life of the mouse, its fear, its hunger, the contentment of a full stomach, of sound sleep, its urge to reproduce. His new sensitivity stunned and delighted him. Teachers and mentors could help one learn but there were forces all around him, in his body, an inbred knowledge, the traditions of the ages.

One evening after dark as they leaned on a pasture bar enjoying the cool night breeze and talked with John Sutton. Sutton related to Sutton, who he knew as William Jones, that he found him a strange one, a good one, the best he had hired in years to help on the farm, and who had stayed so long. Sutton/Jones replied that he simply didn't have anywhere to go, which was true enough. But he was deeply satisfied with his life on the farm. They talked about that. Could such contentment be somehow sinful? Some men are unhappy, restless, and this mood drives them to great accomplishments. Contentment is simply adjustment to and acceptance of one's environment. If man could find such contentment, someday there would be peace. Thinking ahead, Asher said that man would someday go to the stars. To that John chucked and replied: "Before Man goes to the stars he should learn how to live on Earth."

Asher commented on how the land was different at night. John replied that it was the land but you (William Jones). Getting back to the William/Asher's strangeness, John told him that he just didn't seem to belong there. But then he assured him that he did, that he was one with the people who knew him, that it seemed he had always been here. Yes, replied Asher, but there would come a day when he would likely have to leave.

Ten years had come and gone. Asher had tried to write his book but could not without his notes and finally gave it up. He mused that his hotel in the future was no more than a short distance up river, where Prairie du Chein was in this time, and that the University of North America would be just north of the Sutton place and someday great starships would rise out the Iowa prairie to the west. He longed for Eva.

"Peace and quiet, he told himself. In this corner of the ancient Earth there is peace and quiet, unbroken by the turbulence of twentieth-century life."

"From a land like this came the steady men[24], the men who in a few more generations would ride the ships out to the starts. Here, in the quiet corners of the world, were built the stamina and courage, the depth of character and the deep convictions that would take the engines that more brilliant, less stable men had dreamed and drive them to the farthest rims of the galaxy, there to hold key worlds for the glory and the profit of the race."

He turned his troubled thoughts to the being within, Johnny. Johnny simply said that these ten years had been good for him and everything would be fine. He reminded Asher that he would be with him to the day he died, that he would never be alone. And Asher felt content.

[24] I have a copy of a eulogy of a great, great grandfather, who lived at the time of Simak's own grandfather Wiseman, that speaks of his good character coming from his growing up in a farm outside a small, Simak sized, town in Pennsylvania.

But the time had come. As he walked the dusty road one night a man joined him who said he was a representative of the Revisionist camp. He came with a new offer. They knew where he was, and they knew about John Sutton's letter; had waited for John Sutton to write it. The letter they knew would lure Asher to this time and sealed him off for a while. Now he was ready to go. He went back to the future with them. Only five weeks had passed by that time. He met with Trevor, the Revisionist leader, who occupied himself by flipping paper clips into an inkwell, splashing ink on his desk[25]. Trevor made his pitch. He argued for the manifest destiny of Man, the only race, he believed, who would know how to realize destiny, to use it to the best advantage. Sutton declined. He told Trevor that the common destiny should include the androids, to fill the ranks of men in the stars. They should be equals. Man had given them a gift, of inferiority, something to fight about. Humans have nothing to prove but androids do. They have the same brain as Man. They are distinguished only by the marks on the foreheads. Trevor released him. He wanted Sutton alive, he explained. One way or another he needed that book.

Sutton felt a measure of respect for Trevor and those like him. They knew where they were going. They had a plan. They had conviction. It was this quality that had driven men to conquer the stars (and I might add to conquer nature in John Sutton's twentieth century). Sutton admitted a strength and a greatness in this quality. Yes, there was something of manifest destiny in the human condition.

Trevor had said Sutton was a traitor to humankind. Sutton's name would become a foul curse. As Trevor had walked away from him Sutton saw the back of humanity turned against him. By now the Revisionists had learned about the Cradle, a secret laboratory where androids created their own kind without the marks on their foreheads. It would intensify the war. It was time for him to go, he would travel to the edge of the galaxy, to Buster's homestead, to write his book. Herkimer provided him a ship. He got his notes from Eva. He offered the androids another weapon. They had the capacity to scan and reproduce his body, with different faces, the two bodies and two brains and special powers that would allow them to penetrate the headquarters of their enemies, read their minds and continue to fight the delaying battle as long as necessary. Parting with Eva was difficult, for both of them. She could not go with him. She told him she saw the greatness in him; he only felt the loneliness closing in on him. He was destined to stand alone forever.

Ah, but there is a final, poignant twist. What Sutton didn't know, as his tiny ship climbed into the sky, heading for the edge of the galaxy, is that it had been planned this way. Herkimer was the master strategist. Eva was an android from the Cradle, without the tattoo. It is they who had orchestrated Sutton's destiny, in order to achieve their own.

A PHILOSOPHY OF ASHER SUTTON

Time and Again was published before *City* but it was in fact written after those stories. It therefore represents an important development in the chronology of Simak's philosophical outlook. The story opens as something of a generic space opera, a good one, but quickly develops a mature and sophisticated plot of a style new to Simak. Very quickly we have a visitor from the future and a human who has had an encounter with an alien, an encounter that has left him not exactly human. We meet Asher Sutton as he willed his body

[25] It's 6,000 years into the future, inkwells, cigarettes, pipes and men's hats! Go figure!

to life. He has returned through space from a distant star in a ship that will not fly nor support life and with a briefcase full of notes in an indecipherable language.

Simak quickly got down to the basic and dramatic plot. A crisis has emerged in the governance of the Earth's empire, a vast spread of inhabited planets. What is not yet known in Sutton's time is that revolt has started in the future. The war involves two vital issues. First the rights of non-humans, including androids who are biologically identical to humans but created in laboratories rather than born. The second involves a philosophy, not yet written by Sutton in present time, which defines the equality, or lack thereof, of all sentient creatures according to nothing but the interpretation of his yet to be written book. Sutton is, or will, become a figure of messianic proportions.

There is a greatness in man but also a ruthless viciousness. The warring factors are "our special race" against all others: androids, sentient robots, untold alien races. There is the need to dominate. There is a cunning mechanical intelligence that gives man the edge.

And then there is destiny, the still, quiet voice in all of us, human – android, robot and alien – that has always been with us and always will. It is our striving to be something more, better, even sublime. Simak had personally rejected religion and he made the point that Sutton's destiny is not a religion. That it is an alien presence is an interesting plot twist but one that recurs in many of his stories and is more fully developed in *Time Is The Simplest Thing*, a decade later (1961).

The war that unfolds between human bigotry and the rest of the universe is a time war that spans at least 6,000 years from our time to Asher Sutton's, and beyond. On returning to Earth he finds copies of a book he hasn't yet written, indeed must take many years to write as he learns of his own personal evolution.

An untold story is who or what rebuilt Sutton's body out 61 Cygni. Asher Sutton returned to earth a superman, a god if you will. He has a body that could not be killed, that had great physical strength and extended mental capability. He is on a first-name basis with his destiny. Was Johnny implanted at 61 Cygni or was Sutton merely awakened to its presence? And just who or what is Johnny? We know little more than that Asher Sutton is not the first human it has inhabited.

The plot is further defined by the ancient trunk preserved by an equally ancient robot servant. Buster had served for 4,000 years and conveniently created a refuge at the end of the universe, a homestead. But the trunk is 2,000 years older than that. There is an unopened letter in the trunk, a 6,000-year-old document, that was meant only for Asher Sutton. The letter takes him back to our time, to the Simak family farm, to the rock on the bluff, near which I stood and have taken the only known photograph, with an incredible view, and to the contentment of John Sutton's pastoral life.

Simak's pastoral science fiction is rooted in this little patch of land, albeit a place morphed in his capable imagination, time and again. It is where he grew up; on an isolated farm in a beautiful country. It is a haunting image for those of us who are drawn to him. Many of us, including myself, grew up in such places in other parts of the country, and perhaps the world. The *City* stories lead us to the country, but the human condition is given as hopeless. *Time and Again* probes a sublime quality of life on the land the Webster's are unable to fulfill. The Suttons, from John to Asher, are able to become one with it.

John Sutton's farm is, of course, the Simak farm. John Sutton wrote about his great love of that farm and the land and the bluff upon which the farm stood, overlooking the Wisconsin River and in sight of the bluffs of the Mississippi. Asher Sutton came to share the love of that place.

He met "Old Cliff" down on the river fishing opposite of the farm[26]. A grasshopper is caught by a fish as they talk. It is the grasshopper's destiny, said Old Cliff. He told Sutton he had written a story about destiny once. Between John Sutton and Old Cliff, we get a very detailed portrayal of the countryside and that bluff that has become the center of this, and so many other, books. Simak makes a point of writing himself into the story, of identifying with it. And, of course, John Sutton's sentiments are his own.

Without his notes Asher Sutton cannot complete his book but he does begin to develop the powers latent in his new body and the entity who shares his mind. These immortal entities, embedded in us, are the source of Destiny of every intelligent being for none are ever alone. They shared the minds of all beings from the beginning of time and sought to speak to them, that still quiet voice, sometimes the hunch. Most do not as a rule listen for the voice and they do not hear it. They thus miss the Destiny that is their right. This theme will also come up repeatedly in Simak's books, particularly his quest novels: Deliverance is for the few.

It's not a religion but it is a power, an energy, and an agency. Sutton is unique, a transformed Man, barely human at all except in outward appearance. He developed a powerful ability to sense the life of small animals as he strolled about the farm. John Sutton is a keenly sensitive and educated man who chose to farm as a way of life to be close to the land and to live simply. He senses the power latent in Asher but does not pry. Asher's powers grow year by year, but he keeps them to himself. He is in awe of them. He wants to know more about his potential. Johnny is reticent. Sutton asks for advice and guidance. Johnny says, "wait and see." Destiny unrolls only in the course of life, by test and trial, by choice and will and determination. But the root of this idea is that Johnny told him that he will always be with him. That he will never be alone. That no man, no intelligence is ever alone. That is Destiny.

Sutton had not written his book yet, but he found copies of it. He learns that there are two versions: The original and the revision. The original implied that all beings are equal, all share destiny. The revisionists assert that only human beings have the unique power to rule the galaxy. Yet that rule is fragile for Man is spread thinly. He is served by robots who share a moral attitude but apparently not in the war and androids who serve Man by day and engage in a mortal struggle by night. The androids Sutton met in his own time are very much in that war. They have the book. They are organized. And they have a secret weapon.

There are three factions: The purist, the Revisionist and a third party who would simply like to get rid of Sutton before he created this mess. Since they can't kill him, destiny is against them.

The revisionists know where Sutton is all along and eventually bring him back to his own time. He refuses to cooperate with them but they let him go. In his time whether he

[26] I was greeted by such a man, beard and all, as I explored the Simak bluff.

cooperates or not they still need his book. He has made an android friend, Herkimer, and fallen in love with a beautiful woman, Eve. Eve we learn is an unmarked android. The secret weapon of the androids is that they have learned to make themselves in secret laboratories with no distinguishing markings. They will be able to duplicate Sutton's body.

The androids find a way to spirit him away from Earth. Eve cannot go with him. He must go alone to finish the great task before him. They send him on a small ship to Buster, to live and work in isolation on the remote frontier until his book is done. But what he does not know is that Herkimer and Eve have engineered his destiny. They are soldiers. They fight for the rebelling androids. They have worked for years, informed by the future, to arrange his life and given him the time to prepare to write the book that would free them all. They too have shaped his destiny.

Some final thoughts.

Sutton has the advantage over those of us who are merely mortal. Like a Buddha, he has been enlightened. He doesn't know to what he has been awakened. Whatever is at the shielded planet at 61 Cigni has chosen him, and this time, to put Destiny on the fast track. It takes just a little book. But the book is a political manifesto. This is a world of the oppressor, man, and the oppressed: everything else. The message is simple: The universe isn't meant to be this way. The war covers millennia, more than since the beginning of human civilization; it is clear the struggle will last a very long time.

In a very real sense this is a part of the sci-fi mythos which in my interpretation is about lone individuals taking on the universe, striving to achieve personal potential, working creatively, to serve the destiny of the race. Simak has merely taken his own unique track into that myth.

There is something prophetic in this book. The Civil Rights and environmental movements were in infancy. I don't know if Simak had yet heard about Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rachel Carson. It is a decade and more before Maslow, Rogers and other humanist psychologists stirred the human potential movement. It is even nearly a decade from the first orbital satellite. And yet, like Sutton's book, Simak brings us a glimpse of the future. He will continue to write entertaining stories to the end of his productive life but he will return, time and again, to the themes established in this book.

Chapter Five: Hunch

Simak said he reached his full maturity as a writer with *City* and *Time And Again*. Like many other writers who worked for Campbell he was then under the reign of the Meister. Like the best of them, he too was finding his own wings and parted from Campbell in 1950. Possibly because the popular media was coming back after the war and partly because of his own growing reputation, he emerged not only as an independent writer but a leader in the field of science fiction, one of the six best according to one critic.

I find there is much more to his development than his career as a fiction writer with a growing audience. It was more than the refinement of a style, although this was part of what was happening. It is, in my view, more a matter of what was going on inside of Clifford Simak that counts. He was developing a philosophy – a deeply rooted philosophy – that I think puts him in the league of those American writers who, like him, returned to home ground, who found their inspiration in the common life of the people of a rustic setting. I think of Emerson and Thoreau and the people of Concord, of Hawthorne and Melville, of Whitman in poetry, and later Mark Twain, and of Cather, Derleth, Ruark and Wendell Berry. There are also the anti-down-home writers, like Sinclair Lewis who, in their revolt against Main Street, none-the-less wrote from a window overlooking one.

In the novels addressed above, we see Simak moving from an ambitious hope for Man's great potential, albeit one which we must grow into, to a complete failure of Man as one of nature's experiments, to something of a middle ground which begins to sketch the core of what I have come to see as his personal philosophy. That philosophy probes deeply into the human potential by tapping into a universal cosmic principle and by the development of extraordinary mental and physical powers.

With *Time and Again*, Simak brought his characters down to earth in a form that shaped his pastoral themes. He brought out the natural landscape of a country setting. He personalized his characters. He went into their heads. And he first takes us to the bluff, to that prospect that must have held him in thrall as a boy and young man. He will take us back to that bluff, that outlook, time and again. We will go near there, in fact, in his next book, *Ring Around the Sun*, back to Millville.

In *Ring Around the Sun* we find our lead character awakening not to a cosmic potential but to a latent evolutionary tendency inherent in all living things: mutation. This is not a simple biological mutation, not the emergence of new physical subspecies, but an evolution of the powers known only to Man and found within the precincts of the human mind.

In the development of our potential, as found in Simak's stories, there is something of the supernormal, not unnatural but rather latent in all of us. In some stories, wisdom comes out of lives lived long beyond our three score and ten. But it is also found in subtle mutations, particularly those involving mental capacity. It is found in Joe the mutant and in the Dogs. Asher is rebuilt, both body and mind by some superior entity. In Joe, mutation goes very wrong, but that fits with the tone of *City*. In *Ring Around the Sun* we see a more natural form of mutation; one that awakens rather than suppresses the moral sense.

Ring Around the Sun is a misleading book. It is good storytelling, the stuff that makes money for editors and publishers and fortifies the bank accounts of writers. But it is a complex book and there is an underlying story, a structure, that is part of the philosophy of Clifford D. Simak as I understand it. I don't think anyone can read him much without gaining that 'hunch' that something was going on.

I will relate the story of *Ring Around the Sun* as I read it and as Simak unfolded it. Simak introduced us very quickly to a host of characters. The leading character is Jay Vickers, a writer living in a village "up the valley" from New York City. We meet an affable old man with a distinguished voice, a bit shabby, a neighbor who is pleasant to talk to, Horton Flanders. We learn about Kathleen Preston; a girl Vickers once knew with whom he took a walk in an enchanted valley. She lived in a big house on a hill and had been sent away to school. His parents lived on a run-down farm, one of many in his area, on which they eked out a bare living. His agent, Ann Carter, calls him to the city to meet a prospective client, George Crawford.

Simak opened the book with a mood that was becoming characteristic of his philosophy. He obviously felt a sensuous delight in a summer day and in nature in general: Vickers sat on his porch looking at the garden[27]. There are flowers and golden sunshine and summer leaves, and wind and birds, a sundial, picket fence and an innate harmony of life in it all. It is peaceful. There is an old, dying pine tree that represents the natural order of life and death. It is part of the harmony of things. The prose of this passage would do credit to Thoreau, Emerson or John Burroughs.

Simak set up the coincidental factors that define the story: Vickers read in his morning newspaper about people disappearing, even whole families at once, and a story by a scientist about the possible existence of multiple worlds. This was a troubling world, but Vickers had found a refuge from it. The little village in which he lived seems detached from the greater world. People calmly accepted the way things were. The world was defined by the seasons, the sun and moon. These were "a gift to be cherished rather than a right that one must wrest from other living things." Or so he thought.

Vickers' car had broken down. He called the garage man, Eb, who told him that trying to repair the car was just a waste of money. He had a new car to sell, a Forever car. A guy came by just yesterday to talk to Eb about selling them. Yes, they last forever. You can hand them down to your children and grandchildren. They just need gas and tires and a paint job every ten years or so. It cost $1,500 and Eb will give Vickers' $1,000 on his old wreck. Vickers was astonished. He knew it would cost him $2-3,000 for a new car and that it would be a pile of junk that would likely break down the second time you took it out. Simak was taking a potshot at the infamous loss of quality and planned obsolescence that came to define the fifties.

Vickers took a bus to the city for his meeting. The bus stop is in front of the store. It sells only three items: Razor blades, light bulbs and lighters. The bulbs last forever. The razor never gets dull. The lighter never needs flints. He met Flanders there. The old man said there is something going on with these gadgets, and the Forever car, and now a new synthetic carbohydrate food that is being offered free to needy people, and there are more

[27] There is no hint, however, who keeps the garden.

needy people now, put out of work as these new products appear and close down old factories and businesses.

On the bus Vickers had overheard two women talking about the Pretensionist Club. Each member finds a time in history and a character and studies them and pretends they are living in that time and place. They keep a diary and read it during their meetings. Vickers reflected on the emptiness of the lives of that group, insecurity and pure escapism. True, the memory of war and the treat of an even more terrible conflict hung over their heads, but this was "just a moral and mental numbness that one didn't even notice."

His potential client, Crawford, wants Vickers to write a book for him about all the new products and the effect they are having on the economy. The new houses will kill the construction industry and the Forever car the automotive industry. There is a vast complex of warehouses and distributors, but no source of raw materials or manufacturing can be found. The carbohydrates, for example, come out of a small warehouse. The new corporations pay more than their share of taxes and scrupulously follow the law. They register their companies, but the board members can never be found. Crawford wants Vickers to write about them. His group will provide the information, but they need a writer not associated with them to gain credibility. He admits it is a form of propaganda. Vickers turned down Crawford's generous offer on a hunch, a hunch that there was something illogical, even dangerous, about the proposal.

As he and Ann walked along the street after the meeting, they found a store that was selling the new houses. The house sells for a flat $500 per room. It is self-sufficient, solar powered, both heat and electricity. The kitchen comes with appliances, but you have to buy your own furniture. It will have no mice and no bugs, not even mosquitoes. They will tear down and remove your old house for free. A five-room house is $2,500. They will give Vickers $20,000 for his house, yes pay him in cash for the difference. If he wants to add a room or so they will come in, redesign the house entirely, and add the room for $500, flat, per room.

Later, at home, Flanders came for a visit. They talked about the news of the world. The Cold War had been going on for 40 years (which would put the story in the late 1980s and about the end, for us, of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Empire). Flanders observed that there had been a lot of crises but not another war (which was not quite the way it worked out).

Flanders went on to relate that about 90 years ago progress took off at a gallop: the automobile, telephone, motion pictures, flying machine, radio, etc. Then the new physics with Einstein and relativity and all. It was not the first time such a jump occurred, but it was still something different. Flanders said that he believed that somewhere out in space resided a vast reservoir of knowledge. There must be other, more advanced beings. Maybe we didn't have to wait for rockets. Maybe we could use telepathy to contact these other beings. Is that what happened? Look at all these new gadgets.

After Flanders left, Vickers vaguely saw something in the corner of the room. He picked up a paperweight and flung it with good effect. He found a small machine, full of tiny tubes and wires and disks. He thought it must be some sort of spying device. Why had it moved and caught his attention? Too many things had happened that day and he ticked off

a whole list of them in his mind. Flanders, he decided, must know something about what was going on. He went out and headed for Flanders' house. There were people there and the sheriff. Flanders had disappeared. His housekeeper went looking for him after he had returned home and couldn't find him. There was a search but no trace of him was found.

Ann called the next morning wondering what would be next in the new market. She had just found a clothing store on Fifth Avenue with dresses for fifteen cents. They were very nice dresses.

Vickers found a letter in the mailbox from Flanders, apologizing for all the trouble his disappearance had caused. He asked Vickers not to reveal this letter. He offered a word of advice: Take a holiday and walk down the paths he had taken as a boy. Vickers thought about home. He had last visited when his Pa died. He remembered the cornfields, the cows, the white dust of the road, and the old house. He could go back and walk down to the creek and to the fishing hole. But he knew that the hills would seem strange and he would not stay long. He would feel alone. He would also drive by the brick house where Kathleen Preston had lived. For two days he had written nothing. His mind was too full of questions and doubts. There was something, he felt, he had overlooked. So many strange things had suddenly happened to him. He didn't want to go, but was there some abstract symbol that he might find that he had missed that he might find that would allow him to understand the emptiness in himself?"

Then he thought of something. He searched for an old notebook of some twenty years ago. He had written that people would not sit next to him on a bus he took to work. Only when it filled up and there was no other seat would someone sit next to him. He kept looking for a reason why he might repel people but found nothing. At the office no one would come to chat at his desk. When he joined a group, they would quickly break up. When we talked to someone at their desk, they would find an excuse to get away. No one sat with him at lunch. So, he had turned to the solitary trade of writing and he had achieved a measure of success to sustain his solitary habits. He was different and out of that difference he built his life. He had retreated from humanity. He had found peace. He had settled into a rut. Now everything was changing. He felt another hunch, something he couldn't put his finger on, that little voice that was telling him that he had retreated as far as he could go and must turn back.

Eb came banging at Vickers' door and warned him to take off, that a mob had formed down at the Tavern. They had convinced themselves that Vickers had done away with Flanders and were talking themselves into a lynching party. Eb, like Flanders, was an exception to Vickers' rule. They were friends. Eb had brought him a Forever car. Vickers grabbed a few things and took Flanders advice and headed west, back home.

The old hometown was a rundown village[28]. The old place was grown up with weeds. The mountain ash he had planted as a boy was still there. He found a child's top, battered, all its colors gone. He had gotten it for a Christmas long ago and it had been his favorite toy. He'd watch it for hours. And then he remembered there was sort of a fairyland connected to it when he had spun the top. He had gone for a walk there and brought back a

[28] This pretty much describes the village of Millville today; and a lot of other places towards the end of the twentieth century.

flower he gave to his mother. It was wintertime. His parents took the top away from him. But here it was again.

He stopped at the Preston house, a brick house, once proud now empty and decaying. He remembered the walk with Kathleen in the enchanted valley, with thick stands of crab apples in blossom[29]. Twice he had walked that valley, once by virtue of the spinning top and once by virtue of the love for a girl.

The memory of his experience with the top stayed with him. He took the old top with him. He stopped at two dime stores and then a hardware store in search of a new top. They didn't make them anymore. He remembered that he had watched the strips running to converge at the top and wondered where they went. He called Ann and told her about the top. He thought maybe there was something occult about the top, but he didn't know anything about the occult. Ann just laughed at his mysticism.

Vickers decided to repaint the old top. As the paint dried, he went to a diner. The waitress wanted to know if he was going to see the new movie. She lived for them. He looked at her and

> *… saw that she wore the face of Everyone. It was the face of those who did not dare sit down and talk with themselves, the people who could not be alone a minute, the people who were tired without knowing they were tired and afraid without knowing that they were afraid.*

Again, that anxiety, people running away from the uncertainties of life. Escapism, pretense, at the movies or with TV; seeking to be anything but yourself.

Going back to the hotel he found Crawford in his room. Crawford admitted he had picked the lock. Vickers was easy to track down. Crawford's group had tapped Ann's phone. They also had analyzers that could scan people and find those that were different, the Gadget people. But he said he knew Vickers didn't know who he was or what was going on. The new people frightened Crawford. He had an inferiority complex that modern man had become a Neanderthal in comparison to the powers of the new men. That, Vickers thought, must have been what Flanders had talked about, about the interventionists.

Vickers realized that the top was gone. Crawford had spun it and saw it disappear. And then with a blur it came back.

Crawford represents a group of desperate men who wanted to preserve their way of life and that they are willing to fight for it. It was a complicated story about mutants with special powers who had tapped some great source of knowledge and were making things that undermined the old order of Crawford's world. Crawford revealed that his group has a secret weapon. Vickers realized that he was one of the mutants. So was Ann. And so was Flanders.

So, what does it mean to be a mutant? Something here about the power of the hunch. A different standard of life, a better way of knowing right from wrong ,something better than endless, circular reasoning; a form of intuition, of premonition. Or was it just a lot of superstition? Perhaps there is a sixth sense we have yet to develop. And what is it

[29] Crabapple trees and apple blossoms became a major backdrop for Simak stories. They represent something of a polar opposite of his passion for Autumn. Autumn represents something more concrete. Crabapple blossoms represent something more ethereal.

with the extrasensory perception, ability to control matter with the mind, to see into the future. And how did people with these abilities, the mutants, fit into society.

Crawford and friends had already mobilized their attack. Stopping for breakfast, Vickers sees a front-page newspaper article warning the public about the mutants. Mobs were forming. A man had been lynched. As he ate, a mob formed around his Forever car, turned it over and hammer at it.

He managed to retrieve the top from the wreckage and, spinning it, found himself in a vast empty land. It wasn't his fairy valley, but it was Earth. He remembered the article about the many Earths, each a second removed from the next. He decided he had to see if the Preston house was still there in this world. He knew it was to the northwest and that it would take him many days to walk back. He inventoried his pockets, a knife, a few matches and other objects of little value now. As he traveled, he caught fish and scavenged, his clothes turned to rags. He found a giant factory, run by robots that paid him no attention. Giant cargo containers landed and took off. He found a river he believed it to be the Wisconsin River and followed it towards the Mississippi, towards the house[30]. Finally, he saw the great bluffs at the junction of the rivers (my cover photo), familiar, enchanted, ground, crabapples but no longer in bloom, and the path that took him to the Preston house.

At the Preston house, Vickers learned he was an android, an artificial man, a body made of chemicals, shaped by the cunning of a mutant mind. Not a man, not a mutant, merely created by the mutants to serve their ends. The realization grieved him. And Ann was artificial as well.

Vickers fled the Preston house. He met a man, tall, strong, dressed as a farmhand, "but there was nothing of the peasant about this man, but a cheerful, self-sufficiency." He had a bow and arrows and two dead rabbits. His name is Asa Andrews. Yes, he knows it is another Earth. He knows the mutants in the house listen to the stars to glean knowledge. They have laboratories where they work on the ideas, make things.

Andrews led Vickers to a cluster of fine farms and fields. Vickers washed and ate two helpings of dinner and then sat outside with the family for a while. Andrews told Vickers that in his old life he had worked in a factory and lived in a hovel. The factory closed down and he lost his job. He couldn't find another. He went to the carbohydrate people for help. Then the landlord evicted him. The carbohydrate people told him about a new place looking for settlers. He accepted the offer. Here there was free land, plenty of food, robot teachers for the kids and robots to help out with heavy farming work if needed. But the robots weren't much needed as the neighbors helped each other. Doctors came when you were sick. There was no money, no government and no taxes. Andrews told him of a good place for a house, with some good level ground, and a fine young woman looking for a good man to marry. The neighbors would help build the house and get the farm going. Vickers noticed the family had a shelf of good books.

The immigrants lived well. There were no hardships. Just a pastoral life under the benevolence of the mutants who never interfered. It was a place

[30] Towards Millville.

for resting and thinking, for getting thoughts in order, for establishing once again the common touch between Man and Soil, the stage in which was prepared the way for the development of a culture that would be better than the one they had left behind.

Here we have an excellent cameo of Simak's pastoral philosophy and a number of its key principles. And there were other principles. Such as, that human life on Earth was a failure. Something had gone wrong; intelligence and goodness had lost to arrogance and selfishness. The only way to save people is to remove them from the environment that has brought them down, to break the old habits of "hate and greed and killing."

The mutants had a plan. To start, "you must break the world they live in and you must have a plan to break it and after it is broken, you must have a program that leads to a better world." You had to start with the economy[31]. The world's industries were being undermined by cars, light bulbs and razors that last forever, houses that were built for a fraction of what they gave you to tear down the old one, and food and clothing. What do you do with the people who lose their jobs? Relocate them to virgin worlds and give them lives of hope and independence and security. There was no shortage of alternative worlds.

The secret of human progress must have always been mutants. They provided insight and innovation for others to follow. Down through the ages there were those who were more successful in their pursuits, who stood above the herd. But always the mutants were a small minority forced to constraints to cripple their abilities. For being different they were persecuted. Finally, one came along who could listen to the stars and tapped a vast resource of knowledge. One mutant would find another. They would organize. And they would look for a place to hide.

Vickers explored to the gnawing discord in his soul. He was an android. Mutants at least were human, but androids were artificial. What hurt the most was that he was being used. He had to find out why. To do so he would have to return to the big house, the Preston place.

Hezekiah, the robot butler, showed him to a room and brought him a nightcap. Horton Flanders came in and explained to Vickers that what had happened to him had been planned. He had been manipulated into breaking out of his rut—to get him moving. He had to learn to listen to his hunches. Vickers hunches were not working too well because he didn't give them a chance. He was still relying on mechanical reasoning. Vickers knew Horton was right. He'd known that he needed to spin the top on the porch of the Preston house but hadn't.

The good news is that Vickers is not an android. He started life as a human. His life essence had been transferred to an android body and when his job was done, he would be returned to his human body. The mutants had gotten around the manpower shortage with robots and androids, splitting themselves into many parts. Horton Flanders was also an android, one of Vickers' 'split' selves.

Flanders told Vickers that he had more than one talent but that all were latent, that he didn't know he had them and now was the time to awaken them. There was also one

[31] I am reminded of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* at this point. This book came out five years after *Ring Around the Sun*. Rand wrote about an unappreciated productive elite who withdrew from the world and their businesses and worked to accelerate the inevitable failure of a sick society. Rand, unlike Simak, simply left the world in ruins.

more of him but wouldn't tell him who. Vickers thought it must be Ann Carter, also now in an android body. Flanders told Vickers that his parent's bodies were in suspended animation against the day immortality was achieved. Best of all, when the job was completed, Kathleen Preston will be there, and they had a good chance to achieve immortality. The dream he had carried for twenty years, of seeing her again, would come true. After Flanders left, Vickers looked out the window at the moonlit valley that had now regained its enchantment.

A world of immortal people would need the endless space of the alternative worlds. They would have time to develop the vast knowledge that was available to them. They would master science and technology but also culture and the spiritual nature of man.

For now, however, mutants were but a step or two ahead of the rest of the human race. Their margin was thin, their numbers few. They were the forerunners who had a slim chance to help others begin to move forward, to help the human race to evolve into the mutant state.

Vickers remembered that Crawford had told him he had a secret weapon to use against the mutants. That weapon was war. It was destruction and poverty. Crawford would use the worst of the human condition to bring the world down before the mutants could complete their work.

Crawford wants war because during war the government controls all labor and industry and resources. It controls every aspect of production and distribution. It would give him power over the mutant industries. What Crawford has planned is a mutually agreed upon war, orchestrated by the antagonists so that not too much damage is done, just a city destroyed here and there.

Crawford had to be stopped. It couldn't be done by conventional means, not by slogans of peace and brotherhood, not by conferences seeking treaties. There was a malignancy in the human condition that must be excised by whatever means necessary. To do that he would have to develop his mutant capabilities. He must innovate.

Vickers could see that the real cause was the "mechanical culture of clanking machines." Machines and technology could provide comfort but not security and not justice. It was a culture that could work with metals and chemistry and create gadgetry. But it knew nothing about human beings, cared nothing about the lives it consumed, the hopes and dreams it killed.

Vickers thought up a plan. He asked Flanders for some of the settlers to go back to the first Earth. He believed that the Pretensionists were ripe for their purpose. They are ripe for belief. They were natural escapists who could be mobilized into a preaching campaign to return to the simplicity and uncomplicated living that many of them sought in history. New settlers will be coming in droves. Flanders said they would be ready.

Vickers found that he no longer needed the top to travel between worlds. He simply wills himself from one to another. Returning to the first Earth, in the Preston house, he remembered his parent's poverty, just a mile away, in ragged clothing, reading books by a dim kerosene lamp. A masquerade. They were a listening post for the mutants.

He drove across the country. The news was bad. War was close. People he listened to at his stops didn't understand how things could get so bad so quickly. But they were being mobilized to fight, "them Commies." They didn't really know the cause. They were being conditioned to blame, to hate, the enemy. But there was hope, there was something else being whispered about a new life that even the newspapers were beginning to pick up.

Crawford had been able to track Vickers down and invited him to his office. Crawford tried to talk reason, at least as he saw it. They talked of the accelerating events and of people disappearing in larger and larger numbers. Crawford knows something of what the mutants are up to and he was frightened. He told Vickers that if they couldn't make a deal, he would see him dead. Vickers refused and left and took Ann into an alternative world where Crawford could not follow them.

Vickers made a film and visited Crawford at a meeting of his board. With Crawford lured out of the room, Vickers showed the film of the spinning top and by the time Crawford got back all the board members had all disappeared into alternative worlds.

In one of the Simakian twists, the end of the story is that Crawford realized that he too had such a top and had himself visited a fairy world. Vickers realizes that Crawford is another of his alternative selves. Simak ended the book with this enigmatic and compassionate line: "Vickers touched the big man's arm. 'Come on, friend,' he said softly. 'Or should I call your brother.'"

A Philosophy of Ring Around the Sun

Ring Around the Sun starts with a fiction writer living in a nice, small, quiet village; a Simak-sized place. Jay Vickers is living the nice, quiet, settled life we find in so many of Simak's characters. That is before the onset of a sudden crisis. The season is summer, rare for Simak. The garden is in full bloom but there is death as well as life in that well-ordered realm of nature. There is a communion between vibrant life and the old dying tree. It's a natural progression and a continuity of life. Here again we see a sense of the elemental in Simak, a consciousness that makes him unexcelled and rarely equaled among the environmentalists.

For those unfamiliar with the post-war (World War II) boom, it was an age of planned obsolescence and notoriously shoddy production. This was during the early Cold War, at the time of the war in Korea. The Russians then had atomic bombs and long-range bombers just like the United States. There were no ICBMs yet. Students in public schools learned "Duck and Cover." The Civil Defense and bomb shelters were a part of life. Hardware stores carried Geiger counters. It was a troubling and unsettled time.

Vickers was disappointed in the way he saw people respond to stress. Through him Simak expressed a critical attitude towards escapist pretense (role playing) and submersion to the movie (make that soap opera a few years later) culture. Vickers detected a strong undercurrent of fear and anxiety and there were those who not only exploited this uneasiness but also nurtured it.

The world was falling apart but there is something new and important going on. When Vickers car broke down, he was offered more for a trade-in than the cost of a new car that will last forever. He found a new store that sold razors and light bulbs and lighters that

also last forever. He found a store in the city that built houses for a flat fee of $500 per room and give more for the old house, which was torn down, than the cost of a new five room home with appliances.

Vickers was offered a job to write a book critical of these products that had undermining the economy. Vickers had a hunch there was something wrong and refused the offer. This pitched him into the conflict. He fled to his hometown (Millville, Wisconsin) fleeing for his life again, and as fate would have it, was flung into an alternative world.

Here Simak introduced a quest theme that he fully developed in a number of books over the years down to his last. Vickers is alone on a prairie world. He has nothing but a pocket knife and a few matches. He shows no panic, just a simple conviction that he will make out. His hunch is to just keep on his journey, now on foot, to his old home. He knows the direction to travel and sets out to find the junction of the Wisconsin and Mississippi. After weeks of trekking, during which he found a robot factory which he can guess is one of the sources of the everlasting products in his world, he returned to home and found a group of families settled, successful subsistence farmers, supported by the Mutants, who provide medical and social support, such as schools, and robots to help with the work (which they find the settlers can usually do without). It is an idyllic pastoral world.

There, Vickers learned that a neighbor, who had gone missing, by the name of Flanders, is the leader of a group of human mutants who have created a conspiracy to destroy the powers that are using politics and economics, including the threat of an atomic war, to control the Earth to their own ends. The mutants are offering sanctuary to those who are left jobless and destitute, driven from their homes and hungry. As in *City*, there are endless worlds for the displaced to settle. In their new homes the mutants will help humanity seek a second chance by shedding the material culture and bad habits, by giving up firearms, by living close to the Earth and with each other. Vickers also learned that he has an android body, that he is an artificial human being created for a purpose to which he must awaken.

The mutants are human beings who have developed paranormal abilities. As Simak had already written in *City*, there have always been mutants. The great geniuses and leaders and achievers had been mutants. Many mutants, because of their oddness, had been persecuted. But now the mutants have organized and for nearly a century working to save the human race from its fatal flaws[32]. Some, like Vickers, can travel between alternative worlds. Some can listen in on the stars, a theme Simak would elaborate on in subsequent books. From what they have learned, they built the new technology that offered commodities for little or nothing and deliberately undermined the political-economic power mongers on Earth. Simak gave his story the theme of the pursuit of our essential humanity: to understand ourselves, our universe and step-by-step come to an understanding of a "Universal God." Vickers set out again on the path of devising an alternative 'religion' as a means of the salvation of the human condition.

Meanwhile, Vickers' nemesis, the gross potential warlord named Crawford, has marshaled the resources of governments and escalated the threat of war to mobilize a battle against the mutants on Earth. He is fighting back, and he is winning. He intends to

[32] There are TV series, like the 4400 (2008), and movies like the X-Men series, that have developed a similar theme more recently.

sacrifice a “few” cities to atomic attack to consolidate the political powers on the Earth to defeat the mutants. He suffers a paranoiac inferiority complex because he fears the powers of the mutants. He wants to preserve the status quo, a condition which the mutants believe humankind can not long survive. Vickers mission, the reason he was created, is to defeat Crawford. He does that by developing the motif Simak began with *Time and Again*, in this case a single, clearly defined power, The Hunch. Vickers has spent his life unknowingly avoiding the power of this gift and now he knows that he must, like Asher Sutton, fully develop it as both a weapon to defeat a mortal enemy and as a means to lead humanity to salvation.

The story draws to a dramatic climax and several surprising twists to a sudden conclusion. The talented leaders of Crawford’s group are, of course, by simple virtue of their ability, mutants themselves. Vickers must subliminally ‘convert’ them, thereby depriving Crawford of his power. Crawford himself is a mutant android. Happy ending: Ahead lies only endless opportunity, benignly guided, for the entire human race.

One of the really odd twists of this story is that Vickers is one of three androids that have been created out of his personality. He has no clue that he is anything but just different. Vickers becomes a reclusive writer. Crawford is equally ignorant of his true origin. Crawford is the nemesis of the mutants. This of course makes no sense. So, what is the story Simak is telling? Perhaps that we can only know good in contrast to evil, and that both qualities may lie in each of us.

Joe the mutant is a bad dude. He is antisocial. In those stories the trait seems inherited and shared by all mutants. In *Time and Again*, Asher Sutton, who is given the kinds of powers Joe was born with, takes just the opposite course. Sutton had latent talents that had to be developed. So too did Vickers and Crawford. What it comes down to is a matter of choice, the course of life we each experience, the opportunities offered, and the ability to pick up on some small nuance of feeling, of intuition, of a hunch. There is a subtle but profound philosophy at work here, Simak’s philosophy.

Chapter Six: Interlude

With *Ring Around the Sun* Simak began a deeper excursion into human paranormal potential. He attributed these abilities to human genetic mutations. There is nothing new about biological mutation. Mutants had appeared throughout history but now, in his stories, they seemed to be in larger numbers, organized and using their paranormal talents to develop new technologies. The mutants are working to restore and advance the wellbeing of all humankind. Their new enterprises are undermining business and commerce and have caused great alarm in the ranks of the power elite – a group that seeks to rule the world lead by Crawford. But the world has already gone awry. The rulers have already lost control and people are suffering. The ruling elite is now not only threatened by the mutant's growing powers but suffer a psychopathological inferiority complex. Crawford even facetiously calls himself a "Neanderthal." To maintain their power, they will use any means to obstruct the mutants including orchestrating a global war. They are willing to sacrifice a city or so to an atomic attack to mobilize the masses against the mutants. Ironically what the mutants offer is not only progress but survival, a progress that transcends a meaningless, mechanical and fearful life that drives so many into despair and 'pretense.' In the process, however, they are prepared to totally destroy the economic foundations of a world civilization forever at odds with itself. In return they offer new worlds, new and peaceful lives and the prospect of immortality for all.

While the question of mutants is mute, Simak's description of the world as it was to become has a chilling likeness to today. With the 1960s came a sense of transformative change. If faded in a decade or so. The cold war had a way to go. So, where next?

Simak had by this time well established his pastoral genre. We see plot elements that will recurring in many stories. He had become a leading light, if not so acknowledged, in a growing social attitude about life. Knowingly or not his tone reflected the existential philosophy of despair that reached full flower after World War II and as the Cold War deepened. But there was also an emerging movement that spoke of a vast, untapped human potential. It was about this time that a new, humanistic psychology emerged, something about a new and higher state of consciousness. A popular idea was that humans use only a tenth of their brain capacity. At that time there were several social heroes and heroines in the world, like Albert Schweitzer and Gandhi; great souls with brilliant, luminous characters and a spiritual drive, who gave up wealth and comfort to serve humanity.

Julian Huxley, grandson of Darwin's 'bulldog,' Thomas Henry Huxley, a biologist by training, became a leader in world education, serving the United Nations, to uplift humanity and to remove the cause of war. His brother, Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, and other novels about the dark side of human nature and progress, was also publicly advocating the pursuit of higher, and latent, human potential. Aldous wrote a number of both fiction and non-fiction books on the subject. He inspired many including two young Stanford graduates, Michael Murphy and Richard Price, to found the Esalen institute, a place that has fostered an energetic pursuit of the human potential since the 1960s, a place 'mutants' find comforting, and a place to awaken latent potential, including the paranormal, about which Murphy has written with authority.

Ralph Borsodi, who decades before had advocated "flight from the city," and his colleague Mildred Loomis, launched their "Green Revolution." They too were seeking a post-industrial, pastoral world in which each individual could develop their latent talents. I have written their story in my *The Essential Ralph Borsodi* (link[33]). Simak has long been an inspiration for my pursuit of this vision.

Tolkien also popularized a pastoral society, that of the Hobbits. He had a well-established prejudice against a failing and violent industrial world.

Simak didn't publish another novel for nearly a decade after *Ring Around the Sun*. His next novel, *Time is the Simplest Thing* (1961), was a very different story but one that delved deeply into extraordinary human ability and some themes touched on with *Ring Around the Sun*. Again, we have a number of individuals gifted with paranormal abilities who work for Project Fishhook. These people are able to project their consciousness, and a small 'robot,' into the far reaches of space in search of knowledge. The lead character, Shep Blaine, is a 'traveler' who meets an ancient creature, a treasure trove of galactic knowledge, who trades minds with him. Contaminated, Blaine fled and set out across a desolate landscape hounded by prejudice against paranormals. He meets other mutants with paranormal abilities and thwarts a global plot to suppress them using the knowledge he acquired from the mind trade. In the process he opened an alternate world for the mutants to settle, a world to which they move with no more than the simplest implements and a few personal effects to start a new life free from persecution and where they can pursue their potential unhindered. I am not going to summarize the story or unpack the philosophical content of *Time is the Simplest Thing* but recommend the book as one of my much-read favorites.

During this ten-year interlude Simak was awarded two prestigious awards, indeed the first science fiction writer to be awarded both. The first was the British International Fantasy Award for Best Fiction,[34] for City. The second was the Hugo Award for best novelette for "The Big Front Yard." His awards had greatly enlarged his audience and his numerous short stories[35] of this time made him one of the top half-dozen science fiction writers then working.

During that decade of the 1950s, one of the formative decades of the post-war era, Simak was promoted to Chief of the Copy Desk at the Minneapolis Star newspaper. His job was to select and trim the wire copy from around the world "and present it to the busy public" in terms he judged "of how much impact [the story] will have on the reader's personal life." He was developing both his skills as a news writer and an acute sense of what the reading market wanted.

Simak also began to travel the country to interview scientists about the newsworthy events related to scientific global exploration and the International Geophysical Year (IGY). He delved deeply into and wrote award winning columns and feature articles about science, medicine, archeology, paleontology, ecology and sociological topics. Becker's bibliography lists some 130 non-fiction articles by the time Simak retired in 1976, some of which were

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[33] *The Essential Ralph Borsodi*: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VKsp7zOBs3vegHH4OM-frI4HoSQj6a5V/edit

[34] J. R. R. Tolkien was also a recipient of this award.

[35] A philosophical analysis of which I will leave to future scholars.

published in hardback collections. From a country kid guiding a plow behind a horse, he became one of the best-informed journalists in the world on topics such as the space race and atomic energy. But he also delved deeply into natural history and the appearance of human beings. He used much of what he learned to shape the plots of his stories – stories that sought an alternative world, an alternative way of life, worlds in which science had often failed.

Simak staked out and cultivated his own unique style of science fiction and thereafter rarely left its bounds. He was, as we see in the above stories, beginning to find fault in the course of the modern world and its dehumanizing effects. He was decades ahead of Alvin Toffler's best seller, *Future Shock* in his understanding on the taxing effect of modern technology on the human nervous system. I am not entirely clear how he became interested in the paranormal and mutant potential, but he obviously saw that there were alternative routes to human development, other routes than technology, modernization and the consequent erosion of the deep character that distinguished the common people of his youth and early career[36]. Those simple people and solid values became interwoven with the development of exceptional abilities. Those abilities, I would point out, were already found in folklore and myth. It's sometimes called "the hex" or witchcraft, but the supernatural is very real to people leading a less complicated rural existence[37].

Long before the counterculture Simak rebelled against 'establishment' values motivated by little more than greed. In *Ring Around the Sun* he satirized planned obsolescence and the shoddy products that came to define the fifties. Ironically he rejected modern technological progress while sending wave after wave of 'listeners' to the stars to gather scientific and technical knowledge. But increasingly the knowledge he sought was not gadgets but rather values and insights into life and the potential destiny of life and intelligence. More importantly I believe he sought knowledge applied on a human scale. Since humanity had not found their own way, perhaps some other race among the stars could guide us. It took a special development of inherent potential, telepathy in particular, to tap those distant minds.

Simak clearly saw the conflict between the prevalent materialistic values of American society and what I will loosely call 'exceptional" abilities. The rigorous intellect, led by science, is prejudiced against religion, myth and especially fairy. There was, however, a strong undercurrent of popular interest in the paranormal during the fifties, indeed during the first half of the twentieth century. There were popular organized groups like the Theosophists and Rosicrucians and many others. This was perhaps too much of the occult for Simak. Perhaps he, like Vickers, "didn't have an occult bone in his body." Serious research into the paranormal was always a little tarnished by the zany fringe. Sociologists and psychologists often attributed the interest in the paranormal to an escapist trend, in what Simak called "Pretense." It was, just as Simak described it, an age of deep uncertainty. There was a considerable religious revival at the time. I suspect Simak found established religion wanting in the same degree he found establishment business and government wanting.

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[36] People very much like those I grew up with.

[37] A professor of mine, Hans Sebald wrote a book on witchcraft he developed from a study of ancestral practices in rural Germany where he grew up. His grandmother was a legendary "white witch," a healing woman. Commonplace "psychic" powers were accepted in the rural South where I grew up.

There was also a rising tide of UFO sightings, also on the fringe. Nonetheless, money went to scientists to set up radio listening programs to try to tap signals from distant civilizations. Most scientists, as well as science fiction writers, at that time before the planetary probes, even before the first satellites, believed that there was life on Mars and Venus, and possibly civilizations, probably now in ruins since we couldn't contact them.

Overall, the fifties were an incredibly dynamic and unsettling period. David Halberstam, among others, wrote penetrating books about this age that many of us of the boomer generation grew up in. It was the early days of the Cold War and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. I suspect the Crawford character in *Ring Around the Sun* was based on Herman Kahn, a contemporary military strategist who wrote of the "unthinkable" dimensions of nuclear war. Kahn was also a large man. Ironically, it was a politician of Simak's generation, California Governor Ronald Reagan, several decades later President of the United States, who idolized the same 'main street' values Simak wrote into his novels, yet escalated the Cold War – fortunately to a more peaceful resolution with the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and pushed the country into an era of globalization. Mainstreet America was fading rapidly.

I have no doubt that much of my fondness for Simak comes out of my own 'main street' upbringing. As Simak and Derleth, who lived upstream on the Wisconsin River from the Simak farm, and many other writers so clearly understood, we are all products of the soil out of which we grew. I started reading Simak while living in that, doubtlessly idealized, past. My memories are filled with Simak type characters. Like Enoch Wallace, whom we shall shortly meet, I lay in dark fields and gazed into a night sky ablaze with stars and the luminous band of the Milky Way and wondered what might be out there. Like Simak's characters, in those days before Sputnik, I could travel to those stars only in my imagination, and I did. Like Simak and many of his characters, my value system was already being shaken by not only the political events of the day but the material progress that drove them and that in just a few short years washed away that 'cultural topsoil' in which I grew.

I literally read through the town library in search of answers. Simak's books were there. Like Simak I experience a crisis in faith. At one time I read my *Bible* from cover to cover, then read it again. "Where are the Christians?" I asked. I didn't see many really "Christlike" people. They weren't saints. But they were down-to-earth. The people around me were mostly good and honest and honorable people. Some of the best of them, I discovered, professed faiths other than Christianity, or at least Protestant Christianity, and were often looked down on for their beliefs despite the evident quality of their character. Go figure. A select few of them, albeit very human, remind me of Simak's story "The Sitters," one of my favorites. It was they who gave shape to the community through the nurturing of youth. They did it unobtrusively. Some were teachers, some scout leaders, some were neighbors, some kin; but they all shared an essentially simple, pragmatic view of life.

The world against which Simak dissented was a continuation of that which Emerson and Thoreau had already begin to react against more than a century earlier; the same to which Muir and Burroughs and the early naturalists objected, and which environmentalists, some of whom shared Simak's rural roots, fought a rear-guard action against. If the city symbolized for Simak all that was twisted and wrong in modern culture, the countryside "came to represent for him not a retreat so much as a return to what civilization ought

never to have left: A world of neighbors and neighborhoods rather than ghettos." It was also, increasingly, a philosophy of the universality of life. Simak began to organize the cosmos into neighborhoods, and he began to establish principles such as, "We are never alone," as Sutton said. And if we are not alone in terms of an inner partner, then we share something with all other intelligences in the universe. We are only a part of the destiny of intelligence and we might as well be good neighbors.

Simak maintained his own small and well-tended plot. He came to value men and women untainted by civilization, people in which wisdom accumulated. His characters got along well with aliens typically unexpectedly encountered. They were men and women who accrued "worth" rather than technical enrichment, who developed both intelligence and the heart. He came to believe that humanity must have a purpose and that purpose must be found if for no other reason that our salvation, that is, our survival, depended on it. Simak didn't see technology as the key to human progress. He saw it as a mistake. A favorite quote of his is this:

> *If mankind were to continue in other than the present barbarism, a new path must be found, a new civilization based on some other than technology*

He saw much horror coming out of it, especially after the atomic bombs dropped on Japan.

The *City* stories were written over a period of seven years, but they had a unity from which Simak was able to develop a book, interwoven by doggish editors and commenters who passed on the stories of a mythical and improbable race called Man. Those stories depicted humankind's decline into darkness. In the forward to the 1976 edition of *City*: Chris Morgan wrote:

> *Looking back at the disillusion out of which the city stories were written, now deepened by the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Simak suggests that 'Perhaps, deep inside myself, I was trying to create a world in which I and other disillusioned people could, for a moment, take refuge from the world in which we lived.'*

Perhaps it was his increasing editorial immersion in the news of the world, in his intimate daily involvement in the breaking political and scientific events that defined his age, that darkened his vision.

Clareson pointed out two human failures that Simak wrote about. First was our

> *… preoccupation with a mechanical civilization" and second an "inability to understand and appreciate the thoughts and viewpoints of another man, … a condition resulting in man's terrible isolation with in his own limited consciousness.*

In the *City* tales "'Man,' was running a race … engaged in a mad scramble for power and knowledge but nowhere is there any hint of what he meant to do with it once he had attained it.'" In Simak, Man's surrender to the machine exposed a "basic lack of character." Clareson said he thought Simak believed that, "'Without at least broad purpose, without certain implanted stability, no culture can survive, and this is his lesson.'" Simak had too much faith in humanity to completely give up.

Much science fiction sought to create credible worlds of scientific progress but there were other writers who questioned the inevitability of progress such as Wells, Keller, Williamson, and Asimov. Wells wrote some of the earliest apocalyptic science fiction, even conceiving tanks, aerial warfare and the atomic bomb in 1913. Asimov set his *Foundation*

trilogy in the collapse of a great galactic civilization. Frank Herbert's *Dune* epic begins with revolt against the thinking machine. Simak had to find a saving grace in humanity, something to halt and stabilize our rapid decline. That stability came out of country life and values.

Simak felt he had lost something after *City*. But he came back from his sense of desolation. He began to seek to overcome the sense of individual isolation and insignificance. He addressed the problem of a universe completely indifferent to us, not hostile, but just not concerned, not even noticing us. He could not accept the meaninglessness of human existence that was finding popular expression in philosophy and literature. *Ring Around the Sun* and *Time is the Simplest Thing* both begin to address an alternative human potential, but he was about to make an important breakthrough with an award-winning novel that unfolded a plot that would rescue humanity and give us back our destiny. In 1963 he published *Way Station*, a book that earned him a second Hugo, beating out, to his great surprise, Frank Herbert's now classic *Dune*.

Chapter Seven: Way Station

The four novels Simak wrote between *City*/*Time and Again* in the early fifties and *Way Station* in 1964, represent an interesting variety of plots and styles. Simak had reached his full stride as a writer but he was clearly still exploring his craft of storytelling. One novel, *The Trouble with Tycho*, was an outright space opera. *They Walked Like Men* seemed a satirical condemnation of unethical, money-grubbing business practices. In more venomous detail, Simak made a rounding condemnation of the political and economic climate of his day. But he had already started that lament eight years earlier with *Ring Around the Sun*.

Way Station, in my opinion, represents a great leap forward in Simak's pastoral science fiction. For the second time we are taken back to the Simak/Wiseman family farm in Millville township, Grant County, Wisconsin. For the second time we go to the bluff. To a degree only approached in some of the scenes in *City*, we become deeply engaged with the natural world. And it its more than a nature walk. It is a penetrating engagement with the natural world and through it the essence of the human condition.

We don't know what Simak read for his own edification. He was a private man. He did keep journals but they are in private hands for now. I don't know if he kept the detailed accounts of experiences as he describes with Enoch Wallace and will again. It is, however, obvious to me, that Simak is himself thinking very deeply about the nature of life. Perhaps fiction, a media that has suited other thoughtful writers, was his way of expressing his views.

The Story

Simak opened *Way Station* on a battlefield during the American Civil War. The scene is graphic. The roar of the guns has ceased but smoke drifts like fog. In the stunning aftermath of the battle there seems a moment of silence and then come the cries of wounded and dying men. In the midst of the battlefield stood Enoch Wallace. He was alive but should not have been. His musket was shattered, the ground muddy with blood. He had survived one more battle but many others had not:

> *There was wheat that never would be harvested, trees that would not bloom when spring came round again, and on the slope of the land that ran up the ridge the words unspoken and deeds undone and the sodden bundles that cried aloud the emptiness and waste of death.*

This may be Gettysburg. Wisconsin infantrymen fought a bitter battle there. Simak's grandfather skirmished in Arkansas and Texas and the old man's sword hung proudly over Simak's desk at home.

We meet Enoch Wallace in 1964. He is 124 years old. He looks 30. He was born on a farm near Millville, Wisconsin April 22, 1840 and he still lives in the house, near the bluff that rises over the Wisconsin River. It is the site of the Simak farm. It is the right place, a remote place where a man might be forgotten; a rough, backwoods place where the farms are poor and people mind their own business. Enoch never leaves the property. His only regular contact with the outside world is the mailman, Winslowe Grant, who brings him the simple things that he needs and upon whom Enoch bestows gifts, gifts that Grant does not know are from the stars; and Lucy Fisher, a deaf-mute young woman who will play a lead

role in this story. Wallace subscribes to journals and newspapers and buys books. He pays for them with money he gets from precious jewels, you may call it his galactic payroll, he sends to a dealer every few years. And he buys dozen-lots of record books and pints of ink.

Enoch lives in the house in which he was born and raised. It is trim and neat with no peeling paint. But it is impenetrable. The grayed wooden walls feel as solid as stone and a knife won't scratch them. Even the foundation stones have a smooth, slick feel. The windows are black. His house is, in fact, Earth's Way Station, the sole link to a galactic transportation system, and he is its keeper. He leaves his house for a walk, an hour every day. He has walked the same route for a century, first across the slope to the point of rock that overlooks the Wisconsin River, then through the woods to a spring, then to the mailbox. He walks like a soldier, tall, erect, a rugged man. He is never in a hurry. He carries a rifle. Each day he meets Grant at the mailbox and chats for a moment.

Sometime after the end of the war, and the death of his father, Enoch had been sitting on the front porch, on a summer day, with a thunderstorm threatening, when a stranger walked up and asked for a drink of water. As they sat on the porch and talked, the stranger told him that he had been looking for a certain man, one who had looked and wondered at the stars, like Enoch had done many a night, laying in the field near the house. They talked of the stars and as they talked the stranger shed his false, human, face and revealed beneath an alien, shocking, countenance, but with luminous, intelligent eyes that caught Enoch's attention. The stranger had ended his quest; he had found the man he wanted, the keeper of the way station on Earth. Enoch named the alien Ulysses, in honor of the Greek Ulysses, who strayed far into alien lands.

The house had been transformed. The interior was glutted, except for the original stone fireplace which Enoch insisted on keeping. Much of the house and a giant basement dug below it had been filled with the mechanism of the galactic transfer station, but a corner was reserved for a living space for himself. That space was filled with books and journals and his record books, and artifacts – numerous gifts from travelers. Most travelers came only once but some had stopped numerous times and with these Enoch had made many close friendships over the years.

The record books are filled with notes about visitors to the way station, travelers with a little time to kill. Some of the travelers have little to tell. Some he can't communicate with at all. But others share a universal language and a love of conversation and they tell him about themselves, their worlds and of the life of the vast galactic civilization. He maintained a file of index cards that gave him ready access to his notes. Using a statistical system he learned from a traveler from Mizar, he has composed a chart of events on Earth. The system allows him to organize the disparate bits of information he has gleaned from his reading to plot the path of the progress, and perils, of life on our troubled planet. Our future is perilous.

Simak takes us for a walk with Enoch. There are two things going on in Enoch's reverie. The first is his (Simak's?) personal love of the place. The second is, in a sense, "spiritual." The Earth is man's home, seemingly made for him. But it is also home for the animals around him, the fox, owl, weasel, snake, fish, "for all the other teeming life that filled the air and earth and water."

Enoch muses about all the other beings who visit him. They never leave the station, its purpose concealed. He yearned to tell the world of the wonders he had witnessed. He wanted to tell the world that we are not alone. It is in this scene that Enoch walks to a rock outcrop overlooking the Wisconsin River and ponders that ancient landscape, one which the glaciers did not touch and transform as they did all the surrounding regions.

If you look at a Google image of the last ice age you will see something extraordinary. There is an island in that sea of ice, that scourged the earth to bedrock, which it did not touch. The Simak farm is roughly in the middle of it. That land is, in fact, ancient and untouched. Simak knew this. It was a geological "accident" that defined the bluff topography on the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers.

In *City* and in *Time and Again*, we get a sense of this place, or of Simak's sense of place. In book after book, story after story, we take this walk; sometimes on other worlds. But with Way Station he infuses that little plot of ground with something different. Why is "ancient" important? What have those waters witnessed that tell us the story of the Good Earth which was made for Man?

There is a sense of the eternal in much that Simak wrote across the span of his career. We've looked at some of it and there is a lot more to come. That sense of the eternal is something that draws me to Simak.

Enoch is thinking of the fairy quality of the land:

> *The far look and the clear air and the feeling of detachment that touched almost on greatness of the spirit. As if this were a special place, one of those special places that each man must seek for himself, and count himself as lucky if he ever found it, for there were those who sought and never found it. And worst of all, there were even those who never hunted for it.*

Simak introduces us to Lucy Fisher, a young deaf-mute woman Enoch frequently encounters on his walks. She lived with her family in a house down on the river. She held on her finger a butterfly, one wing crumpled. But as he watched, the wing became straight and firm. Lucy was radiating with an "almost holy look on her face." She was a creature of the woods, a part of them, he thought. The butterfly stretched its wings and took to the air.

He wished he could talk to her. There was a common sign language in the galaxy, and he had thought often about teaching it to her. It was a tool that had been carefully refined over millennia. Like Juwain's philosophy, it enabled a vast diversity of entities to effectively communicate with each other; a quality lacking on Earth.

Even without speech Enoch and Lucy understood each other. Both shared a sense of loneliness. They had a rapport with the natural world. They shared an insight experienced by few others. There is an enchantment here, perhaps we could call it magic.

On arriving at the mailbox, Enoch found that Winslowe had a gift for him. Over the years Enoch had provided him many pieces of exotic wood never seen on Earth, gifts from travelers. Winslowe carved wood and he had carved a statue of Enoch, walking alone, with his rifle. It looked like he was walking into the wind. It was a beautiful piece of art. As they parted, Winslowe acknowledged his acceptance of Enoch's difference. In this remote part of the world, he said, all that mattered was that people got along. Too bad you couldn't say that about the world.

Winslowe knew Grant didn't age. So did the postman before him and before that. Wallace had remained young because the station blocked the aging process. He aged only on his walks and when he sat on the porch to watch a lovely sunset. He could easily live a thousand years or more. The station provided his every need. At another station was stored patterns of the Earth products he used, and they could be materialized at will. The walls of the station blocked radio and T. V. Only his walks and his meetings with Winslowe and Lucy kept him human and in contact with the world. He had the galaxy at his fingertips. But he could not turn his back on the Earth, for which he felt a compelling love. He believed that as a Man he must have a sense of belonging to something and this world was his. The galaxy was just too vast to belong to.

Enoch sat at his desk and thought about what Winslowe had said. The Earth was in political turmoil. His Mizar chart predicted a global nuclear war soon. The evidence had steadily accumulated. A persisting pattern was there, and it was going to be bad. This warlike attitude barred the Earth from the galactic federation; you have to be at least partially civilized.

There was another form of "human" contact. Just then, two figures had appeared, Mary, dressed for the 1860s, and David Ransome, dressed as a Union officer in blue and with a belted saber. Enoch had created them from a technology he had learned from one of the travelers long ago. They had come frequently over the years for conversation. At first, they had come only when he called them but later they had come on their own.

They talked about the matter that was worrying Enoch. In comparison to the people of the galaxy, humans were immature. They talked about the galactic concept of religion. Enoch wasn't sure it was a religion. It was based on knowledge rather than faith. It's based on a force just like those that make up the physical universe. That force is like gravity, something not material but something fundamental. The human race is simply out of touch with it and lacking knowledge, merely grasping for something called "faith" that goes back to the stone age.

There is a device that was built eons ago that Enoch has heard about called the "Talisman." It permits its custodian to contact the universal spiritual force; something that permeates the galaxy. It is more than a machine. It involves psychic principles. It could be operated only by a rare few individuals who were sensitive enough to attune to it. It was carried from planet to planet by the keeper. Each person who came near it could contact the spiritual force. To me, it sounds like something akin to Asher Sutton and his unique engagement with Destiny. Again, Simak is looking for something to replace human religion, something that requires a greater racial maturity than we have.

There were so many things out there that could benefit humanity if he could share them. For example, a behavioral math from Arcturus by which societies could be engineered. A biology for colonizing crazy planets from Andromeda which sounds like the machine that transformed humans and dogs into Lopers on Jupiter in *City*. There was a mental engineering from Manakalinen III for treatment of mental disturbances. There were medicines and drugs that could cure all of Earth's diseases.

Among his frequent visitors and closest friends were the Hazers—bipedal beings surrounded by a glow—a spiritual aura. One group came many times and he had learned

much from them. And once an old philosopher of their race died in the middle of a conversation. After consulting with Galactic Central Enoch had buried the body near his mother and father and erected a stone that he inscribed in the Hazer language.

Mary and David were themselves another science, one for generating illusions of fully interactive personalities that stemming from the thaumaturgist of Alphard XXII. They had no physical substance. This was now the issue at hand. Enoch had loved Mary from the first, indeed created her from the memory of a young woman who had died of diphtheria while he was away at war whom he might have married and another, an aristocratic southern belle whom he had seen only in passing, beautiful and proud and defiant in defeat, she too now long gone to the grave. David was the dashing union officer Enoch had one time dreamed to be, a fine specimen of the gentleman warrior of his age. They were interrupted by a message that another Hazer was coming. And so was Ulysses.

As they say, the plot is thickening, at a breakneck pace. Like the plot in *Ring Around the Sun* Simak builds to a sudden and unexpected climax that completely unsettles the quiet life of the character

Enoch went out to sit on the porch. He could see the bluffs of the river to the west and the Iowa hills beyond (cover photo). Yes, these minutes outside counted but he did not feel the need to horde them to extend the span of his life. Lucy came running. Her father had slashed her back with a bullwhip. Enoch took her inside the station then went out to confront the father. The father explained that he didn't mind her simple magic, like curing warts, but using it on dogs and people was too much. She had used her powers to stop the dogs from harassing a raccoon that had been trapped. Then she did the same to her brother when he tried to interfere. Enoch let him break an ax trying to get into the house. This incident, he knew, would bring attention to him.

Inside the station Lucy picked up a stacked pyramid of spheres and somehow activated it, turning it into a glowing mass of lights, once dull, now, in her hands, a thing of splendor. At that time Ulysses arrived. He entered the room hesitantly, but Lucy was completely unafraid of him. Ulysses brought bad news. The body of the Hazer, the old Vegan philosopher Enoch had buried, was missing from the grave and the Vegans knew it. It has created a galactic incident. The selection of Earth for a way station, Ulysses told Enoch, had been controversial from the start. It was needed to open this area of the galaxy, but opposing factions wanted resources diverted to other sectors. It was also a backward place by galactic standards. There were many factions, and disharmony, in the galaxy. To support their own interests, some will now claim the Earth is too primitive for the station to remain, a planet too barbaric to honor the dead.

The Vegan is soon to arrive, as a diplomat, Ulysses said, who will present the case to Enoch as the representative of Earth. Why him? Enoch asked. Because, to Galactic Central, Enoch is the Earth. The Vegans, reluctantly, are bound to present their protest over the removal of the body. It was only the last straw in a larger game. It was almost certain that the Earth station would be closed. Galactic Central hoped that Enoch would take another station. But to Enoch this meant that Earth would be denied access to the galaxy and left adrift with little hope of changing its future.

For a century nothing had happened and now a crisis and Enoch was at the center of it. He could not turn his back on Earth. He could not retreat to the station and close out the world of his birth. "He needed sun and soil and wind to remain a man."

Simak has again loaded the elements of his story up front. In just under 50 pages, less than a quarter of the book, he had introduced a large number of ideas. It represents the bulk of this chapter so far. He has set an elaborate stage. And now the crisis explodes.

The Hazer arrived and when he greeted Lucy his glow seemed to spread to her. The Hazer asked Enoch if she was indeed of his race. It noted that she was so unlike him. Enoch explained that, by human standards, she was different but in the sense that she had not been molded by human culture. And that applied equally to himself. He had too long been out of direct contact with humanity and for a century had tried to adapt himself to the culture and ethos of galactic civilization and ethos. But he had been alone in his contact with the galaxy. Now the matter involved all of the Earth and all of its people and he was the sole recognized representative.

Enoch went out to the grave, he had to see for himself, and the Earth had been turned recently. The Hazer went with him and read the inscription Enoch had made on the gravestone, in the Hazer language, and commended him for trying to think as one of them in this final tribute.

Enoch took Lucy home and found an intelligence agent, Claude Lewis there. Enoch knew Lewis must be involved. He explained to Lewis why he must return the Hazer body immediately. Lewis, impressed with the gravity of the situation, said he would have it back within 24 hours.

Ulysses had once told Enoch that the galaxy, while far more peaceful than Earth, having no war, had its problems. There was still much work to do to achieve true unity. But things are getting worse, not better. The problem he now told Enoch is that the Talisman is missing and that the people of the galaxy have lost contact with the "universal spiritual force." Only one had been made[38], some ten thousand years ago, by a mystical race. They left no blueprints. Very few know it is missing. But the galaxy is coming apart.

There was more to the problem of the Talisman. It required a Custodian, a sensitive, an individual especially gifted. The device itself is only an intermediary. It taps the spiritual force but those are then amplified through the capacity of the Custodian. The Custodian is the glue that holds the galactic confraternity of intelligences together. It took more than politics, more than knowledge, to do that. With the larger picture of existence, it is easier to put petty differences aside for the greater good.

Enoch commented that it didn't sound much different from what was happening on Earth. They talked about the news in the newspapers Enoch had saved for Ulysses and about the Mizar statistical chart Enoch had kept, which predicted war. Enoch had hoped it would show a road to peace. Ulysses told him that there was such a method available and had been used on rare occasions. Enoch would have to request it on behalf of the Earth, without consulting its leaders. It was a method to reduce mental capacity, to induce

[38] Here, perhaps, Simak indulges in dramatic license. The Talisman, like any object, would be duplicated, and a complete pattern stored, every time it was transmitted between way stations.

stupidity, to make the race no longer able to understand science and the weapons it provided. But there would be catastrophic consequences as people in the cities died for lack of food as the transportation systems failed, and when the electricity stopped. That was not something Enoch could accept.

When Ulysses left, Enoch pondered the century of knowledge he had accumulated in his journals, in alien literature and artifacts. He knew this was only the beginning of what he might learn in another thousand years and that even then he would have only dipped his finger into that vast reservoir of knowledge.

He felt more than ever alone. He was very alone. How could he stand against both the Earth and the galaxy at large. Standing outside he felt a chill despite the summer sun. What kind of man was he? Neither human nor alien, divided loyalties:

> *A homeless, footless, wandering creature who could recognize neither right nor wrong for having seen so many different (and logical) versions of right and wrong?*

He had considered himself an objective observer; meticulously recording the things he had learned in his journals but for two days he had not even found the time to write in his journal. He needed a distraction. He went to the cavernous basement, to his rifle range, where he hunted and was hunted by deadly alien beasts. The station builders had asked him if he had a hobby. They didn't understand a shooting gallery or a safari. They didn't understand the primal force in man that drove him to kill, to hunt, to exercise cunning. The shooting range pitted his skills against capable, yet animal, adversaries. They had nonetheless surpassed his wildest imagination.

Enoch had often wondered if there was a great difference between the act of hunting and an act of war. And remember, we come into this story on a horrific battlefield. There seemed to be a combative instinct in the human race, and aggressive urge, a compulsion to compete. Was conflict an inherent human characteristic?

The beast and scenery of the range were an illusion, like the Star Trek holodeck, but the realism of the setting was very vivid when he entered it. When he finished, he checked the scoring device and found he had missed one shot, a miss that would have been fatal if the beast had been real. As he walked back from the range, he spotted the trunk of the Hazer who had died, whom he had buried, and whose body was to be returned that evening. He opened it and found a letter. In the letter, written to a friend but never sent, the wise Hazer said he knew he would die soon, he wrote about the declining quality of the Custodians of the Talisman, the last of whom was now dead. No replacement had been found and that, the Hazer wrote to the friend, the galaxy "has lost its close identification with the ruling principle of life," and without it, chaos would inevitably result. The Talisman had made a galactic civilization possible but now the Talisman itself was lost.

Enoch reached his decision. He would stay with the Earth. He must prepare to abandon the station. He began by packing his journals and alien literature and some of his more prized artifacts. He put them in boxes and placed them next to the station door.

At that moment he heard the official materialize working and a strange being appeared. It drew a weapon and it was obvious that it intended to disable the station. It would take years for a ship to come to make repairs if the station was put out of action.

Enoch grabbed one of the gifts he kept on his desk and threw it at the alien. Startled, the creature uttered the word to open the station door and dashed outside. Enoch grabbed his rifle and went out after it. The alien ran towards the bluff, out along the outcrop of rock. It was trapped. It fired shots at Enoch with its weapon, an intense, incandescent, laser like beam. Ulysses suddenly arrived and told Enoch that the being had the Talisman. Then they saw Lucy moving towards the creature. She was drawn by the force of the Talisman. Seeing Lucy in danger Ulysses urgently insisted that Enoch kill the creature. Enoch took aim in the fading light but had no clear shot. Then the front sight settled on the alien's head and from long practice on the rifle range Enoch squeezed off a fatal shot.

Stunned by the sudden violence, the emotion of killing the alien and so narrowly saving Lucy, Enoch looked down at the ground, and then Ulysses called to him, with a sob in his voice. He addressed Enoch in the faithful words: "my brother…." Enoch looked up and saw Lucy was moving with a light.

> *It is the Talisman,' Ulysses said, enraptured, his breath rasping in his throat, 'And she is our new Custodian. The one we've hunted through the years. 'Now we shall be one again. Now we shall feel again. Now we shall be a people instead of many people.*

They walked back towards the house. Only one in billions, Ulysses had said, could actually tune in on the Talisman. Only for such a rare sensitivity would it come alive. It had been centuries since a Custodian had brought such a glow from the Talisman as Lucy had.

When they reached the house, Lewis was waiting with a truck. He had the body of the Hazer. Just then Lucy's father arrived with a drunken mob. Lucy took the Talisman from its bag and the light blazed out and quietness descended,

> *And with the quietness came an abiding sense of peace that seemed to seep into the very fiber of one's being. It was no synthetic thing—not as if someone had invoked a peace and peace then was allowed to exist by sufferance. It was a present and an actual peace, the peace of mind that came with the calmness of a sunset after a long, hot day, or the sparkling, ghost-like shimmer of a springtime dawn. You felt it inside of you and all about you, and there was the feeling that it was not only her but that the peace extended on and out in all directions, to the farthest reaches of infinity, and that it had a depth which would enable it to endure until the final gasp of all eternity.*

The mob quelled and fled, Lucy's father ran away in terror, howling, fleeing some private devil that was in him.

Ulysses asked for the honor of carrying body of the Hazer back to the grave. After they reburied the Hazer, Enoch read the inscription he had carved on the stone: "Here lies one from a distant star, but the soil is not alien to him, for in death he belongs to the universe." … The Hazer diplomat had told him that Enoch had written it as one of them, but Enoch knew he was wrong, for it was a human sentiment as well.

Lucy would go to the stars, the new galactic Custodian. But first Enoch asked that she attend the upcoming peace conference on Earth. Peace would finally be established as the light of the Talisman filled the chamber and the Earth. A world committee would have to be formed for now, with Lucy as Custodian, the Earth would have to join the galaxy.

Enoch walked back out to the point of land overlooking the river where the alien had died "and gazed down at the huddled figure that lay among the rocks.

Poor, tattered bungler, he thought, dead so far from home and, so far as he, himself, must be concerned, to so little purpose.

Although perhaps neither poor not tattered, for in that brain, now broken and spattered beyond recovery, must surely have lain a scheme of greatness—the kind of scheme that the brain of an earthly Alexander or Xerxes or Napoleon may have held, a dream of some great power, cynically conceived, to be attained and held at whatever cost, the dimensions of it so grandiose that it shoved aside and canceled out all moral consideration.

The Earth had been a choice of desperation for the creature but in that desperation, it had brought the Talisman to Lucy. The Talisman had no moral effect on this being. It had been driven by greed. It had been resourceful in hiding the Talisman for years. But it had somehow served only to deliver it to its new Custodian.

Enoch apologized for taking the beings life and then walked to the edge of the cliff and hurled his rifle out to plunge into the water below[39], and "And far below, he heard the smug, contented gurgling of the water as it flowed past this cliff and went on, to the further ends of Earth."

Lucy and the Talisman would bring peace, eventually. It would take time until the last man threw away his weapon. But one rifle was a small start. There was much to do.

The river rolled below him and the river did not care. Nothing mattered to the river. It would take the tusk of mastodon, the skull of saber tooth, the rib cage of a man, the dead and sunken tree, the thrown rock or rifle and would swallow each of them and cover them in mud or sand and roll gurgling over them, hiding them from sight.

A million years ago there had been no river here and in a million years to come there might be no river—but in a million years from now there would be, if not Man, at least a caring thing. And that was the secret of the universe, Enoch told himself—a thing that went on caring.

Enoch turned and walked back down the hill. He could hear (as Asher Sutton had) the scurry of small creatures in the leaves. He felt a deep peace, an afterglow from the light of the Talisman. Returning to the station, he knew he was no longer in isolation. Strangely, for the first time since the house had been transformed into the way station, he felt like it was home again.

He would continue his job as station keeper. Only now the Earth would be pounding at his door. He picked up the statue Winslowe had carved from his desk and he saw now the loneliness of that figure. Winslowe had captured his mood "the essential loneliness of a man who walked alone." Now he could tell Winslowe where the wood had come from. And now he was alone no longer.

There was one more string to be cut. With a rustle of fabric, he realized that Mary had come back. She placed her hand on his arm. Enoch was started. She was real! No, she told him. The pyramid of spheres Lucy had activated served to make illusions real: You made your illusion and the device made it real. But she had come back to bid a last farewell. She told Enoch that they were both "victims of illusion…" She was still a doll and he was the toymaker. She picked up the pyramid and smashed it against the fireplace and was no more. Enoch realized that he had lost his old world forever. In a moment of shock, he had now broken through his own illusions—but so with him, now also with all of humanity.

[39] I've found no point along this ridge where even George Washington would be able to hurl a rifle into it.

He turned back to his desk. He picked up his journal. Much had happened that he must record. He must get back to work again. He was ready. "He had said his last goodbye."

A PHILOSOPHY OF WAY STATION

I've attempted to give the background of *Way Station* in a little more than a handful of pages. I've included quotes directly from Simak to give my reader some sense of the power of his storytelling. You will not get the story without a leisurely reading of the book. I've read it more times than I can count and still the story draws me.

We are attracted to a story because of what it stirs in our soul. In a sense, Simak's books are a Talisman and Simak the Custodian of a truth, a philosophy, a larger picture of reality than that of our everyday lives.

Is fiction for entertainment or does it provide a source of enlightenment? We know that there is literature that uplifts and inspires us and yes, a lot of these writings are fiction. There are books about the philosophy of Tolkien's works, and Tolkien is one example of a writer with an inner world at least as vivid as Simak's. There are books about the philosophy of Star Trek and Star Wars, The Matrix, Sherlock Holmes; about Melville and Hawthorne. The list is long.

I once read *Way Station* when Ken Burns' "The War" was showing on PBS. This powerful series has at heart two things to say. First, it graphically depicts the horrors of war as experienced by combat soldiers, sailors and aviators and particularly those who, like Enoch Wallace, survived one great and costly battle after another[40]. Second, the story embraces the home front, four towns and in particular one with which Simak was likely familiar, Luverne, Minnesota, about an hour from where he served as Editor of the Worthington, Minneapolis newspaper. Burns' voice of Luverne is the local newspaper editor. There were plenty of vintage photographs and I saw Luverne as a Simak-sized Midwestern town. Burns was able to convey a profound pathos of those war years as it must have been experienced by Simak and other home front non-combatants.

Enoch Wallace is a timeless man living in a timeless world, in a remote corner of Wisconsin. The book was published in 1963, originally as a series of nicely illustrated stories in *Galaxy Magazine*. The story started with Enoch on a horrific battlefield, surrounded by death, surprised that he was alive. During the century of his life there were, of two World Wars, two horrific conflicts, the second of truly global scope. The year before the story was printed the US and Russia went to the brink of global thermonuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Hugo award the book won obviously spoke to its emotional impact on readers. Enoch's Mizar statistics predicted World War III. The bombs didn't fall but in just another year a prolonged conflict did erupt in Vietnam that ultimately claimed 55,000 American and a million or more other lives.

Enoch lived in two worlds. For a century he has had only two regular contacts with the human race, or we presume a succession of them in the mailman. Yet he is a citizen of a galactic civilization as well, thousands of races and among them he shares a steady dialogue and even warm friendships. The house is indeed impenetrably sealed from the Earth. It supplies all his needs. Within it he does not even age. There is no reason for him to go

[40] Ken Burns also produced *The Civil War* which gives us a sense of that time as experienced by Simak's grandfather.

outside yet he does so for an hour every day, an hour during which the aging process proceeds, eating away at his virtual immortality. During the hour he walks a well-trod path, over the century tens of thousands of times, that keeps him intimately anchored to the Earth and thus his own race, a loyalty that determines not only his own fate but that of humanity.

Enoch stays up on world events by subscription to newspapers and journals. He is able to draw from these resources the data he needs to feed the Mizar system. This stream of information, the link to the world Simak spent a career providing people, despite the bad news, keeps Enoch in rapport with his own race. In the end these connections pave the way for humankind to find relief from its own brutal nature and affords 'Man' a place in a galactic citizenship by virtue of rare and possibly unique gifts of the spirit, an ember of eternal fire inherent in the human condition, which Simak now fans to a glowing light to restore the hope and promised of the manifestation of intelligence we call 'Man.'

Enoch established another feature of Simak's philosophy. He is culling knowledge from the culture of the galaxy. He fills record books with what he learns in conversations with travelers, all carefully indexed in a card file. He uses this knowledge for the chart he constructed using a mathematics of an advanced civilization on a planet of far-off Mizar[41]. It is a system he has laboriously developed to understand and for finding a way out of the human dilemma, our proneness to violence, now armed with the hydrogen bomb and missile delivery systems.

Enoch stands on a bridge between two worlds. He is attached to the Earth. He has a profound sense of being at home. He is well-informed of the events of his day and spends long hours trying to come to an understanding of the forces of human history. By Earth standards he is not only well informed but possessed of tools of thought that reduce the workings of great universities to mere child's play. But that is a theme that will steadily emerge in Simak's writings: There is knowledge out there, hidden and hard to reach, from which we may ultimately grasp the reality of things.

On the other side is the vast culture of the Galactic Federation about which he is also deeply informed. He has documented and studied it carefully for a century. He has learned some of its languages and explored sciences and philosophies and collected artifacts and gifts from countless friendly travelers. They bring him the wood he gives to the postman. But he comes to learn that not all is well in that great confederation. It is falling apart. It has lost its spiritual center. There is an object called a Talisman. Only very rare souls can activate it and unleash its powerful spiritual energies. Not only have none appeared for a long time but now the Talisman itself has disappeared. It has, he learns suddenly, become the tool of revolt and violence.

Simak also settled into what would readily qualify him as an environmental writer. The Earth is a planet made for 'Man'—our natural and organic home. But it is also made for all the other creatures born of the earth. And more, it should be a home, as they choose, for the many races that can breathe our air and can share our food. It is a place that nurtures life. Enoch is far closer to his plot of Earth than was Henry David Thoreau to his Walden

[41] Mizar, we now know, and it's twin, Alcor, are the second "star" out in the handle of the constellation we call The Big Dipper. They are actually part of a system of six stars some 83 light-years from Earth. They are part of a cluster of nearly 60 stars. They are new stars, roughly a half-billion years old, about four billion years younger than the Earth and thus unlikely to support advanced life.

Pond. It is this Enoch Wallace who stands on the bluff and understands the unfolding of time on a geological scale, to whom the moment is an eternity.

Lucy Fisher, a deaf-mute who lives with a rough and crude family down on the river, has a spiritual radiance, a bond with all life and a touch that heals. Lucy is the very spirit of the Earth and the life about her. Enoch would like to communicate with her, indeed could teach her a galactic hand speech, but this would somehow break the spell of mystique and isolations for them both and perhaps violate the spirit and purity that is in her being. They understand each other and that is enough. Both are lonely and outcast, yet each possesses a world of wonder inaccessible to others.

Enoch has unknowingly and innocently become the source of a tragic diplomatic incident. It starts with an act of compassion Enoch bestowed on an alien visitor who died at his way station. But a meddling government agent who has been keeping an eye on Enoch, exhumes the body, unknowingly plunging the Earth into a crisis that could not only leave the human race in obscurity but result in its potential extinction. Enoch finds himself the sole representative of Earth. To the Federation he is the Earth. Upon his shoulders rests the fate of his race. Yet he cannot even consult with another member of it.

Enoch is torn between his loyalty to the magnificent panorama of galactic civilization and his innate loyalty to his own kind. If the Earth's way station is closed, he is offered another, an easy way out, even a noble life, and one of virtual immorality in perpetual comfort. But he chooses to stand with Mankind at whatever personal cost. Every aspect of his long-settled life has been suddenly thrown into chaotic turmoil. Every intricate piece of it has broken to pieces.

Ironically, human failings come to his aid. Intolerance and violent assault have driven Lucy to seek sanctuary with the only friends she has. A simple, voiceless soul, her hands turn his alien technology to life and the visiting diplomatic dignitary, a being of vast spiritual presence himself, sees in her a light like his own that radiates from the vitality of their being.

As Enoch struggled to resolve the diplomatic crisis, knowing even then that it will not likely help the fate of the Earth, the fate of the galaxy itself descends on his shoulders. In another of those stunningly impossible coincidences, the talisman arrives at his way station, carried by an armed and violent being who has stolen it for purposes of its own. Enoch, a veteran warrior and armed with the rifle he has used in his virtual reality shooting gallery for a century, placed a bullet through that brain, ending its twisted dreams of greatness. And delivered the Talisman to a keeper with rare talents even by Galactic standards.

She will begin by healing the Earth and then taking her place as the Galactic Custodian. Now Earth must be granted membership in the Federation. And Enoch unselfconsciously settles into his role; The gates to the bridge between the Earth and the Cosmos are open from both ends and so is the door of the way station.

Chapter Eight: An Empty World

A Choice of Gods was written nine years after *Way Station*. During those years (1963-1973) Simak wrote six novels. He also wrote 17 short stories and published three collections, not to mention the number of previous stories that reappeared in anthologies. During this period, he won a Hugo, for *Way Station*, was twice a Hugo runner up, won two Nebulas, and received three prestigious awards for his journalism: Best Idea of the Year Educational Award for a Newspaper Used in Schools; Westinghouse Award for the American Association for the Advancement of Science; and the Minnesota Academy of Science Award.

Simak was then 69. It was still several years before his retirement from the newspaper. In my opinion he was at his best. By this time Simak had established much, but not all, of his range of stories. He had long since left behind the space opera science fiction style of Campbell and the Star Trek era. Science and technology, despite, or because of, his award-winning involvement with science writing, begin to fade from his books and stories. Indeed, they had become antithesis. He had also begun his quest and fantasy themes, of which more later. For now, we will turn to another empty world.

The Story

A Choice of Gods is, in my opinion, Simak's philosophical masterpiece. It is a masterpiece in the sense that it displays his fully mature artistic style, the style of a true master. It is like the work of a medieval guild craftsman or Renaissance artist: A demonstration of skill, if not a testimony of a life. Thomas Clareson said that Simak wrote the book, in Simak's words, "to get the idea off my back," and as, in Clareson's opinion, it was "an opportunity for a full-scale exploration of the problems which have so long haunted him."

A Choice of Gods is a climax of Simak's philosophical thinking. I've described glimmerings of this philosophy in Simak's earliest writings. The foundation is there but not fully expressed. It was slow, steady work. *City*, by which he passed his apprenticeship and took his place with the front rank of science fiction writers, is certainly a cornerstone. *City*, however, represents Simak's philosophy at its nadir following the appalling horror of World War II. That mood lingers but we begin to pick up a more optimistic theme over time. One of the key themes from City is the house as a special metaphor. It is a refuge and a superlative dwelling place. Another is endless natural space. The robots are there. As in *City*, it probes the basic problem of what it means to be a human being. Man, rather than Dog, finds the essence of being and achieves paranormal capacity.

In *Way Station* Simak described a house that must have been very close to his childhood memories (most likely his grandfather Wiseman's house), or at least an idealized proximity thereof. The house is actually a shell. The interior has been glutted for the mechanism of the way station save for one small corner with its ancient hearth. As we saw at the end of that book the house becomes a home[42]. It's not clear what that means other than the possible fact that for the first time Enoch feels at home in his world; he has broken the cocoon of his aloneness. *A Choice of Gods* is centered on a very special house, on its bluff

[42] This metaphor is almost the polar opposite of the quest theme scenes.

overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers. This house is a home from the beginning. It is the birthplace of a new race of human beings. And it is a magnificent dwelling rooted in the earth.

Some say *A Choice of Gods* was the precursor of *Project Pope*, which I will review below, but I do not believe it to be entirely true. I believe *A Choice of Gods* stands alone and is the apex of Simak's work. In my analysis it brings his philosophy, if not to a conclusion, at least to full flower. In comparison, *Project Pope* is an elaboration of several of Simak's basic themes, a very good one. As you will see below, I am very fond of *Project Pope*.

To set the stage for many of his stories, Simak emptied a world. In *City* the Earth was abandoned for Jupiter. In many of the quest stories the worlds entered are already empty, or largely so, of people. I believe this reflects the emptiness of the setting of Simak's childhood. His corner of Wisconsin was largely open, and the family farm was on a bluff set off from the world by deep ravines, woods, the bluff and the Wisconsin River. There are no back fences to chat across[43]. Like Wright's houses, it is a place of sanctuary, and like Taliesin, it provides a prospect.

The prospect from the bluff north of the Wiseman/Simak farm, or its imaginary equivalent, is sublimely empty. There is something of the art of China or the philosophy of Zen and the Tao: A spiritual 'emptiness.' But 'empty' is the wrong word: Simak's space is filled with something elemental. There is actually a special sense of asylum in this emptiness and aloneness. Even when the stories are set in populated worlds, the principle characters are very much outsiders, the towns isolated, and even the rooms have but one or two occupants. *A Choice of Gods* does indeed start with an empty world, left for 5,000 years to renew itself. It was left to a very few, humans and robots, to find their destiny without interference. But that is only the beginning of the story.

In typical Simak style, we meet many of the characters early on. Simak opened *A Choice of Gods* with a reading from a record book, dated August 1, 2185. Fifty years earlier the people of the Earth had disappeared, all but the people in the Whitney house, who were there for a birthday party, and a band of Indians on a remote reservation. There were sixty-seven people at the party for John and Jason Whitney, twin grandsons, when the disappearance occurred. There were maybe 300 Indians. The Indians went back to their old ways on the land. The people at the house resorted to "some of the older and more basic technology geared to a simpler way of life and these basic rudimentary skills should keep us from sinking into utter savagery." Some of the robots, all left behind, settled with the Whitney clan.

None of the remaining humans possessed the knowledge and skill to train the robots to maintain the technology of civilization. The robots were not built to be technologically minded[44]. They were built to bolster human vanity and pride. Simak suggested there is an innate human need to have other humans (or a reasonable facsimile of other humans) to minister to our wants and needs. Is there an urge to dominate other human beings, to enjoy a sense of power over the lives of others? The robots were built to serve as cooks, gardeners, butlers, maids, footmen—servants of all kinds. They were the flunkeys and the

[43] Even today, Millville Township has only about seven people per square mile.
[44] Which, of course, begs the question of how the robots were maintained for thousands of years (what was their source of power)? And then, as we will see below, there are the project robots who are technically competent.

inferior companions, the yea-sayers, menials. In a sense, in their servitude to us, they are slaves; they were owned and programmed to eagerly embrace that status. This is generally true with all of Simak robots, a rare exception will be found in *Project Pope*.

The robots never seem to think of their servitude as slavery. They serve most willingly; thankful of a chance to serve, they press their services upon us, apparently glad to find new masters to replace the old. But of course, they are machines with computer brains that are programmed (which begs the question of why they have self-aware personalities). The robots can maintain the farms and provide for the Whitney's and a few do so most willingly. There are also the 'wild' robots who are often seen going about whatever business occupies them. There is a small group of four robots who occupy the nearby monastery.

The aging process has been virtually stopped. Jason and John the grandsons whose birthday was being celebrated, after 50 years still look 21, and their grandfather, at 110 chronological years, feels no additional signs of aging. There was no illness. There was no doubt that whatever agency removed the human race endowed the remaining few with a virtual immortality. So, why?

Also consistent with his style, Simak jumps from place to place and from time to time. He takes us to another overlook, on the other side of the Mississippi River, where he introduces us to a young traveler who stops to absorb the autumn beauty of the valley where the two rivers came together and the bluffs surrounding that spot[45]. The sun, as it so beautifully does late in the day, caught the red and gold brilliance of the maple leaves on the far bluffs.

The young man had journeyed across the plains from the far west. He had been welcomed by the people of the plains, there had been a girl, but he could not stay. He had been drawn to the rising sun. His neck arrayed with a necklace of bear claws

We meet Jason Whitney as he finished his morning walk that glorious morning. Jason had seen 5,000 of these marvelous fall seasons but Simak has him reflecting that his morning walk was one of the best he had ever had. Coming back to the house he could smell the frying bacon as Thatcher, the family robot, was making breakfast. At the door was his wife Martha. She had the morning news – she is a telepath – of family doings. "Out Polaris way," she began, "They're on the nicest planet…"

Next, we meet Evening Star, a young Indian woman, as she prepares a talismanic doll she will offer to an ancient oak—a tree that had spoken to her seven years ago when the tribe was last this way. Her grandfather, many times removed, is Red Cloud, patriarch of the Indians whose time went back to the disappearance of the people of the world.

Then we meet Hezekiah, a robot, dressed in a coarse, brown robe, sitting on a bench, gazing towards the house that sat a mile or so from the monastery where he lived. We are told it was a great stone house that "stood solid on the rocky battlement that rose above the rivers—a mighty, sprawling house with its windows winking in the morning sun, the chimney's pleading hands lifted up to God." He was filled with old doubts and fears. We

[45] This house appears to be located at the actual junction of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers a few miles west of the Simak homestead. That site is a park and readily accessible to the public.

learn that Hezekiah and a small group of other robots have lived at the monastery over the centuries, studying the books of human theology. He reflected that it should be the humans, not the robots, at that task, that there was something blasphemous that entities without souls (robots) should spend their time ministering to God. He hoped they might develop souls, but he had never felt even the smallest awakening of the feeling. As we will learn, he is not the only non-human with the need to find a soul; and that the humans have no such interest. Hezekiah, however, has that good Christian quality of an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and guilt.

After breakfast, Jason Whitney sat at his desk. He is described as a tall, thin man, but with a sense of strength, "square and solid shoulders," and his hair gray. He opened one of the bound record books, taken from a long row. What would he write? Life was placid with few ripples. There had been no visitors from the stars for the past month, nothing of particular interests, just the routine news to Martha.

One day after another for 5,000 years. Wouldn't this routine come to bore Jason? Apparently not. He seems to enjoy each day fully. He is content. Simak describes Whitney as sitting in a long-familiar room. There is something special about this room:

> *… with its book-lined loftiness and vastness, carried a special benediction. The thoughts of many men, he told himself, resided between the bindings of the volumes on the shelves, selected and placed there long ago by his grandfather so that in the days to come the essence of the human race, the heritage of recorded thought, would always be at hand. He recalled that he had often held the conceit that the essential characters of those ancient writers, the ghostly presence of the men themselves, had in the passing years settled on this room and late at night, when all else was quiet, he had often found himself conversing with these olden men, who emerged from the dust of the past into the shadow of the present.*

It is apparently a large room, two stories with a balcony, shelves of books all around, broken only by two doors and three windows. Above one door is a clock. It showed the time to be 9:15, but the clock had not run for ages. Jason didn't really know the exact time and had no need to know the "o-clock."

As he sat musing, Thatcher announced the arrival of "Mr. Horace Red Cloud," chief of the original tribe of Leech Lake Indians, who had come back down the river after an absence of several years. They had been friends when young, sharing blood in a bond of brotherhood. It has been 5,000 years, for both of them, then young men, and if they live, as Jason's grandfather had, they could expect to see 8,000 years. They sat and talked, two friends of untold years, catching up, remembering the first time they had met as if it were only yesterday. The Indians have traveled south from gathering wild rice and are preparing their corn fields. Jason offers Red Cloud the bounty of his farm. There is the usual abundance of corn, wheat flour, good wool cloth and other goods.

It is a good life, both men agree. They settled into an extended reminiscence of the course of events since the disappearance of the people. The family had been forced to make a decision about how it would live after the people disappeared. They decided to settle on this patch of land, a rare swath of good land in an overdeveloped and then starving world. They became (with the labor of robots) good farmers.

The Indians had decided to go back to the ancient ways. They thought about becoming farmers but decided against it. There was something in their heart, Red Cloud said, that pulled them back to the ancestral ways.

> *It was a relief to shuck off all of it and go back to the flowers, the trees, the clouds, the seasons and the weather, the running water, the creatures of the woods and prairies – to make them a part of us again, more a part of us than they'd ever been before.*
>
> *Sometimes," he continued, "I wonder if we made the right choice, then I see an autumn leaf -- one leaf alone, not a lot of leaves – or hear the sound of a little stream of water running in the woods, or catch a forest scent, and then I know we were not wrong. We went back to the earth, linked ourselves with the hills and streams, and that is the way it should be. That is the way we were meant to live. Not back to the old tribal concept, but back to a way of life. We were a woodland tribe to start with, but now we are no longer woodland. Maybe we're simply Indian. We adopted the skin tepee of the Western plains tribes and, in large part, their way of dress and their use of horses. But we kept the birch bark canoe, the wild rice harvest and the maple sugar. It has been a good life. You and I, old friend, have caught the feel of life – I in my tepee, you in this stone house. You never went to the stars and you may be better off for never having gone. I suppose they find great things out there…*

Both races abandoned technology. Jason reflected they really didn't have the skill to maintain the old order, nor did they have any compelling desire to do so. They felt no loss of the old ways. There was another path, turning inward. Jason's grandfather had begun to chronicle the slow but steady transformation of those left behind. It was in the rows of bound journals. He had continued that work. But, as he sat and talked with his friend, he knew of no one to continue after him.

Of the group gathered at the Whitney residence that fateful night, and of the children they had, all save Jason and Martha had gone to the stars. But someone, he felt, needed to stay. Someone needed to serve as an anchor to humankind's home planet: "To keep the home fires burning." For Jason and Martha, the house and the surrounding acres were home. It was their very identity. While he might if he chose, he could not bear the idea of leaving this place behind. For 5,000 years he had been a part of this place and loved every day of it.

The Whitney clan had eventually developed a range of psychic powers. They became teleports able to travel from planet to planet at will. They were telepaths, all able to communicate with each other instantly across the vast reaches of the galaxy. Perhaps, Jason mused, this capacity was innate in human beings. But it needed time to develop, time free from the distractions of technological civilization. The Indians hadn't developed those gifts but rather another set of gifts that gave them an acute attunement to the voices of the Earth, the trees, the animals, the flowing waters. They seek total engagement with the world itself. Jason thinks that that is their power.

It takes 20 pages to come to the hint of the crisis. There is one disturbing trend from the news from the stars. There are some other intelligences out there, some friendly, some not, some simply indifferent. But evidence is mounting that there seems to be some great intelligence in the center of the galaxy. It seems totally indifferent, cold, distant, purely analytical. You can't call it evil. It is obviously so vastly intelligent that something like the human race would be totally insignificant to it. It makes him feel unclean. I think Simak is giving us one impression he has of a God.

So, ask Red Cloud, why worry about it. Obviously, it's been there all along. Simak inserts the thought of the lingering question about what agency made the people go away.

Sometimes aliens visited the Earth; two or three times in the last century that he knew about. Jason can talk to some of them. It is the matter of wandering aliens that has occasioned Red Cloud's visit. In the unhurried way of tribal protocol, he had come at last to a problem. An alien had been found near their camp. Horace couldn't communicate with it. He could talk to flowers and flowing rivers but not with this alien. The alien had no ship. It had teleported, like humans. Jason will check on it.

Which brings up the topic of Evening Star. She has powers unusual for the Indians. She has a thirst for knowledge unlike her people. She has read all of the books the band possesses but craves more knowledge. Of course, Jason said, she was more than welcome to stay at the house and use the library.

Then they talked of the robots. The Indians prefer to live without them. Red Cloud spoke of the band of them up in an old city, once Minneapolis and St. Paul, who are building something, a great building.

Simak takes us on a walk with Evening Star and shares her close commune with the natural world. She was taking the doll to the ancient white oak that had spoken to her before. It was a grand old tree, great of girth, crouched on the earth with a sense of power. Its leaves were already brown but still clung to the branches (as they do with white oaks).

On her last visit, Evening Star had left a corncob doll in a sheltering hollow. It was still there, and she placed the new doll beside the old one and spoke to the tree. She spoke to the tree:

> *Old Grandfather, her eyes looking at the ground as a matter of respect, I went away, but I did not forget you. In the long nights and the bright noons I remembered you. Now I have come back again to tell you that I may go away again, although in a different way. But I'll never leave completely, because I love this world too much. And I shall always reach out to you, knowing you will know when I hold out my arms and I shall know that upon this land stands one I can believe and depend upon. I am truly grateful to you, Old Grandfather, for the strength you give me and for your understanding.*

The tree did not speak to her as it did the last time, but then she felt something stir, as if it raised its limbs in benediction, a powerful force that overcame her. She turned and fled.

Evening Star ran a little way and stopped. Looking back, she could no longer see the old oak. Then she saw the stranger. She saw the great necklace of bear claws around his neck. One per bear, he said. She was impressed by his medicine. She knew one of her kin had been killed by a great bear only a year ago. The stranger was not one of her people. He had come from the west, from the big water, the ocean. Where did he go? He pointed to the house and said that maybe that was his destination. He had come across the continent, across the mountains, deserts, rivers, the plains, a very long journey. Why did he come so far, she asked? Because something had compelled him to do so. When the people on the plains told him of the great house, he sensed it was his destination. If not, he would continue towards the rising sun.

He told her he saw the change in the great oak and that it was something he found wonderful.

Jason found the alien, “a can of worms.” He thought it was a horror. He sat down, looking at it, quieting his mind. The alien, not waiting, reached out to him and touched Jason’s mind with a mental probe, a calm and firm touch. It had met human travelers before and came in search of their home. It had talked to one of them one afternoon about the soul. It had come to seek its soul. Jason told the creature that many humans had sought their souls but that he didn’t know if he had one.

The alien told Jason that is what the other human had said. He didn’t know if he had one, did not know what a soul might be. But he knew about such things and that it had once been important on the Earth. So, the alien had come to visit.

Yes, responded Jason, there had been a long search for the soul but there was never any proof, just a faith and that faith had been slipping away before the people left. They talked about the nature of a deity, an entity that judged the worth of the soul. But Jason knew nothing of this. There was another who might know something about the soul, not human.

A storm was brewing as Jason walked back to the house. He was deep in thought about his conversation with the alien. Why had faith been such a big part of man’s history and why did we turn away from it? The Indians perhaps had a faith in a different context. They revere the natural world. Simak has given us a view into this with Evening Star and the ancient oak.

Jason continued to muse. Why had the people left on Earth been left there? None of the people in the house that fateful night felt the need for faith. Those who had faith were now all gone in the disappearance, fewer though their number were becoming over the years. Why had faith lost out? The drive for wealth and property perhaps. Now what was left of faith was being kept alive by robots. There was Hezekiah, the self-styled abbot, and three robot “monks'' living at the old monastery. Jason would speak with Hezekiah about the alien.

As he topped the ridge, he saw that the storm clouds were building. He thought of the record book he had opened in the morning, with nothing to write. Now there was much to put down. He would wait until after dinner and after the concert of the music trees. They were already tuning up. Martha greeted him at the door. His brother John had returned.

Simak returned to Jason’s grandfather’s entry, of Sept 2, 2185: Why had the little group of people been left behind? The Whitney family had led a privileged life in an overcrowded world: Every part of the earth and much of the sea had been developed, and yet it provided too little for the hordes of people who lived in poverty, eight billion of them (that number reached November 2022). The economy was steadily breaking down.

The house had been built by his great grandfather, nearly 150 years before, the land acquired from the monastery down the road that had fallen on hard times. The design of the house had ignored all the modern trends. It was built in the solid and simple style of some centuries before: It had been built to stand forever. It had accommodated 67 people without any great inconvenience (and their progeny?).

Following the Disappearance, they put the rich land around the house, which had formerly been an agricultural station, back into production with willing robot labor. As machinery (other than the robots, as noted) broke down, they went back to horses for motive power. The robots somehow kept the farm machines, the plows, and harvesting machinery, simple in design, in good operation condition.

After the disappearance the woodlands started growing back, wild animals were being seen again. The rest of the world was going back into the ground except for this farm. The world was already beginning to restore itself. The Earth had been cleansed. Why?

Simak switched to the monastery where the four robots who had long ago taken up residence there to study the sacred text. They had been pouring through their rather considerable library culling, condensing and collating these materials into a single text. Three of them did the research. Hezekiah struggled with the final synthesis. The task was difficult. They had no innate understanding of truth or faith. Were these two ideas even compatible, he had wondered? Were they just wasting time? Man hadn't made sense of it so, how could he? They had thousands of books and had not found the answer. He agonized over the possibility that somewhere there might have been a book that brought it all together[46]?

Simak portrayed Hezekiah as a very "human" creature who was struggling with his soul. Is Hezekiah typical of other robots? We follow him as he paced the garden to help him think, savoring the flowers and the changing of the leaves, pondering the miracle of life. He looked up at the building storm clouds and saw a ladder to heaven and immediately rebuked himself for his unworthy "flight of fancy."

The storm broke. Hezekiah heard the gate banging and went to shut it to prevent it from being damaged. At the gate he found a huddled form sprawled on the ground, with a jagged cut down the temple. He carried the limp body back to the chapter house. It was a young man, with a bear claw necklace. He still breathed. Hezekiah was elated. A human being had come for refuge. It was the first time a human had ever come to the monastery for shelter. Here was duty and obligation to be fulfilled. Hezekiah called for Nicodemus and sent him to the house, to Thatcher, for food and blankets and a way to make a fire. He told the others to break up furniture, the less valuable piece, to make a fire.

As Hezekiah dabbed at the wound with a corner of his robe he was transported into a sense of peace, a sense of fulfillment, of compassion and of service to this stranger. Was not service the greatest thing, greater than endlessly searching for truth. Here was a robot fulfilling a task that humankind had forgotten. But he was aghast at these thoughts. What vanity! He was less than nothing. He yearned to be like a man. He wore a robe, sat in a chair, sought to understand the books men had written, worshiped God. This he thought was blasphemy and he crouched on the floor in abject contrition.

What a strange story. A robot struggling to achieve what so many humans are conditioned to in Sunday School. An obviously sentient entity that struggles to find a soul. A being who suffers deeply from emotions that have long troubled human beings. This is not the last time Simak will have a robot struggle with God.

[46] The search for some lost or hidden idea, the key, is a common theme with Simak.

Chapter Nine: Paradise Lost

In one of those great coincidental moments that are characteristic of Simak, one of those chance shots in a million, or millions, Jason's brother John, came back from the stars after so many thousands of years. He told Jason the reason he had stayed away for so long was that he had been searching for something toward the center of the galaxy. This is exactly the entity that Jason and Red Cloud had just talked about reported by other travelers. But there was something more important. John has found the People and they are on their way to the Earth. They should arrive soon.

In a very typical style, Simak switches scenes, first from a sudden climatic shock to deep quiet. With this scene we see both what has flowered out of the human essence on an abandoned earth, the promise of human destiny that had been restored, and the old human heritage that threatens to drive it away again. Now we go to Evening Star in the serenity of the study and learning of long-gone men and women and the books they wrote. She sat in that huge room of books, seeing it as Jason described it, and Thatcher had told her there were many, many more stored in basement rooms. She remembered something Thatcher had said: "'Here you can trace and chart the path of man up from darkest night.' Saying it proudly, as if he were a man himself and alone, in terror and in hope, had trod that very path." She had taken a liking to Thatcher, very uncharacteristic of her people.

> *She sat and listened to the voices of the books—or, rather, perhaps, to the voices of the men who had written all the books, strange, grave voices far off in time, speaking from the depths of time, the distant mumble of many cultivated voices, without words, but with meaning and with though instead of words, and she had never thought, she told herself, it could be anything like this. The trees had words to speak and the flowers a meaning and the little people of the woods often talked to her and the river and the running streams had music and a magic that surpassed understanding. But this was because they were living things—yes, even the river and the brook could be thought of as living things. Could it be that books were living, too?*
>
> *The voices of the books kept mumbling in the dimness of the room while rain ran down the windows—a companionable muttering that must keep on forever, the ghostly conversations of long-dead writers whose works lined the study walls. Was it all imagination, she asked herself, or did others hear them, too—did Uncle Jason sometimes hear them as he sat here by himself?*

She sat there in the library, at a small desk, not the big desk where Jason wrote the chronicles, with an open book. The storm had brought wind in the eaves and rain heavy on the windows. She felt something deep in this room,

> *… the shadows of many people, and many other desks and far distant times and places, although the distance of the times and places seemed less than they should have been, as if the veils of time and space had grown very thin and were ready to dissolve, so that she sat, an observer to a great event—the running together of all time and space so that the both of them became almost nonexistent, no longer caging men and events into separate cells, but running them all together, as if everything had happened all at once and in the self-same area, with the past crowding close upon the future within the confines of a tiny point of existence that, for convenience, might be called the present. Frightened at what was happening, she nevertheless glimpsed for a terrible, sublime moment all the causes and effects, all the direction and the purpose, all the agony and glory that had driven men to write all the billions of words that stood stacked within the room. Glimpsed it all without understanding, with no time or capacity for an understanding, understanding only that what had happened in the minds of men to drive them to create all the mumbled, scribbled, burning words had not been so much the work of many individual minds as the impact of a pattern of existence upon the minds of all mankind.*

Thatcher seemed delighted to have another human to care for. He brought her a tray of refreshments. Thatcher tells her that it has been his responsibility to care for the household for many centuries. He is proud of the high standard of service he has set. He was apologizing for not serving her sooner but there had been an emergency. Thatcher explained that Nicodemus had come from the monastery with news of an injured pilgrim and seeking the means to care for him. That this was the first pilgrim who had ever been there. He said that the young man had a bear claw necklace, and that he did not appear badly hurt. She told Thatcher that she had seen the young man that morning and that he was seeking something. "'All humans seek for something,' Thatcher said. 'We robots are quite different. We are content to serve.'"

Returning to the brothers; John told Jason and his love for wandering the stars, of his "'Sheer exuberance." …John loved the freedom of being able to go anywhere he wished at a thought. No mechanical incumbrancers. Jason had never even tried it. He had: "A love of land and a feeling of continuity, a sense of heritage, even of being a substantial part of that heritage, an earthbound certainty."

Why had John never returned to visit, Jason asked? He said he'd thought of it many times, but he felt he would have come back empty-handed for he had found nothing, learned nothing of importance to bring back. He had run himself hard. He was driven as few of his kin were, obsessed with his search. For John the obsession was the Principle.

In brief (this is a long dialog): No, he doesn't know what it is, only that it lurks near the center of the galaxy. Others had sensed it and it is they that sent word back through the mental grapevine. Yes, it had the smell of evil simply because it was so incomprehensive, so uncaring, so far beyond us. John feels it must be somehow aware of everything. Compared to it humanity is nothing, absolutely nothing.

The closer he got to it the more it frightened him. Most certainly he was too insignificant, too "microscopic," for it to even notice him. But it was just that insignificance that hurt; the weighty emotional impact. As we will see, it was far from unaware of the human race.

Why did he call it the Principle? John has no idea what form it might take; just a vast intelligence. It might have arisen from an ancient civilization. It might have been there from the very beginning. It could be matter or energy. With that knowledge it would be like a director or conductor of the universe, somehow connected to the order of the universe, perhaps the force that holds it in the shape we know. It somehow seems integral to the principles that govern men, hence the name: Principle.

John had gone as close as he could. He was sure the Principle was completely unaware of him, totally unconcerned with him. But it frightened him. Coming back from the Center he found the People. He found them with great machines of characteristic human design. There are few technological races and none with machines quite like those made on Earth. He found the language had changed, as might be expected, but it was still a sort of English. The People had been transported to three planets, all within a light year of each other. A lot of them died at first but the survivors had the knowledge and skills to start over.

They also have longevity. That means that a genius could work for century after century. That talent and skill developed over an extended time. They had interstellar travel and were on their way to Earth (another nice coincidence, just now). Despite extended lives they did not develop psychic power. Technology continued to blind them.

They also have no sense of the past. They didn't try to preserve it. They were suddenly uprooted, with only what they were wearing at the time. Those who survived set out again to develop the type of society they understood.

John is convinced it was the Principle that did this. While the Principle might not be aware of a single human being, it may be aware of the state of a planet. Again, there are few technological races, none like human beings. The Principle must have noticed this anomaly. Perhaps it did what a scientist might have done with a microbe in the lab: An experiment. It split us into two parts, one with technology the other without. Both with very long lives to develop their potential.

The People frightened John more than the Principle. To him they are truly alien. They are arrogant, they have learned nothing about the care of their planets, they are shamelessly manipulative. Coming back to Earth they would settle on it and pillage it. Jason had a sinking feeling, a sense of dread. The Earth was part of him. It was the common anchor of the family. But yes, it was also the ancestral home of the People. Did they have a claim?

Simak moved to a new scene, the music trees[47]. They were a relatively new addition. Robert brought half a dozen saplings back from the rim in 6136. The robots planted the trees on a knoll between the house and the monastery. The travelers had brought back many species over the centuries. Many did not thrive, lacking something essential to their life in Earth's soil. The trees did survive. Now there was a goodly clump of them and they played a concert every night – at times composing new ones – that are a delight to the human ear. Few of the Whitney clan had a musical sense and the art was largely lost.

The young traveler recovering at the monastery did know music. Old Jose, of his people, played the fiddle until near the end of his life. The hunters of the plains had drums, rattles and whistles, to which they danced. He found the music of the trees beautiful but there was a wrongness in them. He told Hezekiah there was a sickness in them. Then, without thinking about it, he reached out to them and in an instant the wrongness in the trees was gone.

Jason couldn't sleep that night. He was worried about the People coming back to Earth. It would change their lives, and the Indian's, and the robot's too for that matter. He got up and dressed and went out for a walk, to the bluff[48]. A thin slice of moon hovered in the West. There was a touch of frost. He could smell the tang of the fallen leaves. It was quiet. The Earth, after these long centuries, was quiet and at peace. But now, a spaceship soon to arrive threatened that. It was clear that the People were like those who had spoiled and devastated the Earth and they were returning.

[47] Music trees appear in another of Simak's short stories.
[48] At this location, at the actual point the Wisconsin flows into the Mississippi, just a few miles west of the old Simak farm, there is a park and public overlook. But it is very high. I think Simak imaginatively redesigned that landscape and made it more like the bluff at the Simak farm.

Jason had walked this path so many times he had no difficulty with it in the near dark. Around him, in the fields, the corn had been gathered into shocks, the pumpkins were ready for harvest (I can't help thinking just how many pumpkins two people can eat).

Jason thought of the robots and wondered what satisfaction they got out of taking care of him and Martha. They provided everything. They no longer served the old culture and its profit motive. The robots up the river had their own existence, their own purpose. The return of the people would change that.

Jason had a favorite place on the bluff overlooking the river. Like John Sutton he had a boulder to sit on. I think this passage says much about his experience so alone for so long on this old Earth:

> *Sitting in silence and hushed loneliness, he was surprised to find himself untouched by the loneliness. For this was home, he thought, and no man could be lonely who stayed close within his home.*

He simply could not abide the return of the People and the disruption of the natural order of things; of their sense of ownership over which they had no right. It just couldn't happen. But what could he do. He was just one old man. Was he being selfish?

Jason heard a step on the rocky path. It was Hezekiah. Hezekiah had seen Jason leave the house. He followed, he said, to give his heartfelt thanks for leaving the pilgrim in is care. Jason asked Hezekiah to sit but the robot declined, saying that it was a shameful affectation. Jason insisted.

Jason assured Hezekiah that he did not disapprove of what the robots were doing. They discussed the nature of truth. Is it knowable? How important is it to know the truth? Hezekiah said that to his small band it was all important, the reason for their existence.

Hezekiah asked what troubled him? Jason told him about John's return and about the Principle and about the return of the People. He asked Hezekiah how that would affect the robots? He thought it would not be accepted by the robots up the river and suggested Jason visit them.

The entry in the record book for Sept. 18, 2185 noted that 30 years earlier as they set out to gather a library and preserve what they could of the arts, Hezekiah, Nicodemus, Jonathon and Ebenezer asked permission to use the monastery, to study Christianity, a long-range, objective study. They too needed books and offered to help gather them.

The next morning Jason and John went to see Red Cloud. Jason told him the new developments and asked him about canoes to make a trip up the river. After they left Red Cloud squatted by the dying fire for some time, absently washing his hands in a trickle of smoke, catching himself: yes, a ritual act of purification.

Here Simak has Red Cloud thinking along the line of the search for truth. Belief is too often expressed "in the coinage of delusion?" His people had their truth, rooted in nature, in ecology. His people had learned to live "with earth and sky and wind, with weather, and the wild things, as if they were brothers to us." They took what they needed with the respect owed to living things. He walked to the edge of the water and admired a willow with autumn coloring, the floating leaves of other trees in many colors and hues. He could talk to the river and the trees and the hills and the sky, a steady, familiar dialog that

embedded all things. He cupped his hands and scooped water from the river and let it back into the river. This is how it should be. You could not grasp wind and water nor the earth.

He would send word out to the tribes about the return of the People. He lamented that these good years might soon be gone. The world had been restored only to be threatened again. He called the young men to prepare for the journey up river. They would leave in the morning.

We return to Evening Star: She has been sitting on the patio, reading, when the young traveler came up. He wasted no time. He wanted to talk to her about trees, her oak and what had happened with him and the music trees. He had connected what had happened with the trees to what he had done with the bears, that it was not the arrows and his powerful bow that had killed them but something else he did.

Evening Star halted him at that point. She introduced herself and found that his name (a hundred pages after Simak has us meet him) is David Hunt. They are the same age, he 20 and she 19. His home? He has none. His people kept moving, fleeing the Dark Walker. At times groups of his people were taken by a madness and built rafts and sailed out into the ocean, never to be seen again. He and Old Jose ran away, both fearing the bigness of the water. Finally, Old Jose, who had been alive when the people had disappeared, died. Then he came east. Evening Star told him that there was nothing further to the east, an empty land. Few of her people lived there. She told him that he could stay at the house.

Chapter Ten: Destiny

The clan, out among the stars, was polite and understanding and somewhat amused over the news of the People's return. They no longer had ties with the Earth, many never having been there. In short, they no longer cared for the Earth.

Jason and Martha asked if there might be some knowledge, in the vast accumulated experience of the star wanderers, that might help. But what they knew was superficial; they had no real understanding of the things they found.

Perhaps, thought Jason and Martha, they were just "just two old selfish people." But at stake were also the Indians and the robots. Tomorrow he and John would travel up river, he and John and Hezekiah and Red Cloud, to consult the robots at the Project.

In an entry dated Oct 9, 3935, Jason's grandfather wrote of star traveling. He had never tried it and had great reservations about it. He was uneasy that man has severed his dependence on the Earth. He was delighted that Jason and Martha chose not to try traveling. They too were attracted by the land they had so long trod.

A large ballroom upstairs has been set aside for the travelers when they choose to come home for a brief visit. Many came, alone or with family or friends, and visited and left again. They brought gifts from the stars. There are many mementoes from the stars around the house and he lamented that there is no film for cameras.

Arriving at the robot site they met Stanley, the representative of the Project. Stanley was polished and glittery, suave and genteel. He had been waiting for them near the river when the flotilla arrived. On the bluff top, some distance from the mound of the ancient city stood the Project, a great flaring structure. The robots had taken pains to preserve much of the university, especially the library, laboratories and workshops.

When Jason told Stanley the People were returning, he was visibly shaken. No, they would not be glad to have them back. In 5,000 years, the Project robots had changed. They had found a new purpose. At first, they had been lost and alone. Many stayed in the old households for a time, going through the motions. Then they took to wandering to find new masters. Stanley explained that the robots had taken care to stay away from the Indians, whom they knew had a certain animosity towards them. He said that the Whitney house had enough robots to serve its needs and that they thought it would be inappropriate to intrude further. The robots knew of a frightened little band out west, the band from which David had come. They had been field workers. They fled from the robots.

The robots had sought a new purpose. With no humans to serve, over the centuries the idea grew on them that they could work for themselves. But what could a robot work for? Fame or fortune, power or status were foreign to the robot mind. Humans, they noted, worked for self-improvement. How could that apply to robots? The idea slowly evolved to build a new and unlimited robot, one that would continue to grow and evolve over time. They built such a robot and now it has taken over the Project. It is very large and immobile but still a robot, not merely a computer. Twenty years ago, it ordered the building of the great structure around them.

Stanley was apprehensive about the return of the People. Some robots, he said, would welcome being taken back into service. Worse than that would be that the People would no longer have a use for them. But for those dedicated to the project the People would, as was their nature, feel compelled to interfere. Stanley said the project would know what to do. They had fed its memory core with vast knowledge and it was now in touch with an intelligence far out in space[49].

Change of scene: David and Evening Star, on a walk together, come upon the alien, the can of worms. David found the creature beneath the birch. He sensed it; he sensed its suffering, a feeling of "hopelessness, the doubt, the longing and the need." His mind went out to the creature and there was a change.

> *And out of the seething mass came a cry of gladness and relief—a cry of gladness and relief that had no sound at all, and a cry that somehow was intertwined with a sense of compassion and of power that had nothing to do with the can of worms. And over all of this was spread, like a mantle of hope and understanding, what the great white oak had said, or tried to say, or failed to say, and within [Evening Star's] mind the universe opened up like a flower awakened by the rising sun. For an instant she sensed and knew, not saw or heard or understood, for it all was beyond simple sight or understanding, the universe to its very core and out of its farthest edges—the mechanism of it and the purpose of its existence and the place that was held in it by everything that held the touch of life[50].*

Coming back to reality, Evening Star asked what had happened? What had David done?

> *For there had been a great happening, she knew, or perhaps great happenings and she was confused, although in the confusion there was something that was at once a happiness and wonder. She crouched against the tree and the universe seemed to lean down above her and she felt hands fastening upon her and lifting her and she was in David's arms, clinging to him as she had never clung to anyone before, glad that he was there in what she sensed must be the great moment of her life, secure within the strength of his lean, hard body.*

David responded that it wasn't just him but something they had done together.

In this scene, Simak reported what can only be described as a profound mystical experience, and one with eastern roots. Not religious, per se, but deeply personal, something linked the both the natural world and the evolving potential of humanity no longer shackled by industry and commerce. I've often wondered how well Simak understood what he was describing.

As they walked back to the river from the Project, John wondered if the Project might be talking to the Principle. Just speculation. But the Project was a super robot, and a super computer into which had been pumped a vast trove of human knowledge; the content of university libraries. The vast antenna array is used to communicate with something. With this extended frame of knowledge, it would likely be better able to communicate with something no human could hope to reach. Red Cloud is appalled by the very idea. Hezekiah can see the logic in it.

As they sat beside the river and talked, Stanley came down the path. The Project says it will not help. Hezekiah is outraged. Man, he forcefully pointed out, deserved the

[49] The Project anticipates Project Pope.
[50] A moment of Zen-like satori that perceives the totality and unity of all things. It seems much like the one she had earlier in the library when she saw the unity of the human effort to know.

robots help. Man created robots and robots owe them loyalty. Jason disagreed. Humans no longer need that loyalty and may indeed owe the robots an apology for bringing them into existence. But why will the project not help? Stanley handed them a computer printout that read: "The situation outlined is immaterial to us. We could help humanity, but there is no reason that we should. Humanity is a transient factor and is none of our concern."

Back home, uncle, as she considered him, Jason had started Evening Star reading history. She was in the library late, the large candle burned nearly to its socket. She sought to understand but there was doubt in her heart. Where was the understanding to solve the present difficulty? Where was the understanding to understand David Hunt and her feelings towards him? Where is the understanding to understand what happened to the alien?

Thinking of that moment with the alien, she recalled that once again.

> *The world had opened out and so had the universe, or what she since had thought must have been the universe, lying all spread out before her, with every nook revealed, with all the knowledge, all the reason there – a universe in which time and space had been ruled out because time and space were only put there, in the first place, to make it impossible for anyone to grasp the universe. Seen for a moment, half-sensed, a flash of insight that had been gone before there had been time for it to register on her brain, sensed and known for an instant only and then gone so quickly that it had left impression only, no certain memory and no solid knowledge, but impressions only, like a face seen in a lightning flash and then the darkness closing in.*

I should note that such feelings were expressed with Enoch Wallace in Way Station, a deeply meditative state associated with life close to the Earth. Authors write their life stories into their works. It occurs to me that Simak was on his own quest, something now clearly established, and which would continue to the end of his life. It is a search for the Grail, or the philosopher's stone, an essential truth that is essential to the human experience but, once again, something we have lost. In his stories there is often something out there we seek.

With this experience and that with the great oak, she realized she had an ability.

And where was David? He had disappeared without a word.

As the candle guttered to its end, she once again sensed "all those ghosts that huddled there among their works, the one last place left to them on earth."

Jason's grandfather, on Nov 29, 5035, had written that over the last few centuries he had finally come to feel the effects of aging. His wife, Alison, died 500 years ago, dying peacefully. At her funeral Jason had read from the *Bible*, as convention had once decreed. Many of the family came from the stars and gathered around her grave. And the robots, a little apart, had gathered, although no one had suggested that they should stand apart. It was rather their custom.

After the funeral he had sat alone in the library when there was a knock at the door. It was Hezekiah. Hezekiah told him that he had not been at the funeral because the robots had held a memorial service at the monastery. He had brought a beautifully lettered and illuminated parchment of the service, done as if in a medieval scriptorium.

He wrote further:

At first I started the journal so that the truth of what had happened to the human race would be placed upon the record and thus serve as a deterrent against the rise of myth and legend. I think that at the time I had no other reason and did not plan to continue with the journal, but by the time I had it all written down I had so acquired the habit of writing that I continued with it, putting down upon the pages all daily events, however small, as they took place – oftentimes writing down my thoughts as well as the events.

He had never written about the time Hezekiah came after the funeral and wondered about it often over the years. Why had they not asked Hezekiah to perform the burial service to start with? It was not, perhaps, really possible then. He had read the service for the dead with little feeling of faith. The robots were trying to keep faith alive. And Red Cloud's people had something, if not a belief then an attitude that spoke to the spiritual. It was not belief, not empty ritual, but a way of life for them. For man, even before the Disappearance, faith had been allowed to die.

I have thought much on this the last number of years, sitting on the patio and watching the seasons pass. In the process I have become a student of the sky and know all the clouds there are and have firmly fixed in mind the various hues of blue that the sky can show – the washed-out, almost invisible blue of a hot, summer noon; the soft robin's egg, sometimes almost greenish blue of a late springtime evening, the darker, almost violet blue of fall. I have become a connoisseur of the coloring that the leaves take on in autumn and I know all the voices and moods of the woods and river valley. I have, in a measure, entered into communion with nature, and in this wise have followed in the footsteps of Red Cloud and his people, although I am sure that their understanding and their emotions are more fine-tuned than mine are. I have seen, however, the roll of seasons, the birth and death of leaves, the glitter of the stars on more nights than I can number and from all this as from nothing else I have gained a sense of a purpose and an orderliness which it does not seem to me can have stemmed from accident alone.

It seems to me, thinking of it, that there must be some universal plan which set in motion the orbiting of the electrons about the nucleus and the slower, more majestic orbit of the galaxies about one another to the very edge of space. There is a plan, it seems to me, that reaches out from the electron to the rim of the universe and what this plan may be or how it came about is beyond my feeble intellect. But if we are looking for something on which to pin our faith – and, indeed, our hope – the plan might well be it. I think we have thought too small and have been too afraid.

Back to the present with the crashing close of the music tree concert for the night. It was a fine night, Jason thought, for the season. He wondered about David's strange disappearance. And the alien, the can of worms, had disappeared as well. Perhaps David had fled before his Dark Walker. He was afraid of it. It most likely didn't exist. He reflected that his long-held belief that he was the anchorman of Earth, now seemed only another self-sustained illusion. With the people coming back he could be swept aside, hardly noticed, as if he had never been there. But there was the matter of injustice. Enough injustice had already been visited on the Indians, and on the robots as well, for that matter. They must have their chance.

There was something lethal about the human race; lethal to itself and everything it encountered. Jason thought it had started when the first farmer planted seeds and thus sought to secure the land – ownership of the land. Erecting fences and walls and then fortifications. There is security in ownership (the deadly theme of *City*).

The Indians did not own the land, indeed spurned the very idea of anyone owning it. He doubted the robots had any sense of ownership of things (they seemed to possess

nothing). It was only human beings and Jason considered it a sickness. But what could he do to stop the People?

Stanley was an enigma. He had been deeply concerned about the return of the People. The Project, however, was completely unconcerned. But then the Project robots had installed a radio and beacon on the roof. And just then Thatcher came to tell him that someone was calling on that radio. He sent Thatcher to get Red Cloud, and also to ask Red Cloud to send someone for Stanley. And to send for Hezekiah.

The voice on the radio said that it was known that there were humans and robots on Earth, but they were surprised that it was so easy to find them. Jason welcomed them back. They would be there in the morning. The cornfield would be fine for a landing spot for a small shuttle.

Jason and Martha and John were sitting by the fire when Hezekiah came. They told him to sit, that he was expected to act like the humans in the house, even if he didn't need to. Hezekiah expressed hope that he might be able to talk to the visitor about religion and about how it had developed over the years they had been away. John told him there was no evidence of religion on their planets.

Red Cloud arrived. He called the gathering a wake. He was pessimistic. He expressed his doubt that the People would have changed; they never do. It's the influence of the machine on men. The machine gets in between man and the world, "It brutalizes him," and makes him inhuman.

The shuttle arrived at dawn. The two occupants were greeted by four humans and one robot – the other robots staying out of sight, watching. The visitors stressed that they were not armed but they were "protected." They said they had only recently learned that a few humans had been missed. No, they did not know what had taken them. They knew the robots had been left behind. They also knew there were star travelers and telepathy. They had come, they said, because they wanted these things. And they said they had much of value to give in return.

Simak made another flashback to a journal entry by Jason's grandfather, (5152) who observed that even before the Disappearance, the old had been left behind. Their friends died and they were left alone – only to become increasingly more sufficient to themselves. They found their journey through life, as it had begun to run its course, like climbing a mountain with a heavy pack of things collected along the way. The farther they go the more stuff they decide to leave behind, winnowing the chaff of their lives as they came to the end of it, coming to a time they could see with a marvelous clarity.

> *It seems to me that even now I can see farther and with greater clarity, although perhaps neither so far nor so clear as might be the case closer to the end. For, as yet, I cannot discern what I am looking for – the path and promise for the mankind that I know.*

With the Disappearance much of the old culture had been automatically shed. There was little sense of loss, rather a hope for a second start. The new start was not for him, because he was already old, but for the young with life ahead of them, without the accumulation of so much culture to weigh them down. And what form would the new start take? Perhaps it was still simply too early to tell. Standing on the top of his mountain, he could only speculate: "I strain my eyes to look into the future."

Maybe the day would come when men could achieve godlike power over matter:

Will they be able, by the power of mind alone, to engineer a planet, converting it from a useless mass of matter to an abode of life? Will they be able to alter the genetics of a life form, by the power of mind alone, refashioning it into a more significant and more satisfactory life form? Perhaps more importantly, will they be able to free the minds of universal intelligences from the chains and shackles that they carry from the olden days of their evolutionary cycle so that the intelligences become reasonable and compassionate intelligences?

What is the path to such an end:

Before such a situation can obtain there must be certain progress made. We must grow into this new ability of ours to make things happen without the aid of silly mechanical contrivances and the growth will not be rapid.

But perhaps there is a point beyond which man could not go. Perhaps there would be another point like the one that ended in the Disappearance. Man seemed unstoppable in the pursuit of the future. It is not a matter of will man persist but whether we have the right; what makes us special?

The People wanted to send small numbers to learn the parapsychic skills. They refuse to believe why they can't. Jason tried to explain that you are either parapsychic or you are technical; you cannot be both. Somehow, they are mutually exclusive.

If they want to become parapsychic then they don't have to come to Earth. They need rather to shed all the technology and then it would still take a couple of thousand years, maybe. Jason doesn't believe it is something that can be taught but rather something that must be slowly discovered.

The two men from space continued to argue their case. They offer their technology. They are told that neither the Whitney clan nor the Indians would touch the stuff. They promised treaties and agreements to leave North America alone. Jason countered that new treaties would not be kept any better than the old one. The Indians who had once owned the continent had been robbed of it, slaughtered for their land and finally forced onto reservations. They might make promises with the best of intent, but history proved that those treaties would be broken. Technological society must expand.

The two men became belligerent. This was their planet. They claimed it as home. Jason refuted them. He believed they had known where Earth was for years. But then they learned there was something there of value – the parapsychic abilities. There was no compassion in them but only a cold hard calculation of profit. They had a job to do and meant to do it. "All was sacrificed to progress."

At this point Stanley arrived, unceremoniously. The visitors protested his abrupt appearance. Jason informed them that he had been invited. Stanley told them that the Project had been communicating with an intelligence near the center of the galaxy and the intelligence had sent a message: "Leave Earth alone. No interference is allowed. It also is a part of the experiment."

At that moment Jason knew for sure the Project was talking to the Principles. John had been right about the Principle conducting an experiment (reminds you of the Creator story). Those left on Earth had not been missed by accident. Two groups had evolved.

One of those three experiments (were there others on other continents?) had failed. Or had it? There was David Hunt. There was the matter of the change in the music trees. The robots seemed to have had the story and passed it to Thatcher.

And then there were the robots, another strain in the experiment. It was their Project that had advanced to the point of communicating with the Principle.

And speaking of David. He was struggling with his feelings and churning thoughts: He had a power that could kill, and it could also heal. He found the beginning of an answer. He decided to return to the great stone house. He wanted to see Evening Star. He still carried his bow and arrows, out of habit, but realized he no longer had need of them. Then he saw the gleaming metal ship in the field next to the house. He sensed danger. A fear gripped him. Then, coming around the ship, he saw a dark shape. It was huge. It was the Dark Walker. Without thinking he drew and shot an arrow. The arrow went through the figure and clanged against the ship. But once again his mind reached out and the Walker was no longer there. He sank to his knees, overcome. The alien was close to his heel. It had been following him. It was a nuisance, but he could not communicate with it. Now the can of worms huddled close, trying to comfort him.

He threw away the bow and arrows and bear claw necklace (as had Enoch discarded his symbols). The arrows had not affected the Dark Walker. Was it only a shadow of the mind, something that had long embedded itself in the human collective consciousness? But he had vanquished it. It was no more forever.

He found Evening Star in the study:

> *It is so strange about the two of us, he said. I can make things well, I can cure the sick. You can see everything there is and make me see it, too; everything there is comes clear inside your mind. She said nothing. But, within her mind, she told Grandfather Oak: It is a new beginning…*

The emissaries from the People departed the Earth. John took his leave; confident the Earth was now safe. He and Jason knew they would probably try to come back, and they would undoubtedly be stopped. That threat was over. They would have to follow their own course of evolution.

They spoke a bit more about the Principle and the Project, about how the Principle could have spoken to humans but did not. It spoke with the Project, like to like. If the Principle is not a machine, as John says he can attest, then what is the Project? It must be the direction of evolution for the robots. The robots are friends of man, made so much like us. But they have their own values and their own destiny now.

John asked about the alien. Jason told him it was gone. It had wanted to thank David, but David could not hear it. It came to Jason. Jason hasn't told David yet. What the alien said might frighten him. But he did tell Hezekiah. Why, asked John? Does Jason think the alien really now has a soul? Jason is not sure; a new state of mind yes, but a soul?

At the monastery, Hezekiah tramped up and down the garden, troubled by what Jason had told him about the alien and its soul. A chilled wind blew, and he shivered, caught himself, disgusted and a little frightened: Did he think he was becoming human with all his affectations? And he shivered again at the thought of the Principle.

No, it can't be so! God must be, forever, a kindly old (human) gentleman, with a long, white flowing beard.

A PHILOSOPHY OF A CHOICE OF GODS

A Choice of Gods unfolds on an empty world. Like *City* the setting is a house on a hill, and like *Way Station* it is on a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers, Simak's home country. There live two human beings, Jason and Martha Whitney, who have occupied that great house for 5,000 years since the time humanity disappeared from Earth. Jason lives close to the land which he has walked, like Enoch Wallace, every day, and many days sits at his desk surrounded by a vast library of ancient tomes and keeps a journal, again like Enoch, one started by his grandfather some fifty years after the disappearance when he realized he and the other had the gift of a greatly extended lifespan.

Jason Whitney is very like Enoch Wallace in his attention to cataloging the intelligence of the galaxy. Much of what he writes about is the scattered family out among the stars with whom Martha is in daily contact. They are all accomplished telepaths. Teleportation is also a common ability. For three thousand years they have explored the galaxy, at times bringing home artifacts: but every day gossiping with Martha "on the line."

Only Jason and Martha, like Jason's grandfather and grandmother, decided to stay on earth. Their every need is met by a band of robots who farm the land, care for the house, and serve the household. Jenkins becomes Thatcher who conscientiously and proudly runs the household.

There is another group who have formed their own culture. Scattered on the plains is an extended tribe of Native Americans, a small tribe of which had been left behind. They had chosen to return to their ancestral ways of living in harmony with nature. They too declined the stars in favor of a bountiful earth. Their path was to grow close to the Earth and to each other. Earth has become a sanctuary for the remnant of humanity who chose to identify with it. The technology of the industrial world was quickly lost, there being no means to maintain it. There is a splendid isolation and emptiness and aloneness and yet full of the round of daily life for Jason and of communion with the far-flung family for Martha and of the world of nature for the Indians. It is truly a Zen-like or Taoist state of mind.

The setting is autumn. Simak wasted little time before taking us on a walk with Jason, like those of Enoch and John and Asher Sutton, and others in later stories,to enjoy the glory of the fading year. Simak took a moment to dwell on the fact that the aging process in humans has slowed. Jason and Martha were barely out of their teens at the time of the disappearance 5,000 years ago. They are middle aged now. Like Jason's grandfather, who was this age at the disappearance, they expect to live another 3,000 years. There is no ennui in them. Each day is lived for itself.

Simak introduced us to several of the Indians and a wandering youth from another small remnant band on the West Coast, now gone save he. David has evolved a unique capacity. The leader of the Indians, Red Cloud, is a friend of Jason's since just after the disappearance. Jason and Red Cloud agree that their love of the land and of their daily lives only increases with time. There is a young Indian maiden who finds herself on the

boundary between her tradition and a love of books, who communes with a grandfather oak but is drawn to the tradition held bound in Jason's library. She is a nexus of the story.

And then there are the robots who also play critical roles in the plot. From the chief steward of the family, Thatcher, to the leader of a group of four robots who have taken up the monastic life and the study of religious texts, Hezekiah, and the "wild robots" who wander the land, to the group up river who are building some kind of great project under the leadership of Stanley.

Simak gave considerable space to the life of Jason and Martha and the Indians, grounding them in their daily routine and a deep and abiding love of the Earth. Jason's life is manorial. He has no need to work for the robots take care of everything. The Indians will have nothing to do with the robots but work rest lightly on them as the Earth provides its abundance with little toil. We know nothing of the life of the star dwellers save they have nothing to do with machinery. They all seem to live carefree lives, wandering like gypsies and free to travel without burden or restriction. They, like the listeners and travelers of other stories, have accumulated a vast array of knowledge, including sophisticated technologies, but these are only curiosities. They find no practical application for gadgets and gizmos. The house, like Enoch's, is filled with mementoes, gifts returned by the travelers in their rare visits. The most notable of these gifts are the music trees planted close by that each night tune up and play a beautiful concert.

The role of technology in human history and human evolutionary development is a central theme of *A Choice of Gods*. Other than the robots, which, like Jenkins run without repair for an eternity, there are no mechanical contrivances. There is no desire for them. The robots had been created as household servants and knew nothing of mechanics and none of the humans possessed the knowledge to teach them. As farm equipment and trucks broke down, they took up the use of horses. They are good carpenters and blacksmiths but no skill beyond that. Ironically it is this apex of technology that gives humans complete freedom from toil.

As in other stories, Simak implies that technology should provide our needs and give us the leisure to pursue a life of deeper human experience. Some 2,000 years after the loss of technology, the paranormal abilities begin to appear, especially telepathy and teleportation which seem to be the common inheritance of all human beings, and certain alien races. Jason has come to the conclusion that technology did in fact deprive the human race of these abilities, a point that will mark the crisis of the plot.

Religion is another major theme of *A Choice of Gods*. The human remnant has long since lost, if they indeed ever had, a sense of religion. Jason pointed out that religion had virtually disappeared by the time of the Disappearance. Even the Indians have given up religion in a traditional sense. They still maintain some of the old practices but have given up a belief in the supernatural. They find their inspiration in nature. They have the power to communicate with trees and animals and water and stones; the spirits of nature. Early in the book Simak takes us to visit and commune with an ancient oak with Evening Star who receive that ancient being's benediction. Red Cloud has that profound sense of communion with the Earth. Jason too has an incredible sensitivity to nature, if not that of the Indians. Jason and Evening Star also share a sense of the ancient voices of the authors of the books

that line the walls of the great library of the house that whisper to them as they read and sit and think.

There is something "out there" as well. The travelers have sensed the presence of something that has come to be called the Principle, a vast, incomprehensible, lurking intelligence that seems to reside at the center of the galaxy; cold, indifferent and as far above human intelligence as the human is above the microbe. The Principle, like an unknown god, has, we will learn, played a defining role in human history and will stand in final judgment over the fate of the human race at the conclusion of the book.

Religion is now pursued, with great irony, by Hezekiah's little group of robots who have taken up residence in a monastery within sight of the house. They have poured over sacred text collected as they assisted Jason cull a sample of human culture, before it turned to dust, from the libraries and museums they could reach. For those millennia they have worked to boil down and synthesize the texts at their disposal. And they have chosen to practice a Christian devotion. Hezekiah has taken upon himself the sense of shame and quilt associated with the sinful nature of conscious awareness. He struggles with the fact that he is a being created by humans, a mechanical entity without, he believes, a soul, but desperately in search of that principle and practice that will give life a deeper and eternal meaning.

Meanwhile, Jason, whose talent is an ability to communicate with aliens, finds one who has journeyed, like the humans who travel the stars, to the Earth, after conversing with one of the family, in search of its soul. These aliens, like the traveling humans, teleport. They have also avoided technology. But never before had one come in search of a soul.

Two other characters play key roles in the drama of *A Choice of Gods*, the young traveler from the West, David, and Jason's long missing brother John, one of the first to set out for the stars and from whom he had never heard. David has arrived on the bluff on the west side of the Mississippi river and gazing over the autumn wonder and at the house above the opposite bank, which he senses is the goal of the urge in his soul that had sent him questing towards the rising sun for so long. And John has arrived from the stars with news of the Principle and the pending return of the People to Earth. The People are those, and their descendants, who Disappeared 5,000 years before.

The characters and themes introduced, as Jason returned from his walk, a thunderstorm begins to brew, signally the climatic threat to the settled and familiar lives of the players and the unfolding of the crisis that will bring them all together in an epic drama that will, in the best of Simak style, take many pages yet to develop. Jason had opened the record book that morning but found nothing to write, now as he gazes on the gathering storm clouds, he concludes that there is much to record about that day. And he felt totally inadequate to deal with the crisis.

Jason's grandfather wondered about what had happened to the teaming billions who had disappeared from the Earth and if there had been a reason for those left behind. He mused on the terrible condition of the world in those days with eight billion people living in poverty and uncertainty as the resources of the Earth had been depleted and its economy stretched to the breaking point. The house itself was something of a miracle. Jason's father wrote that the house had been built 150 years earlier (about the middle of the twentieth

century) by his grandfather. It was made of stone in a then archaic style, built to last and of a size to accommodate the 67 people left behind without any great inconvenience. It was built on land bought from the monastery after it had fallen into debt. It was set in a rare stretch of good agricultural land.

As John and Jason set down to get reacquainted and talk of the Principle and the People, Simak highlights this theme by visiting the monastery and the robots and looking at their struggle to find God and a soul. Only rarely had Simak attempted to penetrate the psyche of the robots as he did in this book[51]. Hezekiah is a very human-like entity. He is sentient, self-aware, driven by a sense of inadequacy, guilt and shame over his pretense to undertake the work of humans, but realizing the job has fallen on him and his three companions by default. As the storm breaks, he is pacing the garden engaging in a "flight of fancy," as he sees a ladder leading to heaven in the clouds for which he rebukes himself. He is consumed with guilt over his human affectations, his wearing of clerical robes, his love of sitting and pacing, his impulse to seek shelter from the storm despite being completely impervious to wet and cold. But as he berates his all too human weaknesses and faithlessness, he found David knocked unconscious by the windblown gate and carried him to the monastery to care for him. The first pilgrim and the first human in all those millennia to come in need of aid. In his care of David, Hezekiah feels first an abiding sense of fulfillment and then an overpowering angst. In this act of care, he finds more meaning than in the many centuries of study. Is this in fact the secret of being human: the care of one's fellows? But as a mechanical, created being, designed only to serve human needs, he is reduced to hunkering on the floor in horror of his pretenses to be equal to his creator.

Jason's brother John described his impression of the Principle. It's not an innately evil thing, just so distantly indifferent it has a smell of evil. It is so distant and uncaring that they see it as something worse than evil. And setting the tone of evil they turn to the People. Fleeing a too-close encounter with the Principle, John landed on one of the three worlds of the vanished people. He learned that they were transported there in an instant and empty-handed. Many died at first but they soon reestablished life as they had on earth, complete with machines. They too were long lived and the minds of engineers and scientists with millennia to work had created a vast advancement in technology, including star travel. The new planets gave them the resources to rebuild a vital civilization and they did prosper. They had not developed the paranormal power of the Whitney clan but sought to learn of those abilities and were now on the way to Earth for that purpose and to reclaim the Earth.

Jason grew cold with the fear, and loathing, of the image of how the People would unsettle his life and Martha's and the Indian's. He saw himself as a steward and the Earth as something sacred and the machine technology as a demonic defilement of the pristine sanctuary, the slowly healing earth. Was he the representative and defender of the planet and the rights of its inhabitants, human and robots alike? But he also felt selfish and foolish: What right did an old man and woman have to tell these other children of the Earth that they could not come back home?

[51] And much further in Project Pope, a book about a robot Vatican.

Meanwhile, Evening Star is in the library having a mystical experience of the ghost of the authors of the books there. For here those many voices begin to merge into one, to merge the voices of different times and subjects into a common synthesis. She reflected on what had driven those thousands of people to pen those billions of words. What were they searching for? And what did they find? And what did it have to do with this day? Her people were literate but had few books and cared to own no more. But here she was attracted to the reality of the vast accumulation of human experience. Each of their individual minds had, often in isolation, striven to grasp an understanding of the meaning of life and of their personal existence, just as she did now. But then enters Thatcher, upset that his ordered routine of service had been interrupted by one of the robots from the monastery who had come to seek blankets and food and the means for making a fire in order to aid a young injured man, the man she had seen just after her experience with grandfather oak, the young man with the necklace of bear claws, one for each he had killed. Thatcher commented that the young man had been seeking something, that all humans seek something, but robots are content to serve.

Back to John and Jason. John has a love of wandering as strong and passionate as Jason's love of the land and house. Nay, he is driven to explore, to push beyond the limits of others. He, like David, was driven by the need to find something. He could not bear to come home all those thousands of years because he had not found it. He had no news. Now he had gotten so close to the Principle that he had fled in terror. Others had sensed it. Many had told Martha of their experience of that force or what they had heard from others who had gotten closer to it. John tried to explain his troubling experience of that last encounter with the Principle but had no words for it. He is mostly aware that it is a vast intelligence, possible older than the universe we know. It must be too old to be an ancient evolved race. It is nothing like any of the vast number of races he has encountered, many of which are strange beyond human imagination.

He speculated that it is incomprehensibly ancient, which suggests a steady-state universe, one with no beginning. Perhaps it had been the engineer of matter and life that brought the universe into being. He was sure it was totally unaware of him but speculated that it might sense the workings of a planetary society. He believed it had the capacity to intervene with the power necessary to remove billions of people from one planet and plant them on three others that would support their life and do so in the blink of an eye.

The People had returned to the way of life that they had lost, mechanical, impersonal. They had somehow forgotten what had happened to them, that they had a life before they were transported by some unknown force. They had been too busy surviving to think about that life before, to write a history of one that had not been good. They had no vestige of paranormal powers. John believes the Principle had found the human experiment wanting and had intervened, like a scientist with a virus, isolating it and studying it to see what it did, to see if the strain ran true. And the strain did run true on all three planets. Some variations yes but they came together after they had starships and formed a single culture. They had no sense of religion or spirit. In them was a "naked arrogance," that saw property and matter and other human beings as something to be manipulated and used.

Sleepless, Jason took a walk to the bluff top. There is a glimmer of moonlight and the night is crisp with a light frost. The earth is beautiful and quiet and the air smells of fallen leaves. He found his rock, like John Sutton's and Enoch's, and sat gathering the folds of his cape about him against the chill, sitting in silence and with a sense of loneliness but that Simak-like loneliness of being content with oneself and one's place in life. Except the troubling thought that all this would be lost when the People returned. He, like the Indians, had no sense of owning this land. The People would have the need to possess it again. He lived with the land in harmony. They would despoil it again. They would contaminate it with their machines; plunder it for its resources. For that is what it meant to be human.

As he sat Hezekiah came to join him, having seen him walk out on the path from the Monastery where he too was pacing the night with a troubled soul. Jason rejected his groveling humility and had him sit and converse as one being to another. They talk a bit about religion and the work of the robots at the monastery. Then Hezekiah turned to the subject of Jason's worry. Jason knew that the robots had been gossiping and that the word of John's return and likely of their conversation had reached the monastery, for robots constantly watched humans, and like fellow villagers, gossiped endlessly among themselves about the affairs of humans. But Hezekiah had a thought. Why not travel up river to the robot Project and talk to them about the return of the People. They too would be affected.

The next morning Jason and John went to talk to Red Cloud about the return of the People and about a trip up river to speak to the other robots. After Jason and John left, Red Cloud mused next to the dying campfire. He caught himself in the old habit of washing, purifying, his hands in the trickle of smoke. He got up and took a meditative walk to the river where he pondered on the Indian's relationship to the Earth and how that would come to an end. The river and the trees and the life among them talk to him. He dipped his hands into the water and let the water run between his hands, something of another symbol of ablution but one as well of letting go, of not grasping, of not owning. Then he stood up. He would call the tribes together and he would have preparations made for the trip up river tomorrow.

At the robot project they met Stanley, a human formed robot refined to perfection. He showed a cultivated civility and explained the Project to his visitors. The robots, no longer with humans to serve, had to find a new purpose for existence. Gradually the Project evolved, a super robot, not just a vast computer but a robotic personality, only too large to be mobile (precursor of *Project Pope*). They had gleaned the knowledge of libraries and universities; small bands of robots traveling the country to gather knowledge and resources, and had fed the equivalent of hundreds of university educations into the Project. But the Project wanted more so they had constructed a vast sensor array and now the Project was in communication with a vast intelligence somewhere near the center of the galaxy. Jason and John recognize this as the Principle.

Stanley was visibly shaken by the news of the return of the people. He said that some robots would go back into service but that was impossible for the Project robots who now had their new purpose. If there was an evolutionary path for robots, they knew it was in the Project. Stanley can only offer to consult with the Project. It didn't take long. The Project would take no action because in the long run it made no difference. Humanity is

only a transient factor and of no concern. They did install a beacon at the house and a radio with which the arriving humans could find them.

Meanwhile David and Evening Star find the alien who had come in search of a soul and together they join together in a profoundly mystical union and enter the alien's being. Evening Star explained what can only be described as an experience of Satori, a merger with the all. She has the gift of this mystical power of understanding. David has the power to heal. And together they have the power to join as one consciousness. Shortly before, during the concert of the music trees, David had sensed an imbalance in them, a weakening, and without thought, reached out and remedied it. He renewed their life. Now he did the same for the alien. He gave it a soul. Stunned by the experience, he left Evening Star and drifted into the forest on his own.

Meanwhile, back at the house, Jason sat to read a passage from his grandfather, one musing on the progress of age as he reached the end of his extended life, much as Simak was doing (if not the end then a full ripeness, for Simak had much living yet to do). Jason's grandfather talked about the end of life like a journey up a mountain. Wearying of the burdens of life they are cast aside to lighten the load until at the top one was free of hindrance and blessed with a broad prospect from which to view and gain a better understanding of life. This was just after the death of his wife. He mused about Hezekiah and the robots and their search for religion. Hezekiah had brought him a memorial service artfully calligraphed and illuminated like a medieval manuscript. Man had given up religion. He wondered if he had been right acquiescing to Hezekiah's petition to take over the monastery. But then perhaps Hezekiah should have read the service at the funeral for he was more fit than any human to officiate. He mused about his habit of recording his memories in the record book to preserve some record of the fate of the human race so that it would not be lost but he was not sure who would read it. He hoped Jason and Martha would stay with the house for he saw in them the same love he had for the house and the land and the Earth itself, an Earth he had never been able to leave even after all the rest of the family had departed for the stars. He had lived for three thousand years. He reflected that in the long days he had become an acute student of the skies and of the coloring of the leaves in fall and the sense of purpose and orderliness he found in the world. There did seem to be a plan to it all. Following the disappearance, the process of shedding human culture had begun. What they lost, he concluded, they were better off without. Now towards the end of his own life he had shed much and standing on his own mountain peak he felt he had a distant view of the way things are and should be. He was happy and content. He had seen the promise in Man, in the members of the clan who had gone out to the stars, and perhaps as they evolved, they would gain new powers to meld with matter and life and by mere thought alone provide all their needs, reach deep understanding, come to be in peace and harmony with all things. There was thus a destiny in the remnants of humanity.

Jason's muses were interrupted. Thatcher came to tell him someone was calling on the radio. The ship from the People's world had arrived. He sent for Red Cloud and Hezekiah and for someone to go up river to tell Stanley. Two men landed the next morning, silently in the field next to the house, at the cost of only a couple of pumpkins. They had come to bargain for the mental powers they had heard about. They had plenty to give in

return. Jason tried to explain to them that they had no needs but far more importantly that the abilities could not be taught. He told them that they could only be achieved if they gave up technology for perhaps thousands of years but even then, he wasn't sure. He was only sure that the abilities would not appear among a technological species.

The two representatives refused to believe them. They pressed their case. The People would send a small number to learn parapsychic skills. Jason again tries to explain that these skills cannot be taught. The two insist that he is bluffing, holding out for more for that is the way they think. They promise to tread lightly, to avoid North America and leave the Indians alone. But treaties are made to be broken Jason and friends respond. It is clear that human beings do not have the capacity to keep their promises no matter how well intentioned the offer. They will be broken just as all the others had been. A technological civilization is never satisfied. As the words turned bitter Stanley arrived and he has a printed message from the Project. The Project talked to the Principle and the Principle had issued an order. The People are to leave Earth alone. They are to depart and never return. They are told that this is an experiment and no interference is allowed. The supreme judge has ruled. The humans and robots of Earth are relieved.

Jason reflected on what the experiment meant. There had been three bands of humans and the robots, four groups. The robots had found their own path of destiny. Two of the human groups had prospered and developed in their distinct way. The group on the West Coast, an impoverished and unlettered people, had failed, running in fear of a shadow, the Dark Walker, they saw stalking the land.

Outside the house, David, returning, saw the space shuttle and behind it the Dark Walker itself. Like Peter, in *City*, he tried to shoot it with his bow and failed. Then like Peter he drew from within himself a burst of raw and powerful energy and vanquished that shadow, the shadow of a technology that had haunted and destroyed his people. Unlike Peter this is not an expression of innate violence but of spiritual transformation for David. He discarded his bow and bear claw necklace (As Enoch discarded his rifle) for now he had recognized the power within him and his innate humanity. He joined Evening Star and they will help define the future of Man on Earth. It is they who will inherit the house and land and books and records from Jason and Martha, to continue the human presence on Earth and pursue the path of evolution and destiny. I see in them a new Adam and Eve only they will inherit the Garden of Eden that is the good Earth and the tree of knowledge that is the library. They will join two great streams, the deep tradition and longing of two peoples, and through them the destiny of humanity will be realized.

And in his monastery, Hezekiah cannot accept the Principle. God must be in the image of Man, a man with a white flowing beard and hair.

Chapter Eleven: The Glooming

The word "glooming" is perhaps too closely associated with "gloom." There is, of course, a lot of gloominess, pessimism in Simak's writing. But there is also a lingering hope, if not for humankind as a whole, at least for a few. "Glooming" means evening. It suggests the end of a day or a life, an "autumn" land, the season Simak obviously most loved.

In 1973, the year following *A Choice of Gods*, Simak turned 70. He was well beyond the usual age of retirement, yet he chose to keep working at the newspaper job he must have loved. He had been writing science fiction for over 40 years and there was much more yet to come. During the next ten years he continued his "novel-a-year" output. He also wrote a few short stories. A lot of his short stories were published in collections and anthologies. In 1973 he was honored with the first Fandom Hall of Fame award. In 1976 he was the third science fiction writer to receive the Nebula Grand Master Award. In 1978 came a Jupiter Award. Another Nebula was awarded to him in 1980. In 1981 he received the Locus Award and another Hugo. His regular writing continued until 1982 with the publication of two novels after which, due to his own illness and the loss of his wife, he wrote nothing for four years. In 1986 he published one last novel. In 1988, his last year, he was awarded the Bram Stoker Life Achievement Award.

In attempting to understand Simak's style I have categorized his novels into three types: Science Fiction, Pastoral and Fantasy. I have to admit that these categories are loose, but I think they do some justice to his basic approach to writing. I would point out that these categories do not seem to readily embrace his short stories as I find many are not so easily pigeonholed. There are, in addition, two major sub-themes in his novels: Philosophy and the Quest. I found most of his books include one or the other theme and several I would argue include both. I want to give these a more visual form:

Types:	**Sub-themes:**
Science Fiction	Philosophy
Pastoral	Quest
Fantasy	

"Science Fiction" (the term as employed by John Campbell) is essentially the fictionalization of scientific concepts or progress. It often involves rockets and computers and technology of some type as a major theme. Simak's early books, *The Creator, Cosmic Engineers*, and *Empire*, are clearly this type of science fiction. True, we find the beginning of the sub-themes that Simak developed more fully in his later works but only in passing, primarily as comments on social conditions that add color but not necessarily used as a backdrop to the story. *The Trouble with Tyco* (1961), with rockets and lunar rovers, was his last pure science fiction novel. Some of his later novels I have included in the category of science fiction more as a matter of genre, not because they are based on fictionalized science but rather because they have little of either the pastoral or quest elements of those novels that best define these types Simak later wrote. His fantasy seems mostly a quest.

Simak did not, of course, invent pastoral fiction but he played a major part in developing and refined the genre for science fiction. Robert Ruark's *The Old Man and the*

Boy, a book Simak loved, was an archetype of the form. Much of Steinbeck and Hemingway were pastoral, if not gentle. The British have a tradition of pastoral fiction that reflects a deep and time-honored love of the countryside. Thomas Jefferson praised the pastoral life and dreaded the onset of large-scale manufacturing.

The pastoral theme is embedded in American culture. The idea surfaced in later political movements, in Simak's generation for example, with the Populists. The American Transcendentalist produced both literature and philosophy of a way of life they saw as being rapidly eroded away by industrialization. American and British Arts and Crafts writers and painters, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dwelt upon the theme of a return to the simple life. The British Distributist, American Southern Agrarians, Catholic Agrarians, Ralph Borsodi, Wendel Berry and others developed this ideal. Willa Cather, a generation before Simak, who grew up in the rural midwest, wrote beautiful pastoral fiction as did Simak's contemporary, almost neighbor and sometimes science fiction writer, August Derleth. In the field of science fiction, however, the pastoral setting was Simak's by general acclimation. And he gave it a very special style.

Simak's country settings took on brilliant clarity. Most of his scenes were set, often explicitly, in the Millville township area, along the lower stretch and usually (but not always) south bank of the Wisconsin River, and near the junction of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. There is a certain magical quality about that country[52]. Returning again and again to those bluffs and rivers, the valleys, the homefolk, and small creatures, Simak readers come to feel that it is a second home. For many of us it is very much like a fond memory of a long-lost place, albeit an idealized and cozy dream of a place.

The first time I traveled to Millville I knew the place. I drove into a valley just east of Millville Township which had a mystical, Simak-like aura. Standing by the road watching me go by was a Raccoon, a characteristic creature we find in several of his stories. It didn't seem the least impressed that I was there.

Simak's pastoral scenery is, I believe, first and foremost, an idealization of his childhood, a time he must have truly loved. He described it well. I knew the country when I visited but I also sensed that it was only the inspiration of Simak's idealized setting. The passages, especially in *A Choice of Gods*, about nature, rank with the most sensitive found in the best naturalist and environmental literature. The Wisconsin River valley is beautiful.

The pastoral setting is, I believe, also protest. He clearly found much amiss in modern, industrial society—not just the development and use of horrific weapons, but the way in which technology alters people's lives, especially those who live in cities. He had no faith in government, religion, public education and especially commerce. All of these can be more or less abandoned in his countryside.

The third major theme of Simak's writing is fantasy, an amalgam of the parapsychic with myth and legend. This takes full form with *The Goblin Reservation*, another book set at the junction of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers, possibly along the north bank, traveling east from Prairie du Chien, into a reservation populated by goblins and brownies and trolls and banshees and dragons. The following year he wrote another fantasy in which he laid out his story of the fairy myth in *Out of their Minds*. Both of these books have a

[52] But Simak didn't write about the gnats and mosquitos the plague the region with perhaps one exception.

modern setting and the former a degree of science fiction. He would later write several 'pure' fantasy books, books that would fit the 'sword and sorcery' genre, and these too were built around his basic quest theme.

There have always been popular stories of paranormal capabilities, witchcraft, and extraordinary, even god-like, powers[53]. There was a considerable surge in interests in occult phenomena during the late nineteen and into the twentieth century with groups like the Theosophists and Rosicrucians. There was a surge of interest in the supernatural with the New Age Movement towards the end of Simak's life—systems of belief and practices that step out of reality into imaginative fantasy. There has also been a great deal of legitimate research into paranormal abilities in universities for years. Simak depicted paranormal powers as entirely natural but rarely realized. The lack of progress in developing these powers, he attributed to our inability to detach ourselves from an obsession with a non-human, mechanical technology. Some of his favorite paranormal abilities require a considerable leap of imagination, like teleportation. But he gave us two very basic and acceptable forms that are often experienced in daily life: The hunch and rapport. Hunches are common to most of us, are widely taken for granted and have little if any paranormal significance. Best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell has recently published a book called *Blink*, which investigates research into the hunch.

Simak did his part with science. He was an award-winning science writer and editor and knew many scientific subjects intimately. But increasingly we stepped into a twilight zone of what I would call parascience. There was nothing new about interests in paranormal mental abilities. They are, in fact, deeply embedded in folklore. I grew up in the rural south with an understanding that there was something of folk magic. A graduate school professor wrote a book about the magic of his grandmother's generation in a rural part of Germany. I think the occult writers such as the Theosophist, took "magic" to a level that is not really representative of its expression in folk traditions. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a description of fairies (small, winged people) and other creatures (*The Coming of the Fairies*, 1922), especially the latter, that I find vaguely similar to those used by Simak. Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was intensely interested in the occult. Simak's fairy creatures are his own and unique to his imagination and, in my opinion, among the best characterizations of the genre ever done. Tolkien's work is full of magic. Ditto his friend C. S. Lewis'. And then there is Harry Potter.

There is magic and there is science. Simak, as were some serious academic researchers, was clearly in search of a "science" of the human mind. With Simak, this framework embraces both the material and immaterial. Material science does not bring out these inner powers; it actually inhibits them. Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, at least, there has in fact been a struggle between the material and the essentially human. There is much about this stress in the fields of psychology and sociology. It comes out in his work and that of many other science fiction writers of his time. Simak did some great groundbreaking work in this genre. Sword and sorcery fantasy has become a leading genre. Simak also did a great deal of development with the ideas of alternative worlds and time

[53] Both SciFi channel and the networks feature interesting programs on the paranormal including those like "The 4400" and "Heroes." It seems that they feed a growing popular acceptance of the paranormal

travel. Both have some founding in relativity and quantum physics, a very thin foundation[54].

There is an element of the paranormal from the very beginning of Simak's writings – of telepathy and teleportation especially. It is there in *The Cosmic Engineers*. In *Time and Again, City, Ring Around the Sun, Time is the Simplest Thing*, *A Choice of Gods* and other novels, the paranormal theme is developed and broadened. Paranormal abilities became less an accidental quality and more an acquired ability, increasingly available to the generality of humankind but only under certain very demanding conditions, like giving up technological life.

Simak, like Tolkien, was honored with the International Fantasy Award. Simak, it must be pointed out, did not imitate Tolkien but created his own unique style of fantasy. I consider *The Goblin Reservation*, 1968, his true fantasy work, into which he introduced fairy, or supernatural, creatures.

The fantasy novels shared much of the pastoral setting but one displaced in time, or often into another dimension. There is a sizable commerce in the literature and lore of mythical creatures today. There is, of course, no fixed canon or pictorial dictionary of such creatures. Interestingly, Simak wrote his second book on the subject, *Out of Their Minds*, seemingly for the specific purpose of making the statement that such creatures, while manifest in the world, were purely fantasies of the human mind. We found, in *Way Station*, that such fantasy can be converted into reality with the proper tools. Simak merely removed the need to have more gadgets involved than the mind. These mythical creatures appear as frequently as aliens from that point, even in his more science fiction types books like *The Werewolf Principle* and *Shakespeare's Planet*. His most definitive fantasies are set in alternate worlds, such as those in the books: *Enchanted Pilgrimage, A Heritage of Stars, The Fellowship of the Talisman*, and *Where the Evil Dwells*.

Seeking Wisdom

Aliens have adorned literature for generations; from at least the time people begin to believe that there might be life on other planets. The need to confirm that there is other life, and possibly other intelligences, in the universe, is compelling. The discovery of independent life, and of even greater importance, other intelligence, would assure us that we are not merely an accident of nature with no greater meaning or purpose than simply surviving[55]. A lot of good government money goes into projects to search for planets, search for life on planets, and listen to the stars for evidence of signals of intelligent origin.

Early science fiction writers created a gallery of alien life forms. Many of the writers of Simak's time, including not a few scientifically trained, wrote about life on Mars and Venus. At the time these planets were merely hazy dots of light. Hundreds of movies have depicted aliens and now they are in computer games. Since H. G. Wells, most aliens are evil. Simak was rare in his belief that most intelligent life forms would by nature be decent and neighborly, or at worst merely indifferent. In an age when the color of one's skin alone could create instant enmity, Simak had his human characters make friends with creatures

[54] Curiously, there is more theoretical support for such ideas as alternative universes today than then.
[55] As we find beautifully expressed in Simak's story "The Answers."

that were not even remotely human, not a few described as so horrible they could hardly be looked upon.

With the robots Simak caricatured human prejudice against intelligent beings of his own creation, made in his image. They had no soul (but then neither, it seems, did human beings) and presumably no 'human' rights. Unlike human slaves, robots were programmed to wish to serve. Even so they become close friends and work diligently on their own to realize the best that humans could ever hope for. Both aliens and robots in his stories frequently surpass humans in their moral capacity and "humanity."

Rapport, sometimes called empathy, sympathy, compassion, fellow-feeling, etc., is the basis of human association. Conflict, it is generally agreed, arises when rapport is absent. Psychologist, psychotherapists, business, education and government agencies have pursued improved human rapport (human relationship) for decades[56]. Rapport is most frequently seen in two forms in Simak's works. The first is the relationship that comes between diverse and often hard to look at entities such as friendliness, neighborliness, and mutual acceptance of the dignity of intelligence. Rapport, in this sense, goes far beyond tolerance. It is full acceptance and that is a rare human quality, reserved typically for saints. The second form, as above, regarding both Jason Whitney and Horace Red Cloud's people, involves the love of the natural world. We might as well accept these qualities as virtually paranormal. They are not universal. The love of nature, especially that conveyed in A Choice of Gods, has a truly mystical quality. I cannot help but believe that Simak personally exemplified these two qualities.

Simak was not unique in his philosophizing. Many of the early science fiction writers, like Verne and Wells, had strong personal beliefs and even explicit models of human destiny. These two writers founded and defined modern science fiction. Wells also wrote a number of non-fiction books and was a leading British Fabian socialist. Not a few of his works of fiction clearly project his ideals. Isaac Asimov, especially in his Foundation novels, evoked a philosophy of history. Like Simak he created robots that were to take a crucial role in human destiny and evolution. Asimov, a secular materialist, envisioned the development of advanced mental capabilities through the efforts of the Second Foundation psychologists. He left enough of a legacy in this regard for other writers, particularly Bear, Brin and Benford, to add a concluding trilogy to his long Foundation series replete with robots and humans with paranormal powers.

Gordon Dickson and Frank Herbert wove their stories around the warp of philosophy and social criticism with a large dose of the paranormal/extraordinary ability, both through long series of books. Dickson's *Childe Cycle* books and Herbert's *Dune* series, offered elaborate futures soundly based on moralistic philosophies and paranormal abilities. Heinlein, a moralist in his own right in his early books, while not always philosophical, in *Stranger In A Strange Land*, wrote about both extraordinary, and teachable, paranormal abilities, and the creation of a new religion. Tolkien invented an entire culture, with language, history, morals, and one of the most profound pastoral settings in the history of literature, the Hobbit Shire. The Hobbit's, intense communitarians and the epic heroism, and the crafts of the elves, have a flavor of powers beyond the ordinary. There is a lot of

[56] Some, like NLP, have sought to exploit human emotion attachment for business advantage.

magical power in Gandalf and also on the dark side of evil. Books have been written about these authors' philosophy, so why not for Simak's.

By philosophy I mean not so much the Greek "love of wisdom," but rather a worldview, an attempt to intellectually grasp the world we live in, to find meaning and understanding, and to establish moral principles for personal and social progress. This I believe is precisely the way Simak meant it. It is decidedly not an academic philosophy but more down-to-earth and practical, the pursuit of ordinary, albeit often well-read, persons.

There are three important elements of Simak's philosophy. First is the existence of a vast body of knowledge that can be tapped by the human mind. It may be a wealth of collective knowledge in a galactic culture, as in *Way Station* and *Project Pope*, or the mind of a single alien, as The Pinkness in *Time is the Simplest Thing*. There is the Crystal World of *The Goblin Reservation*. In both *A Choice of Gods* and *Project Pope*, he has the robots construct a super mechanical mind, more than a computer—a thinking entity, into which is poured the vast repository of human knowledge. Jason Whitney's grandfather himself sought to preserve as much as he could of the human intellectual heritage in his vast library and preservation of as much art as they could store. So too did Enoch Wallace.

The second element is the presence, or potential presence, of an omniscient and omnipotent entity, a distant, remote, aloof and even coldly indifferent entity to which the human race means nothing. We are beneath its notice—until a moment of reckoning for human hubris is required to save the universe of an unneeded plague. It is clear that these entities are replacements for the god of human religions, the omnipotent human-like figure, made in man's image, as Hezekiah so desperately hoped. Religion, even in terms of the ultimate meaning of human life, rather than dogmatic and ritualistic practices, is uniformly abandoned, except by robots.

Simak reportedly never practiced any religion. It appears that he lost his religion, in terms of the usual human pursuit of worship, but never his faith in a universal principle, the discovery of which would give clarity and meaning to existence. With *City*, and a few years later (1954), with "The Answer," he seems to have abandoned hope, albeit in the latter story, for the better. In that story, our existence is pure chance, an accident. It has no meaning or purpose at all. But, even with *City*, he fought back against the shadow that emerged from human history and continued to do so to the end of his life. There must be an organizing principle in the universe and human beings must be, at whatever distance, a product of its evolutionary direction. Surely humanity has made a mess of it but there will have to be some who have the capacity to find a truer path. From 1968 on his stories are mostly of the quest and/or a deep philosophical search winning through to a second chance for humanity, that is, salvation.

The third is an untapped, indeed unacknowledged potential in human beings. There is something profound in us. It is less than a still small voice; we are barely if at all aware of it. Yes, there is a deep and driving anxiety in us but it takes something extraordinary for us to even realize there is more to it than an itch. While Simak is always in search of knowledge, some rare secret that will set us free, it is in fact what we know that prevents us from becoming what we might be. What we know is expressed in mechanical and technological terms. It is expressed in greed and avarice. It is expressed in dogmatic

religion. These are not only false paths; they obscure the awareness that there is even a true path. It takes a mutant to realize that potential and even for them the realization is hard-won. It takes a crisis that strips away the delusions. Too often Simak felt a depressing pessimism about human possibility, as in City. But slowly he becomes more optimistic but even this optimism is conditional: very, very few humans will ever realize the essence, the destiny, that is ours.

I number 14 of Simak's novels under the subtype of "Philosophical," from 1951, *Time and Again*, until his last book, *Highway of Eternity*, in 1986. *A Choice of Gods*, a little more than halfway between these two books, is clearly the most comprehensive statement of his philosophy. He set out to, and got much, but not all, of his underlying attitudes off his chest with that book. It is not easy to assess his philosophy simply because he expressed it only in fictional form. Saying that, he was an accomplished artist capable of interweaving 'fact' with fiction as all great novelists do. He knew how to write to an audience, in both fiction and non-fiction. He knew how to invoke awe and mystery and how to involve his readers in the story. There is, however, a consistency in his works that suggests a deeper sincerity.

The quest theme, which occupied much of Simak's mature writing, typically involved a sudden dislocation into an empty world, often with a small group of companions, usually including a robot and/or alien and/or fairy creature, and a journey across a desolate landscape to achieves an previously unknown goal. That goal, that gradually emerged into better definition in the progression of his novels, is that 'Man' has a second chance.

Many of the elements of the quest theme are already in *Ring Around the Sun*. The characters are very ordinary, yet to succeed they must have a determined persistence, an obstinacy or pig-headedness. There is an element of the romantic and there is always a shading of the tragic. Entering the quest, life is reduced to basics, sometimes the bare essentials for survival such as a pocket knife and a book of matches. The "grail' is well hidden and the path twists and turns. Simak used little technology in these stories. He placed little reliance on weapons or brute strength. It's not the typical hero's journey. Blood and thunder are conspicuously absent.

The goal is not saving the world from some immediate disaster. It's more on the order of a quest for a personal salvation through which the future of the human race is assured. Each of the stories involved, or so I believe what a psychoanalysts would conclude, certain elements of Simak's own personality. There is certainly an elementary loneliness in Simak's writing, but it is not pathological. It is a turning inward that is found in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, John Muir, John Burroughs and others who found solace in solitude. It is well expressed in Enoch Wallace who lived virtually alone for a century.

The stories typically have a benign beginning; with a quiet, serene complacency, jolted by a sudden series of disruptive events that completely upset the settled life of the lead characters. They have no choice in the matter. They are often plunged into utter, hopeless chaos but that is never the way they see it. Failure is never an option to them. Discouragement and nagging doubts are largely absent. Even though the reason for the trial is not known, its challenge draws the character out. There is an element of luck, of astronomical coincidence involved in all of them. Somewhere there is a benevolent but silent force in the background, creating the conditions for the quest, a labyrinth of

circumstances that must be negotiated, and the final bestowal of the prize. These are stories are not like many of the tragic anti-heroic novels of the day but rather of hard-won achievement. There is no pot of gold but a reward of a profound change in the quality of the characters' lives, something to die for.

Simak's quest stories typically involve the transportation of an individual or a select group of travelers into an empty land. *Destiny Doll, Special Deliverance*, and *Highway of Eternity* transports us to alternative worlds, barren and largely abandoned. I believe Simak modeled much of this landscape on the Great Plains where he worked as editor in a number of small-town newspapers early in his career. *A Heritage of Stars* takes us into the Dakota's. *Time is the Simplest Thing* seems to move in that same direction, traveling north from the Mexican border. *The Goblin Reservation* starts in a future Prairie du Chien, and goes east into Wisconsin, from a world university into an imaginary world of forest and fairy. *Cemetery World* takes us to a long abandoned future Earth that is mostly forested – a wilderness.

A "quest" is a search, a mission, and in romantic tales, such as those of the Arthurian Legends; it is an arduous, even perilous, journey that demands heroic feats, and the conquest of evil not only in the world but also in the heart of the hero. Tolkien's tales, based on Nordic myth, are superb examples of the style. Swords, an expression of medieval values and technology, are usually involved in his romantic quest stories. Simak shied away from weapons, but swords are sometimes found and liberally applied in Simak's fantasies. The romantic quest stories are usually centered on the pursuit of a sacred object, such as the Holy Grail, although it can be almost any story that requires heroic deeds. Simak's stories also at times involve sacred objects and great secrets but they, like the true grail quests, are really about the virtues of the characters. I find an element of the quest in 14 of his novels, four of them also philosophical. It is in all of the fantasy novels.

In the quest novels, when our heroes are alone, they often have nothing but "the shirt on their backs." They must simply survive. There is no panic in these travelers. Typically smokers, they have the means to light a fire, at least for a while. With this bare minimum they would make good "Survivorman" stories. More often Simak forms a group of humans, aliens, robots, supernatural creatures, animals, and even ghosts. Often incredible bonds of friendship and trust are formed between man and not-man. There are casualties along the way. Some either fail to bear up or take another path found along the way, perhaps another form of failure. Often a couple, the lead character and a woman of equal merit, finish together. They become a new Adam and Eve, like David and Evening Star (I do not include *A Choice of Gods*[57] under the quest theme although both David, walking across the continent, and John, penetrating to the center of the galaxy, did make quest-type journeys). From them, or from those of a tiny community like them, a place for learning that they join, the human second chance will come.

[57] *A Choice of Gods* and *Way Station* run their course almost entirely within the walls of a house.

Chapter Twelve: End Game

To conclude my survey of Simak's philosophy I want to review three of his novels, all published in the 1980s: *Special Deliverance, Highway of Eternity* and, more extensively, *Project Pope*. The first two are based on quest themes, both philosophical. Project Pope I have classified as pastoral and philosophical.

Special Deliverance and *Project Pope*, both published in 1981, the year Simak reached age 78, were his penultimate literary achievements. They are different books in many ways but seem to share a longing, a hope for a human essence that I have seen through much of Simak's writing. There is also that element of sadness or tragedy we often find in him, almost of melancholy.

Perhaps it had something to do with his beloved wife Kay becoming increasingly disabled with arthritis, but then there was always this mood in his writing. We know less about Kay than we do Cliff, but they were apparently very close. There are extraordinary women in Simak's stories and two of the best appear in these two books[58]. He often gifted his male characters with the love of a woman who shared his gentleness, intelligence and persistence[59]. In this way he was like Heinlein who married a gifted woman and portrayed women in a light of equality not common to the literature of the era. Kay would live another four years and Simak three years beyond that, but his health was beginning to fail as well.

SPECIAL DELIVERANCE

Edward Lansing is a college teacher in New England. It's Friday afternoon, he has a weekend free and it will be a good time to check the autumn colors. His last appointment is with a student who has written an exceptionally insightful review of Hamlet. Put to the question, the student admits that he did not write it but obtained it from a machine in a hidden corner of the basement of the student union, a slot machine type device that had asked him what he wanted.

Walking across campus, Lansing met a colleague, Andy, and they went to the faculty lounge in the Union building for a drink. Andy, a talkative type, argued that the human race had gone in the wrong direction, a dead end. Andy speculated on the possibility of a disaster that would erase a thousand years of errors and provide "A chance to escape from mediocrity, the chance to organize ourselves more sanely." He went on to say that he had read of scientists speculating about historical crisis points and alternative worlds.

Before leaving the building, Lansing decided to check out the student's story. He found the slot machine and fed it a quarter and it spoke to him, asking him what he needed. He didn't have any idea so the machine gave him two keys and directions to the doors they would fit. It told him he would find 12 slot machines and to feed a dollar first into number five and then into number seven. It gave him two silver dollars.

Lansing thought it was a student prank. He went home for a drink and dinner. Curiosity got the best of him. He located the machines and put one of the dollars in number five. It gushed golden coins. He put them in his jacket pockets and fed the second dollar

[58] In *Cosmic Engineers* a woman saves the universe.
[59] In *City* the woman's role is conspicuously limited.

into number seven. He pulled the crank and found himself on a path in a woodland glen. It was daylight. The trees were in full color. It still looked like New England. He followed the path and sometime after dark saw a gleam of light. It was an inn. The innkeeper was expecting him. There were four other travelers there already and another soon came through the door to join them.

The five others were: The Brigadier, the Parson, Mary, Sandra, and a robot named Jurgens. All spoke English. Each came from Earths with entirely different histories. Mary was an engineer from a world where the empires of his Earth's eighteenth century still persisted. The American colonies had made a brief but unsuccessful rebellion. It was a stable world. There had been no world wars and no nuclear weapons. Sandra's world was one of poetry and art, sounding more like classical Greece, but one that had experienced three Renaissances and Christ had not appeared. The Parson was narrow and bigoted and closed mouth. The Brigadier came from a world of continuous wars, fought by "mechanicals." Jurgens had come from a time the Earth had been depleted and humanity had left it behind for the stars.

The inn was ancient, a way station for groups of travelers like them. The innkeeper provided them good drinks, a sumptuous dinner, grudgingly settling for two of Lansing's gold coins for board. He told them there was always one of each group of six who was the treasurer. Next morning, after a great deal of haggling, he outfitted them for their journey. After breakfast they set off down the path. The innkeeper told them they would come to a cube and then a city.

The landscape became grassland with scattered clumps of trees. The Brigadier and Parson settled into a running quarrel. In the afternoon they found the cube, fifty feet high, smooth walls of blue, like porcelain, surrounded by sand. Jurgens quickly found the sand booby-trapped. As he attempted to cross it something lashed out at him and mangled his leg. Attempting to probe the sand with long sticks they found a large flat stone but abandoned the task when one of the sticks was also shattered.

When they camped out that night Jurgens made what repairs he could, but his leg was permanently disabled. Lansing made him a crutch. In the morning they made another circuit of the cube and found nothing new set out for the city. Slowed by Jurgens it took five days. They found the city empty, abandoned, the very stones decaying; a place obviously ancient "where history had run down." They found no art, except for a few pieces in one room, no libraries, no churches or places of worship, no music halls. The city had no sensitivity, no heart. It had about it the sense of failure rather than fulfillment. They did find a broken screen that showed images of an alien world, and a room in the basement with a number of heavy, bolted, doors, each leading to a different world. Looking through the peephole they found one world cold, a great glacier in the background. Another was a dry, dusty desert. Another a seething jungle filled with fanged beasts. And one an apple blossom world, with green grass and clumps of crabapple trees covered with pink flowers.

The Parson, reflecting on the fate of the city, said that there must be some moral law, something to give one a sense of certainty. A man needs religion, a faith, to guide him. He spoke of his home, a white house with a garden and his church where he had the righteous authority to proclaim what is right and what is wrong. There he knew his own mind. Now

that was all stripped from him. He felt a profound emptiness in the city, "the end of love and faith." He felt abandoned by God. Just then an anguished wail came down from the hills outside the city. The Parson quelled in terror.

In the morning the Parson had disappeared. They found, in the basement, the door to the apple blossom world unlatched. It was clear the Parson had escaped into this world and there was no way to find him. There were always casualties, said the Brigadier. He insisted that they stay in the city believing that the answer they sought was there. They agreed to spend a few days and then continue to the west. Lansing and Mary found a building with a vast, humming machine. Approaching the machine Lansing had a sense of his consciousness going out into the universe. Mary snatched him back. She too had experienced something, a deep sense of the people who had lived in the city. She sensed they had almost godlike powers. She sensed that whatever this civilization had been, it had no government, no laws, no economy, "Entirely civilized." They had built this machine to explore the universe. Somewhere there must be a control room. They failed to find it.

The Brigadier was convinced the machine is what they sought. Throwing all caution aside he ran toward it and in a brilliant flash was gone. The city had claimed its second casualty. In the morning the remaining four packed up and left the city. The path leads to an erosion-carved landscape, like the badlands of the western areas of the Dakotas, thought Lansing. Camping that night, they heard the wailing again, and silhouetted against the skyline on the hills above, a great shaggy beast, wolf shaped only far larger.

The next evening, they came upon another inn. The landlady was expecting them but surprised they had arrived so quickly. There were two other people already there, a woman named Melissa, who said that she was not human but a puppet, and a man named Jorgenson. There were four card players at a table in the corner who paid them no attention and refused to talk to Lansing when he approached them.

In the morning the six set out together. The landlady told them of a singing tower to the west and of Chaos to the north. Lansing began to wonder if there was any abiding principle in the universe. Even if there is a purpose it doesn't mean we are capable of gasping it. Perhaps life is meaningless. He felt like a rat in a maze but maybe they would get lucky. Jorgensen saw it as like the endless board games of his world—only now their lives were at stake. Reaching the tower Sandra is bewitched by it. The others hear no beauty in it. She stands before it for two days, then falls to her knees beside it, enraptured by its song. She will not eat. There are obvious dangers on this quest. First the cube, then the city, now the singing tower. Had those that had disappeared, she wondered, found an answer? Or were they just lost.

Jurgens was drawn to the Chaos. He and Lansing decided to scout north, Jorgensen and Melissa west. Mary stayed with Sandra. They would meet in a few days back at the tower. Lansing and Jurgens found the country to the north increasingly arid, not even wood for a campfire. They found a machine topped by a small dome in which was a human skull. Jurgens knew of such devices, a merger of man and machine to protect the man from hostile conditions. And here one had come to grief.

They climbed successively higher dunes, ahead of them a black wall. At first it looked like a storm, but it was not a cloud, more like a black, roaring waterfall. Topping a

final dune, Jurgens plunges down it. Lansing, trying to grab him, fell after him. The sand was fine and deep, and he could not climb back up. The card players appeared at the top of the cliff and threw him a rope. They were not there when he climbed out.

Lansing struggled back towards the singing tower. It was harder than coming north and took him longer. He wondered, the first night, alone, under the stars with no fire, why Jurgens had not cried out, had not sought rescue. Had he, like Sandra, been lured by something? He would never know.

Back at the Singing Tower, Lansing found Sandra dead, her body desiccated like a mummy. Mary was gone. There was no sign of Jorgensen and Melissa. He hiked back to the inn. The landlady told him she was closing up. She gave him some soup and stale bread. He had to sleep on the floor. In the morning she sold him food and sent him away. He met Jorgenson and Melissa on the trail. They decided to try a short cut across the country back to the city. They came across a group of people in tattered clothing, living in rude huts, sustained by a garden and small animals they trapped. They were survivors of the quest, 32 of them, with no place to go, eking out a life as best they could. Jorgenson and Melissa decided to stay. Lansing left most of his money with them to buy provisions from the landlady at the inn.

Traveling cross-country the Wailer followed Lansing. At a river crossing it approached him, ten feet to the shoulder, but showing no hostility. He scratched the great beast's head. When he crossed the river, the Wailer did not follow him. Near the cube he found Mary. After Sandra had died the Wailer had scared her away. She wanted to investigate the cube. Remembering the stone slab they had found, they cut a tree limb to sweep for it and found two others leading across the sand to the cube, which admitted them.

Inside the cube they found the four card players, sitting in a row on a couch. The first congratulated them on solving the problem. Few have done so and almost never two from the same group. Of those who failed, they remarked, there is no place for those who use poor judgment, like their companions. They had saved Lansing not because he had used poor judgment but because he had tried to save the robot. Lansing is angry over their callousness, but they tell him that it doesn't matter. Those lost are eliminated by their own faults. Those at the camp simply failed, they gave up and "hunkered down." Mary and Lansing solved the riddle of the cube by making the right decisions.

The players confirm that there are indeed many alternate worlds that split off at crisis points. This is an evolutionary process going on in the universe, but it doesn't work to produce a better world. All of the worlds are fatally flawed. The failure of the human race is that we do not employ our full potential. But life like ours is too precious to lose. Few races in the galaxy are intelligent and fewer of them have the potential promise of humanity. But all of humanity is headed for extinction. It got a bad start and there is no sign of improvement: "It was doomed from the first beginning."

The solution was to recruit individuals from the many alternative worlds who had potential. Recruited? Yes, they said. Who would want to volunteer? They had agents to search out the best candidates. They had collected many and several thousand had passed the test.

The prize? There was a planet set aside for the ones who made it through the test. There they will find something like a university town, a community where knowledge is shared among its members. There are tools for learning. And there is much to learn. They will not have to work; “All we ask is that you study and give yourself the time to become fully human.”

Mary and Lansing walk through the door to the new world. They appeared on a meadow and walked hand in hand towards the spires of the university.

Chapter Thirteen: His Holiness

Project Pope is, in some ways, a continuation of *A Choice of Gods* (appeared nine years earlier). In it Simak took care of some unfinished business, not yet arriving at his final destination but with a good map in hand. The theme is religion and robots. Both books involved massive robot brains. Both books had robot priests. They provide speculation about human evolution. But it is the machine evolving, not humankind. People, however, have to solve the problems.

Project Pope is, in my opinion, one of Simak's best novels. It's certainly one of my favorites. It has a great setting; an earth-like pastoral environment on a far distant planet. It is heavily laced with philosophical musing. It is far more of an action story than *A Choice of Gods*. It takes up elements of that novel but from an entirely different angle, with a vastly different plot line. It is a stew spiced with many of his favorite literary "devices." There are plenty of new elements to the story, a different mix of ingredients. The Project is now The Pope. Hezekiah, with a bit of Stanley, is now Cardinal Theodosius, presiding over a large ecclesiastical organization of robots and humans. The lead character is another Jason, a young doctor named Jason Tennyson.

Like the Project, the Pope is a vast, immobile, robot-computer with its own evolved personality. It depends on a vast source of knowledge gleaned from the galaxy, in this case by Listeners who are rather like the travelers of a *Time is the Simplest Thing* Fishhook project. There is a wise and ancient alien; lots of other fabulous aliens – some good, some not, plenty of paranormal powers, enough villains to make a proper drama, and a climax worthy of the effort. In this novel we get our greatest insight into the lives, the values, and the experiences of robots and we experience an intimate closeness with an alien, Whisperer, to a degree I find greater than any other in Simak's long career. There is a far clearer distinction between good and evil, evil now of an almost satanic quality. There is also a robot capable of homicide.

Project Pope doesn't start with Jason but with a man named Decker on the planet where the robot Pope had been constructed, and Decker's invisible, to all but a special sensitive, companion, Whisperer. We meet Jason Tennyson as he bails out of a flier over the only spaceport of the planet Gutshot. He is fleeing for his life. Gutshot is a feudal planet and he was hired by one of the warlords as a personal physician and became a confidant. With the sudden demise of that worthy, Tennyson found himself about to be murdered and fled with nothing but the cloths he is wearing and his medical bag. He stowed away aboard the only ship in the spaceport. The ship is bound for End of Nothing, the home of the robot Vatican 17, to which a steady stream of alien pilgrims pours, shuttled by the ship on its round-trip circuit from Gutshot and back. There are few humans out this far and the Captain is sympathetic to Tennyson. Besides, Tennyson has the money to pay his passage[60]. There is a woman aboard, Jill Roberts, a writer who wants to do a story about Vatican 17. She is attractive but has a stigmata, on one cheek, "an angry, ugly slash of red."

As they sit over a drink of Scotch, an old Earth drink favored by several people on End of Nothing, who don't mind the Captain filching a share, the Captain tells them of the project there run by the robots who have built a computer pope. They have modeled

[60] Obviously, a well-stocked medical bag.

themselves on Christianity. The Captain doesn't know much about the project and doesn't really care. It seems to him a mixture of belief and faith. Humans have, by and large, left religion behind and pay no attention to it. He is in business, making good money on the run and hopes to retire in a few years.

End of Nothing has but a single settlement. Even after a thousand years most of the planet has never even been explored. It is very much like Old Earth (which few humans of this time have ever even seen). It is populated by robots and a colony of humans, most of who work for the Vatican. But there is also the loner, Decker, for whom the Captain sells gemstones. Decker finds the gems wandering in the wilderness around the Vatican. No one knows where he came from. He is a friendly man but a reclusive hermit.

Jill, a successful writer, had been hearing rumors about Project Pope for years. She had written letters to Vatican 17 but never got an answer. She didn't know if the Vatican staff would even talk to her, but if not, that alone would make a good article she could sell to cover her cost.

Jill, however, is granted an audience with Enoch Cardinal Theodosius, a robot dressed in purple vestments with a red skullcap, in a sumptuous office. She is informed she must follow protocol, kneeling to kiss his ring and calling him "Your Eminence." He has her letters. Vatican 17 intentionally withheld a response hoping to discourage her, he admits. Vatican 17 wants no publicity. It has work to do and does not wish to draw bothersome attention. In time it hopes to produce something of great value to the entire galaxy, but not for a long time. She is a guest of the Vatican. He offers to pay all her travel expenses. However, he has an offer. She can come to work for the Vatican. They need a history of Vatican 17. They will pay her extremely well and give her all the assistance she needs. She may take as long as she likes to decide. No pressure.

Meanwhile, Vatican 17 takes an interest in Tennyson. Their physician, an arrogant young man who had been there only a few years, decided to hunt one of the fabled Old Ones of the planet and was killed by it, along with two others. On his first night, at dinner with Jill, Jason is called away by Paul Ecuyer, the Search Program Coordinator. One of the Listeners is ill. She is one of the best they have, so good that they are raising clones of her. She has visited a place she calls Heaven. Mary was dying of pneumonia, but Jason is successful in treating her. Ecuyer offers him the job as doctor for the humans on End of Nothing. He is unconcerned with the reason Jason has come to End of Nothing. Nor is he concerned that Jason was unable to bring his documents. Ecuyer tells him that no warrant from Gutshot will ever be served, if ever pursued. Jason is of course in a corner. The only way off End of Noting is the ship that brought him, and it goes only back to Gutshot. Jason is, however, much attracted to End of Nothing.

Ecuyer tells Jason the robots had come from Earth nearly a thousand years before because they had not been allowed to join churches. They modeled their organization after the Earth's Vatican because it had a long tradition, a hierarchical organization, and a liturgy they liked to follow. They had made many adjustments, an evolving synthesis of human and alien religions. They had a close relationship to humans but had created new generations of robots that were different from the ones that had come from Earth, different in values.

The computer pope is immortal, all-knowing and infallible due to its vast reservoir of knowledge, added to daily from the data collected by the Search Program.

The Listeners are a rare and special breed of sensitives, all humans, recruited from throughout the galaxy, who are able to project their minds, to observe, and actually enter the lives of, creatures on distant planets, sentient and not. The program was set up shortly after Vatican 17 was established. Their excursions are recorded in memory cubes that are fed into the Pope's memory store and then kept in a vast filing room. There is a helmet that plays the recording directly into the mind of non–sensitives. Ecuyer plays one for Jason in which he becomes a trilobite. Tennyson is given free access to the recordings.

Cardinal Theodosius, talking to his longtime friend, Cardinal Roberts (robot) wonders why they have to have a human doctor at all. A robot could be trained to do the job just as well. Roberts pointed out that humans want a human touch. He observes that the robots also need the human touch, even after a thousand years on their own planet. Robots have an inferiority complex regarding humans. But they have paid their dues and perhaps in a few thousand years will grow out of it.

There are two groups of robots: The older ones who came from Earth and the new generations, now in a fifth, perhaps as many as seventh, depending on how they were counted. The newer generations are more independent, but the older ones still crave human company.

The finding of Heaven by Mary, they agreed, is a bad thing for Vatican 17. Factions have formed, each including both robots and humans. One group believes she has found the biblical Heaven. Others are more skeptical.

Jason happily settled into the life of Vatican 17. He treated his patients, his work was light, and took long walks in the countryside. He found a place where he sat and watched the mountains that he had come to love[61]. He also viewed the memory cubes. One, that haunted his dreams, was an equation world. Another was an *Autumn Land*, so much like the world he grew up in.

Jason described the autumn scene of his boyhood in colorful detail. I have no doubt they are very much Simak's boyhood memories. They are also mine. And I now live in a region with much the same vegetation and climate as Simak's Millville. According to the old-timers, Jason recalled, his home world was much like England and North America on Earth. English people settled it and he loved to read the history of England, of which the town library had an ample selection (Jill told him the Vatican had a great library of ancient books from Earth that he was free to read).

Jason played the Autumn Land cube time and again. He loved:

> *the coin-gold color of a walnut tree, the purple of an ash, the shouting sun-bright yellow of an aspen, the bright-blood of a sugar maple, and rich red and brown of oak. And over and above it all that bittersweet feel of autumn, the glory of the dying year when work was done and a quiet season of rest had been proclaimed. … The peace that comes at the long end of summer, the peace and quiet before the chill winter of the soul comes howling down. The little time of respite, the time for resting and for thought, the time for binding the ancient wounds and forgetting them and all the vagaries of life that had inflicted them.*

[61] Again Simak gives us a bluff-like prospect.

This, to him, was the real heaven, not shining towers and golden stairs and angels. We find this type of scene in a lot of Simak's stories.

Jill decided to take the Vatican job and threw herself into the work. She, like Jason, developed a fondness for End of Nothing. Jill had her own bluff: Seen from a vantage point, the low spread of Vatican buildings seemed to have grown out of the land, a part of it. Around it were gardens and fields and orchards; a sense of order in the land. In the distance is the shadowy ridge of mountains Jason told her he had come to love. It took her a little longer to get a feel for those mountains, a "great blue surge against the sky." Again, the essence of Simak.

She had begun to piece together the history of Vatican 17. The story started some five thousand years after the life of Jesus. Mankind had scattered to the far reaches of the galaxy. A thousand years ago, the robots planned their own exodus. They found an out-of-the-way planet, one where humans could live comfortably. They would not break the ancient partnership and they needed the human Listeners. There were three ships that made repeated trips. The robots had since designed a new generation of thought driven ships for their own use. They used them to explore places of interest that the Listeners had found, and for which they had been able to determine coordinates from the stars in those distant skies.

Ecuyer and Jason were summoned to an audience with His Holiness, along with Cardinals Theodosius and Roberts. The Pope appeared as a human-like face on a large screen. The Pope spoke in a smooth, flat, cold voice—neither human nor robot in tone. The Pope wanted to know of Mary's mental condition. Jason said he is not qualified in that regard. Ecuyer can only comment that Mary's attitude had changed, she had become haughty. The Pope thought that was inconsistent with what she claimed to have found. Ecuyer said he cannot speak to that. He is not a Christian. The Pope is testy. Theodosius cautions the Pope's this his attitude as unworthy. The Pope counters that the Heaven business is getting out of hand and suggests that the Cardinals are not doing a good job of controlling it.

There is talk about making Mary a saint. Vatican 17 has never had a saint and she is not even dead yet. Theodosius said that most of the robots had a rudimentary and limited understanding of Christianity—like most believers on Earth a thousand years ago. Only a few have a more comprehensive view of the many forms of intelligent life found in the universe, that there is more than one universe, and that there indeed seems to be an overriding Principle at work, one more complex than the physical universe. If, Theodosius mused, there is really a heaven, he doubted it would be anything like the myth which was to him were simplistic. The broad stairs Mary had seen were powerfully symbolic. It would appeal to simple souls.

Cardinal Roberts argued that it would not be advisable for everyone to be fully informed. It would produce a thousand heresies—bickering and squabbling and animosities. It was long ago agreed that most, robots and believing humans, be kept in a simple faith. Like humans of old, only a small number, the few close to the Pope, are involved at more than a simple level of religious observance. Only a select few are moving to a higher ground of understanding and insight into the essence of religion.

With this exchange, Simak gives us a new insight into the nature of the robots. Robots are not just mechanical men. They are very different beings. A robot is capable of loyalty and logic, but not, it appears, of love. Love is too much of a biological term. They are virtually immortal and have few needs. They have an inbuilt drive to serve and are hung up on humans. Like humans they feel emptiness in their lives; incompleteness. To fill that void they have turned to human religion—and their own search for universal knowledge. A robot is always cautious, never adventurous. He (and I believe the masculine pronoun fits) never takes a chance. They like to have things under control. They are easily spooked. But on End of Nothing there isn't much to upset their routine. Until now.

The Pope coldly told them that they are bickering now, and before two humans. He mentioned Decker. No one knows where he came from. He bore watching. The Pope found all humans suspicious. To this Theodosius took issue with the Pope. There has (we hear again) always been an innate linkage between robots and humans. Yes, the Pope responded, they exploit robots. Decker is a mystery and that concerns the Pope.

Jason was disappointed with the Pope. The Pope seemed worried and confused and showed very human emotion. Tons of data had been poured into his data storage and he processed it endlessly. The Pope was evolving a new theory of the universe but had no answers for Mary or the dissension in the community. There are no coordinates for Heaven, no way to send one of the robot's thought driven ships to investigate. He was in a quandary.

It is obvious to Jason, however, that neither he nor Jill were free to leave the planet. Not that they wanted to.

After the audience Jill talked to Ecuyer. Jill wonders if Mary[62] is still human—or perhaps tainted by an alien personality. Ecuyer told her that all the sensitives are remarkably strong personalities. None has ever cracked up. Of course, as in *Time is the Simplest Thing*, they can be corrupted by alien influences.

Mary made a second trip to Heaven. She returned to the broad road with the light at the end of it, sonorous music in the background. But the music and light faded. She saw no angels, only a great staircase of purest gold. She saw along both sides of the road tents and shanties and ragged people, a pit of horror. She ran up the stairs in panic. She saw someone coming down to her, a humanoid, in patent leather shiny black. The figure raised a finger at her and shouted in a thunderous rebuke: "Naughty! Naughty! Naughty! Naughty!" She fled in terror.

On one of his walks Jason met Decker. Decker took him on a tour, in an old beat up machine, of the farms and orchards around the Vatican, which Jason had not yet seen. Decker told him that he thinks he knows where Heaven is. He doesn't tell Jason at that time, but he thinks it is the planet where his ship was destroyed. He had escaped in a lifeboat and was in suspended animation for two hundred years. It finally landed on End of Nothing, not far from the Vatican. He came to love End of Nothing. What he most likes about it is that no one pushes anyone else around. He saw that same love of the place growing in Jason.

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[62] Simak seems to like the name Mary. The name Mary is also the mother of Christ and the Magdalene. I have often wondered if Simak gave certain names he used repeatedly a special significance. The Mary in Special Deliverance is a heroine.

Twice Jason believed he saw a sparkling of diamond dust in the air. He said nothing. This is Whisperer. Whisperer told Decker that Jason can see him. Only special sensitives could, until then only Decker. Sitting in his apartment Jason saw the glitter of diamond dust again and then heard Whisperer's gentle voice. He explained that he and Decker are great friends but that he cannot enter Decker's mind. He can enter Jason's and begs permission to do so.

Ecuyer arrived at this time with urgent news that Mary is back and a basket case. She was raving with fright. Jason gave her a sedative. Ecuyer said this is the first time there had been interaction between a Listener and a being of a place visited.

The Pope has a spy, John, the robot gardener, keeping an eye on the humans and the Cardinals, all of whom John despises. He is one of the original robots from Earth. And he is a zealot. John helped build the Pope but the Pope has changed. John thinks the Pope should be more faithful to tradition. The Pope told John that he is no longer a pure robot and has lost most of the humanity put into him. He is more alien. The Pope reiterated that his job is to seek a true religion. It takes more than faith. It's not just about finding a deity. The Pope is interested in understanding "the many survival and evolution systems that have been developed" being uncovered by the Listeners. From these fragments he hopes to piece together the nature of religion. And he still has a huge backlog of unprocessed data. His is not a short-range project. Even a thousand years is short range. He could take a million years, and he will last that long.

The pilgrims provide a source of money that is useful. They are all aliens. There are never any humans. The pilgrims are simple folk. They have their own religions but are looking for something more. What they don't understand they believe. John thinks the Vatican should do more for them. John believed all intelligent beings, including robots, have souls. John admitted that he had started the business of canonizing Mary. John knows it's not heaven she has found but doesn't care. He thinks the idea that there is one, and canonizing Mary for finding it, will strengthen faith. John wants the fact that Mary was kicked out of Heaven suppressed and the cube destroyed.

The Old Ones, scattered around the planet, hold a meeting by linking minds. They are the planet's wardens, watching over it. They are not displeased with the settlement of robots and humans. The settlers have been good stewards of the land. They talk of the Dusters, originally natives of the planet, who long ago left, all but one, a runt, Whisperer.

And then more about the Whisperer who is a conglomerate of molecules, every one of which is intelligent. He is immortal. He is driven to learn and understand. The destiny of the Dusters is to know the universe. He wants to find the other Dusters and would love to view the cubes for evidence about them. Now three humans, Decker, Jason and Jill, can sense him. He told Jason that he can take him to the world of the equation's beings. He entered Jason's mind and Jason found himself in the equation world and saw great living cubes with equations on their sides, like blackboards. They surround him and engulf him.

Cardinal Theodosius has taken to sitting on a stool having long chats with Jill, talking about her work and other things. He hopes they can become friends, as few humans and robots have. He told her that robots are obsessed with humans and talk about them incessantly. He told her he is concerned about this saint business. He is concerned about

the stability of the Vatican. There is an undercurrent of rebellion. There seems to be a very active mischief-maker in the works somewhere. The purpose of the Vatican is to seek a better and truer faith. There is a faction that thinks the Pope has strayed from this purpose. It (again) comes down to a question of faith or knowledge. Theodosius has concluded that faith must be based on knowledge, "not blind belief, not on the repetitious mumbling of untruth, over and over again, in a desperate attempt to make them turn into truth. We cannot accept untruth, we must know." Mary's heaven could be no more than self-delusion. It is not even like the place most think heaven should be.

The controversy would upset the Search Program and it could take centuries to reestablish it. This could not be allowed to happen. The Search Program must not be lost. Cardinal Theodosius believes that in time they will find all the answers, or at least find one they need. This will not be done by faith, not by "retreat into self-delusion for the comfort and glory it may give us" but by diligent search and must be continued however long it takes.

Jill went to Jason's apartment. He was not there at first but suddenly appeared in front of the fireplace, returning from the equation world. She went to him and he absentmindedly caressed her cheek. At first Jill had been disturbed by his touching the stigma but now she sees it as an affectionate habit. As his hand comes away this time, she sees in the mirror over the fireplace that the stigma is no longer there.

Jason had told her about his visit to the equation world.

> *There are certain things about if for which there are no words. A culture so ancient, so self-sufficient that it operated on a system of logic that was so far advanced over human knowledge and capability as the fusion of atoms was advanced beyond the chipping of stones into primitive tools. A group of cubes sitting on a great green plain manipulating symbols and diagrams—playing a complicated game or solving problems? Or were the symbols and diagrams the visual manifestations of alien thought, perhaps a band of philosophers sitting around in an informal seminar arguing hair-splitting hypotheses, a mere passing of idle time or the long, slow process of formulating new universal truths? Could the equation folk, in times long past, have penetrated to the edge of space and the end of time and now, retreated back to the place where they first had set out, wherever that might be, now be engaged in trying to pull together and evaluate all that they had seen and sensed?*

Meanwhile, the memory cube of Mary's second Heaven visit disappeared from a secured safe. The cube of the first visit had also disappeared. Jason and Ecuyer visited Decker's cabin to find out what he knew about Heaven but found him gone. They could find no evidence of his records.

A group who thought she should be sainted gathered outside Mary's window. She went to it and with an accusing pointing finger shrilled: "Naughty! Naughty! Naughty! Naughty!" She was obviously deranged by the visit.

Decker had taken a trip into the forest. As he prepared his camp a rifle shot exploded the coffee kettle over the fire. He dove for cover, grabbing his rifle. He found a figure in the rocks and squeezed off a shot.

Rumor was circulating that Mary had miraculously removed Jill's stigma and that she must be a saint. Jill was angered by the rumors. She would face them down. And they could drive her from the Vatican.

It had taken some time [for her] to recognize the importance of Vatican—not only to the robots, but to the humans, and not only the humans here at End of Nothing, but to all humans everywhere. There was a greatness here, a very human greatness of conception and of thought, that she could not turn her back upon. In a way she had become a part of it and she meant to remain so. In any case, she told herself. She would not leave even if she wanted to, for Jason was happy here and had found in this strange community the kind of life that fitted him. She could not bring herself to part from him. Especially she could not leave him after what had happened the night before—his fingers reaching out and wiping away the shame upon her cheek. For it had been a shame, she now admitted to herself, much as she might have tried to pretend that it was not, treating it with a nonfeminine bluntness, flaunting it because she could not hide it, bluffing it out before the entire world.

But it was not just Jason who bound her here. Another was the Cardinal Enoch, who came to see her every day, hunching upon the stool beside her desk and talking the hours away, talking as if she were another robot or he another human. … She had never thought a robot would be kind, but Enoch had been kind and more considerate that there was any need to be.

Then she saw Whisperer and heard him. He took her to the equation world. With her the experience was different. The cubes begin to display basic symbols, slowly building a common ground of geometry and numbers.

Jason, meanwhile, visited Cardinal Theodosius. They talked about the mob around Mary. The robot was not entirely surprised. He considered humans flighty, emotional. Robots were not supposed to be that way but now even some of them are acting "hysterical."

The Cardinal then asked him what he thought about having Jill write a history of the Vatican; what purpose would it serve.? Jason responded that he believed something extraordinary was being done that others should know about.

Just then a robot broke into the Cardinal's office, excited. An Old One was coming. Jason and Theodosius walked out to meet the Old One. It stopped and laid out, with great care and respect, first the body and rifle of Decker and then the body and rifle of a robot with the top of its skull blown off. The Old One told them that killing, other than for food, would not be tolerated, turned and left. The robot was Hubert, the one that had looked after Jason. At that moment Ecuyer ran up to tell them that Jill was back.

Jason and Jill were summoned to an audience with the Pope, just the two of them. The Pope is troubled. He said he was built for the long term and was far from infallible on the short term. What was bothering him was this matter of faith. Jason and Jill are perplexed by this line of thought. There were faiths all over the galaxy but nothing like the variety that occurred on Earth. Why is it that on the Earth so much blood was shed in the name of faith? An inherently vicious race?

The irony is that the robots, said the Pope, love humans: "Out of you came us. You created and developed us. For this reason, if for no other, there must be great good in you. There must be in you an overflowing measure of nobility and love."

This thing called faith is tearing the Vatican apart. The Pope wants their views independent of that of the Cardinals. He described them as "two valued friends."

What was it that moved them to love this planet? Jill said that what had drawn her was the quietness, the sense of dedication in her work, the simplicity of life. Jason

responded that once a long time ago in human history, during the time of Christianity in Medieval days, that monasteries had flourished, places of sanctuary. They were places of refuge from a dark and brutal world. He too was drawn by the sense of refuge.

The Pope mused that perhaps an error had been made in his construction: he lacked a sense of piety. He was built to acquire knowledge. He cannot, however, decide how to proceed with the conflict between Vatican factions.

Back to the question of faith or knowledge. Knowledge first, said Jason. Maybe faith could come out of that, but he didn't think it would work the other way around. Many humans would put faith over knowledge. The robots hunger for faith. That is why they built the Vatican

Jason said he believed there could only be one final truth. Ultimately, faith and truth should prove to be one.

The Pope spoke of the vast knowledge he has stored, furnished by the Listeners through the centuries. He is working on many puzzles, looking for the pieces he needs for each. He hunts them down one by one. It is an arduous process. He always fears there is some fact yet unknown that the Listeners will someday find. The Search Program must be kept working. It is the Search program that keeps the Vatican together. It is the source of the knowledge he was built to process.

Back in his apartment, Jason reflected that heaven is a state of mind. "A good fishing stream. Woodland paths to walk. Mountains to look at. Good restaurants where the waiters were your friends—not just servitors, but friends—other friends to talk with, good books to read and think about and you." Both Jason and Jill have found theirs and are happy with their new lives. Jill observed that they had both been running. Now they had found a refuge. Just then Whisperer returned from the equation world. Whisperer had stayed behind after Jill returned. He was regaining his destiny from the equation people. He had just learned of Decker's death. He was grief-stricken. The three of them join as only they could do and grieved as one.

Cardinal Theodosius walked the clinic garden pondering the Old Ones. They had been feared for a thousand years. They had always been a mystery—unapproachable. It had been a shameful waste, the loss of their potential friendship. They might have changed Vatican history. He knew of no other planet that had wardens. But the Vatican was there only by their benign sufferance. He was glad they had proved a good tenant. Only violence had provoked a confrontation. Had Hubert acted alone or for the theological faction? It was certain that Decker had been killed because he might have known where Heaven was.

The Cardinal reflected that the reason the robots had left the Earth for this remote world on the edge of the galaxy, was to find a purer faith. After a thousand years of separation they still seem tainted by Earth's materialistic ethos. Robots in the image of man not only in body but mind. But perhaps that wasn't all bad for it had been the striving of the human race that had elevated them above the mammals, that made them human and gave them the capacity to create the robots. To the Cardinal there is a sense of brotherhood between the robots and their creators; an extension of the human race.

Our human brothers stumbled many times along their way, they followed fearfully and uncertainly that three-million-year-long road—and here we have stumbled along, as bumbling as they, as uncertain as they, for no more than a thousand years. If, at this juncture of our venture and our purpose, we should stumble badly, commit a great mistake, we have done no more than they did many times before and, as was the case with them, we will recover from it.

From End of Nothing, what Theodosius could see of the Milky Way was just "a shimmering in the sky." Where man had stumbled along, he continued to muse, the robots must carry on with purpose, to hold the long view, to think in terms of millennia. He decided he must seek out the Old One.

Whisperer had made good use of his time on the equation world. The cubes, he learned, were elderly philosophers, put out to pasture. Their planet was an "old folks" home. They occupied themselves with problems. But their greatest sorrow is that they are of no use. He believed he had a use for them. The Cubes could take them to Heaven.

Mary died. Jason stayed with her to the end. He and Ecuyer told the gathered people and robots that she had departed peacefully. Many knelt in prayer. The Heaven controversy was tearing the Vatican apart. Ecuyer could depend on a few of the cardinals for support but didn't know about the Pope: "a cold mechanistic mind." He worried if the Pope could continue his work without the Listeners? The Pope had a sizable backlog of data to keep him busy for many years. Ecuyer knew the Vatican had a great deal of secret technology but he was not sure they had any other efficient means to gather the knowledge the Search Project does. There was the faction that believed the universe too big to handle. Most were scared and would like to close themselves off. Already, Ecuyer told Jason, restrictions were being put on the Search Program. It appeared it would be allowed to only live out the life of the current Listeners.

Jason walked to his overlook where he loved to watch the mountains. Below, the bells of the basilica tolled Mary's passing. He was deep in reflection. He mused:

We grasp for knowledge; panting, we cling desperately to what we snare. We work endlessly to arrive at the final answer, or perhaps many final answers which turn out not to be final answers but lead on to some other fact or factor that may not be final, either. And yet we try, we cannot give up trying, for as an intelligence we are committed to the quest.

He looked at his hands. A touch of his hand had removed Jill's stigma. Where had that gift come from? Is it something that has been evolving in humankind? There have always been stories of people healing by touch. How was it that only he, Jill and Decker had been able to see Whisperer, and he and Jill to join Whisperer's mind. It came with his visit to the Equation World and encountered those beings.

Cardinal Theodosius joined him. In greeting Jason commented on the beauty of the land. To which the Cardinal responded that his eyes beheld no beauty. Robots were made without the appreciation of beauty. For them there is beauty in logical thinking.

Theodosius continued on the trail and found the Old One and apologized for their un-neighborliness. The Old One replied that his kind had done nothing to correct that fear because they aren't really concerned about the settlement. They had treated the planet well and that was the Old One's sole concern as custodians of it.

The Old One told Theodosius about Decker's Whisperer and that Whisperer, Jill and Jason have gone to Heaven. Twice shocked, the Cardinal raced back to the Vatican.

Jill, Jason and Whisperer were joined as never before, a bond beyond love, a single intellect. They were met by five of the equation cubes. Yes, the cubes know of the place called Heaven, although they know it by a different name. It is a famous place in the galaxy. In a flash they were all there.

Jason immediately felt a subtle wrongness about Heaven, a chilling coldness, buildings that indeed looked like ice, and in fact a breeze that felt chilled. There was music and light but a vast emptiness. Great worms crawled in and out of passageways in the buildings. After a brief reconnaissance they were apprehended by four "cones" that herded them into the presence of three aliens, a smoky looking bubble, a shaggy haystack and an octopus-like creature that plopped up and down. They were soon joined by a duplicate of Thomas Decker.

This Decker told them he remembered arriving at this place and the assault on the ship. A pattern had been made of him and the Bubblies reproduced him from it. He was a member of a triad, a basic unit of the Bubblies, including the one present, called Smoky, and the Haystack. He was now virtually immortal. He was very well provided for. He had a job as a translator. About the place being called Heaven he said it could best be described as a Center for Galactic Studies; something like the Vatican but with different motives. The Bubblies had started it nearly a million years before. Unlike the Listeners, they had to physically go out and bring back patterns of life forms and artifacts.

Fear was a defense of this place. They knew about Mary. They had made a pattern of her and then deliberately scared her away.

Jason, Jill and Whisperer agreed that this Decker is different. They felt they were being deceived. They realize that they have penetrated the Center's defenses and pose a threat. They know another Jill and Jason will likely be reconstructed. Decker, as Smoky's translator, has shown great interest in the Listeners. Jill knows the Bubbly's have visited the Vatican in the past but very likely that group either hasn't returned or the data has not yet been analyzed. There is the octopus-like creature called Plopper. Whisperer knows that there is more to Plopper than the Bubbly lets on. Whisperer senses danger and wants to get Jill and Jason out but Jason insists on getting proof about Heaven. Failure to do so would jeopardize the Search Program and the future of the Vatican.

Jason wants to know more about the place, about its purpose. Most research centers collected information for the sake of the knowledge itself. The Vatican had the objective of finding a truer faith. But Jason senses a power motive at the Center.

Whisperer sent a message back to the Old One about "Heaven" and that they planned to return soon. The Old One went to the Vatican to share the news with Theodosius. They agreed to wait together. The Old One told the Cardinal that he has difficulty talking so they agreed to commune silence; something mutually agreeable to them both.

Smoky, the Bubbly, was never really comfortable with either Haystack or Decker. They could be irritating. But a triad took a long time to form and both were useful. Decker had imagination and audacity. Haystack had deep wisdom. He had more clout than any

other Bubbly in the Center because of these two. And there was Plopper, an unacknowledged and illegal addition to the 'triad.' Plopper gave him moral strength—something none of his race had ever had. He considered adding the two new Deckers when replicated, to extend his 'triad' even more. They would give him even greater power.

Smoky's said that the Center was indeed intended to understand the diversity of life. But it thought there was a fundamental logic. Once known that logic could be put to use. That use was power. Only Smoky, of all the triads, had this vision. "First the galaxy, he thought, and then the universe. First the galaxy, then the universe." It pleased Smoky to think of the surprise his taking over would create.

Jason, Jill and Whisperer (curiously a triad of their own) met with the Smoky triad again. The equation people joined them. Smoky insisted that Whisperer leave but Jason refused. Whisperer sensed that the Bubbly was up to no good. Smoky presses for more information but Jason was evasive. The meeting became confrontational. Haystack realized something is going on and he expressed his concern to Smoky. Smoky got angrier. Plopper started plopping up and down, faster and faster. Decker II also protested to Smoky. "Anathema! Screamed Smoky. Anathema! I call down anathema!" Plopper began to explode in a flare of light and cold fire. Whisperer snatched Jason and Jill away.

The humans and robots of the Vatican have gathered around the Cardinal and the Old One. They waited for hours. Theodosius was anxious.

John, the gardener, and spy confronted the Cardinal as they waited. Challenged by Theodosius, John admitted he was the instigator of the theologians and the movement to canonize Mary. Yes, he had gone to the Pope. The Cardinal accused John of betraying the Vatican. John, the Cardinal charged, had employed falsehood and was behind the plot that had killed Decker. John was defiant. The Pope had in fact demoted him, but he hadn't given up.

Just then Jason, Jill and Whisperer arrive in the courtyard of the Vatican. With them was Plopper, but without his flame. A moment later the equation people arrived with the triad: Smoky, Haystack and Decker II. The face of the Pope appeared on a large outdoor screen.

Even after the narrow escape, Decker II pleaded with Cardinal Enoch for mercy for Smoky. Smoky can no longer return to the Center. John stubbornly challenged Jason: where was their proof there was no Heaven. The Cardinal asked Decker II about "Heaven." Decker II admits that it is not such a place.

Once again Plopper moved in front of Smoky and began its rapid plopping. Smoky obviously was caught up in the ritual. Decker II yelled at him to stop and then ran for his life. Plopper began to blaze again but a shaft of darkness sprang from the Basilica and the blaze was snuffed out and Plopper was left limp and unconscious.

Smoky was secured where he would do no more harm. Plopper was dying. Decker II and Haystack were placed under house arrest for the time. Later Jill, Jason, Ecuyer and Cardinal Theodosius gathered in Jason's apartment. They talked the matter over. Clearly

the Bubbly's, an obviously vicious race, must know about the Vatican by now but it didn't matter. The Vatican had other tools that it could use to defend itself, if necessary.

Jason responded that Smoky appeared to use the Plopper as a "little god," a secret weapon. But Theodosius responded that there is but one God, or Principle – no little ones. The Center, Jill added, had apparently decided that no spiritual values existed. The Cardinal acknowledged that even when the truth is known, there will be those who will deny it. But he saluted those who would keep the faith as he joined in a toast.

A PHILOSOPHY OF PROJECT POPE

Project Pope is pastoral and heavily philosophical, second only to *A Choice of Gods* in both categories. It is, in my opinion, something of a sequel to *A Choice of Gods*. It is, however, very much its own book with a distinct plot and lots of surprises. It is a far more dramatic and energetic book. Both stories have a vast robotic computer being fed the collected knowledge of the universe. Unlike the Project with its connection to the Principle, the Pope is fed by a group of human Listeners with powers much like those found in *Time is the Simplest Thing* and *Ring Around the Sun*. And like *Time is the Simplest Thing* but unlike *A Choice of Gods*, this knowledge is to be put to use. Now there is a rival Center of knowledge and one tinged with evil which is first mistakenly identified by an old Listener of questionable mental stability, as Heaven. Heaven turns out to be hell.

Simak also plumbed the depths of robots to an even greater degree than in *A Choice of Gods.* There are a vast number of robot clerics and the lead character is Cardinal Theodosius. Theodosius wasted little time in spiritual groveling. He is an efficient minister of the Pope's affairs. He is wise and gentle and very human, but he knows he is a robot. He wonders not only if he has a soul but if there is any basis for such an idea or the idea of God. For him salvation comes through knowledge and the Pope is the means for combing the galaxy for that little spark of truth that may someday satisfy the longing of sentient intelligence to find meaning in existence. There are also aliens in abundance, mostly essentially good but some tinged with evil. And there is a robot capable of homicide, a sixth or seventh generation robot, made by robots, that lacks Theodosius' reverence for human beings as creator.

The lead character is another Jason, Jason Tennyson, a physician. There is a strong female role in Jill Roberts, a writer, whom Jason met early and shared most of the plot. Their meeting is, of course, one of those incredible coincidences. They travel to End of Nothing, a planet as remote from the affairs of the galaxy as possible but there their lives become deeply embroiled in the unfolding crisis and drama. There is only one small community there, a small number of humans that serve the needs of the Vatican. The season on End of Nothing is not fall but Jason discovered a recording of one of the Listeners, that he goes to repeatedly, of an Autumn world, a world not unlike his own home world and one he understands is not unlike a distant Earth he has never visited. Much of Simak is found in this scene.

This, to him, was the real Heaven, not shining towers and golden stairs and angels. Jason also found a "bluff" from which to watch a distant range of mountains. There is also a vast library at the Vatican. Both Jason and Jill come to love life on End of Nothing, quiet,

simple, no bothersome authority. But that of course must come to an end. And then be restored, as in *A Choice of Gods*.

Cardinal Theodosius is a complex character. It is impossible to see him other than a sentient being, not a mechanical human. He is, like Jason Whitney, of great age (perhaps also some 5,000 years), one of the original robots who came from Earth to found the Vatican and build the Pope a thousand years before. Religion by no means flourishes among the human population of the galaxy. Jason and Jill have no sense of it. On Earth robots were not allowed to attend religious services so, somehow, they secured their freedom, acquired ships, and found and colonized End of Nothing, a planet that would support humans as well as robots.

Theodosius retains a strong attachment to humans. He and Jill become close friends and spend long hours chatting. He is fond of sitting, hunched like a wise older man. He wears the robes of the office of Cardinal. As such he is distinguished as a member of an inner circle around the Pope, knowledgeable and well informed about the affairs of the Vatican, unlike the bulk of the robots who are "piddling monks." Many of the robots work on the farms and cut firewood or tend the grounds of the Vatican or attend to the humans in residence.

Most of the robots were new, built on End of Nothing, and have little of Theodosius' feelings about humans, a feeling that is just short of reverent. The Pope has no reverence for humans at all. In his view they have exploited robots. He expressed a distrust of humans. Theodosius has a personality that is much more mature than Hezekiah's' or Jenkins'. He has respect for humans, indeed for all life, but he tends to see himself as more of an equal and as a self-sufficient identity.

The Vatican robots celebrate mass. A good number of the humans are also believers. Others, like Ecuyer, however, a senior manager and leader of the Listener program, are non-believers. The visitors to the Vatican, are alien pilgrims, not humans, who bring money of use to the Vatican and about whom, we learn, are drawn by some vague belief rather than understanding – as are the human believers.

Robots are capable of loyalty but not love, logic but not a sense of beauty, cautious and never adventurous. They are bound to a settled routine; never tiring, never bored and they prefer it that way. Like Tolkien's Hobbits they preferred a settled, harmonious and well-balanced life without the bothersome dynamics of a 'history.' Theodosius hired Jill to write a history of the Vatican; to put the story into order.

Like human beings, robots have a sense of incompleteness, an emptiness and loneliness that they seek to fulfill through religion. They have established a steady balance between the search for understanding and the quiet stability of End of Nothing. Mary's discovery of Heaven upset the balance. Zealous beliefs are forms of self-delusion. But such credulity affects both humans and robots and factions inevitably forming. This opens an abyss under the Vatican. If there is a Heaven, a Christian-like Heaven, the whole foundation for the Vatican project is undermined. Faith would replace knowledge and reason. First to go would be the Listener program and the chief source of information that feeds the Pope's analysis. The Pope is seeking a universal "religion." He cares nothing of Christianity. Theodosius sees it as his duty to preserve the mission of the project and the purpose of the

Pope. They didn't have the answer they sought yet. The search of the Listeners must continue. It is all that holds the Vatican together. But it doesn't look good.

End of Nothing was so far out on the rim of the galaxy that Theodosius could see the pinwheel shape of the Milky Way in the night sky as he paced and worried. They had come there to find a greater and truer faith. They had come to escape the materialist ethic of the humans who had built them. Yes, humans had treated robots unmercifully. But perhaps even then they recognized robots as brothers, a troubling realization. Robots had the bodies and to a great extent the minds of their builders. Humans had their limitations. They had stumbled along the path of history and evolution. But were robots any better, Theodosius pondered? The robots too would stumble and commit mistakes and experience reverses. And like humans recover and continue. There was something driving them both. Robots, however, held to the long view. They had time, individually and collectively, that humans did not – again a favorite muse of Simak.

Mary made her second visit to Heaven and came back a basket case. The robots have developed exploratory spaceships for their own, but they have no coordinates for Heaven. Jason got an idea from one of the Listener's cubes about a place called the Equation World. It just so happens there is an alien on End of Nothing (alien to humans, actually a native of End of Nothing), Whisperer, a being composed of a nearly invisible collection of dust motes, with whom Jason has a very rare ability to share a common mind-space. Whisperer is able to take Jason, and then Jill, to the Equation World where they find a race of mathematicians who are able to transport them to Heaven. Lots of nice coincidences.

The core of Simak's question about religion comes down to the difference between faith and knowledge. The Pope interviewed Jason and Jill on the subject. Jason has never thought about it but leans in the direction of knowledge, acknowledging that humans have had a long and difficult struggle with the question. Theodosius also leans towards knowledge. He told Jill:

> *… not blind belief, not on the repetitious mumbling of untruth, over and over again, in a desperate attempt to make them turn into truth. We cannot accept untruth, we must know.*

The Pope is committed to reason but is troubled. He has the long view but not a good understanding of the immediate crisis. The pursuit of understanding, the processing of the knowledge brought in by the Listeners, is his whole purpose in life. Some of that knowledge Vatican puts to practical use. But on Heaven, the other galactic center for the collection and analysis of knowledge, it can be put to evil ends. Jason, Jill, and especially Whisperer, who considers it a racial duty to seek understanding, seek knowledge for the good. On Jason's first visit to the Equation World he is engulfed by the cube entities. He returned with a paranormal gift of healing by touch. This is only a byproduct of the equation beings' vast knowledge for they too have spent eons accumulating, and like the Pope, processing knowledge, only they have no goal. To them thinking is only a game, a contest. That is their purpose. They do this for its own sake. Jason, Jill and Whisperer are able to apply their knowledge and abilities in defense of the interest of both the Vatican and the galaxy.

Perhaps as a result of Jason's contact with Whisperer and the Equation people, as his own psyche deepens, he and the Pope find occasion for deep philosophical dialogue on the nature of knowledge and faith, on the common search of humans, from ancient times, and now of robots. The Pope acknowledges the debt the robots owe to humans but is puzzled by many of the frailties of the human condition. He acknowledges that robots also have frailties and like humans, subject to dissension and conflict, and now even violence in the name of belief.

Jason expresses an uncommon wisdom for one who has never been bothered by such questions. He has found peace at End of Nothing and he is able to reflect on the common end of humans and robots and that knowledge is the route to faith, and not the reverse, and that he believes there is some common principle at the root of the universe, as yet unfound, for all races; a single common principle that will give meaning to the life of all sentient creatures.

The Pope is using its vast computational powers to piece together the bits of knowledge brought in by the Listeners, each cube fed into his data banks, trying to find links to broaden his understanding but most importantly to find the key that will open the door to understanding. If the Heaven faction wins and the Listener program is abandoned, he will have nothing to do for a millennium or more but to grind through the same material time and time again. There is now a crisis. The problem is no longer one of reason and knowledge but of feeling, and indeed of the violent emotions unleashed by differences of belief. This is the process that has wrecked human progress time and again and now it threatens the Vatican.

Mary's death created an even deeper crisis. A movement was started to canonize her. Jason's new healing power was attributed to her, a miracle. The Pope was incensed. Nobody had been canonized at this Vatican. There were no saints. Theodosius saw the evolving crisis as the work of one or a few, a tight nit and secretive conspiracy to undermine the Pope and the Vatican project. They were driven by petty motives, unworthy of either humans or robots but most of all robots. But he was convinced that it was a robot and not a human behind the conspiracy. A human had been deliberately murdered by a robot. The murder had brought an encounter with the Old Ones, the wardens of the planet. They had watched the settlement from the beginning, for a thousand years. They saw the settlement as good stewards of the land they inhabited. They had not thought to intervene before. After all it was only a passing thing by their scale of time. They would not, however, tolerate violence.

Jason, Jill and Whisperer, by finding Heaven, added a whole new wing to the plot, an already complicated and intricate one by any standard. It is nothing like Mary saw it. It is a vast and ancient Center for the collection and analysis of knowledge, only this bunch must travel physically. It's a much slower process but it has been underway for a long time. They have a device for duplicating the structure of things, including living beings with all their memories, and then reproducing them at will. Here, however, there is a corruption of purpose. Knowledge is seen as a source of power and a plot is underway by one of the leaders on the planet to rule the universe. The Center is convinced that no spiritual values exist, only material ones. It is a power to be reckoned with: Something of a Cold War scenario. It was a well-defended place. It used mechanisms that produced great fear to

drive intruders away. Mary had been scared off and her mind and health broken. Now Jason's group had arrived without notice and defeated the defenses in the process. Jason and Whisperer knew there was some great danger, but Jason must stay until he could secure evidence that this "Heaven" was not a spiritual paradise.

What they find is a strange meld of four beings, an extended triad that defined the culture of the planet, one human, one a passive but wise 'haystack,' one very inhuman and one very dangerous. They are a corrupted unit. It is an unnatural team. Even by Bubbly standards. What Simak was trying to say about the four distinct personalities, or in the case of one silent member of the group, is hard to fathom. They obviously represent something to him but without the basis of his characterizations or a better knowledge of his experience of such, it is difficult to comprehend the full nature of the group. There is a loose analogy in Hitler and his core henchmen but that was too far removed, especially for the newer generation who would be reading Simak by that time, to be an interesting plot device. The perilous circumstances, however, help create a higher order of drama and sets up the closure for the plot.

With the climax of the crisis Jason, Jill, Whisper, a trinity in their own right, are transported back to Vatican 17 followed by the corrupt Center "triad." They appear in a courtyard where Theodosius, the Old One, the Pope and humans and robots wait for their return. The Pope employed an energy device (a weapon) to suppress a lethal burst of energy that was starting to come from an evil being, Plopper, the fourth of the corrupt 'triad.' End of Nothing could adequately defend itself. That, and the clear evidence that there is no Heaven, is enough for the Pope to reassert his power and authority.

The story ends with the triumph of spirit over matter, of reason over feeling, with a collection of friends, human, alien and robot, celebrating victory together in harmony and complete equality. Vatican will go on. Peace and tranquility will be restored. The Listeners will continue their work. The Pope will continue piecing little fragments of the puzzle together and searching for small and important facts that will someday give true understanding and meaning to life, to the life of all beings.

This is Simak on steroids. I find it in many ways the culmination of his philosophy.

Chapter Fourteen: Last Testament

Clifford D. Simak reached 83 the year he published *Highway of Eternity*. He was seriously ill. One would be mistaken to think that this is a book out of his dotage. It is at least as good as the average of his prime. There are those who say Simak wrote formulas, and surely the quest books, particularly, would suggest this. There are certainly many themes he used repeatedly but to think he is repetitious is what I call the bread-machine mentality. Bread is made of flour, water, yeast and salt; simple ingredients[63]. To make bread in a machine you just measure out the prescribed ingredients, turn on the switch and wait a few minutes. It's certainly better than the massed produced bakery products but nothing compared to hand-kneaded and artisan breads.

Bread, one of civilization's oldest and most important inventions, comes in hundreds of different varieties. I have made my own bread, by hand, most of my adult life and I never get two loaves in a row that are the same even when I try. Such is Simak's writing. I would call him a master "baker." He had a rare talent for combining ingredients creatively. Each time he uses a familiar device the way he uses it gives new meaning either to the device or to the story. Each of his plots was a unique product of Simak's very fertile imagination.

If anything, *Highway of Eternity* shows that his imagination never faltered, even aged and ill. In *it* we find some of the familiar ideas and a variety of new ones woven into a distinctive plot and story. Simak was clearly in great artistic form to the very end. He achieved his ideal of the wise old man in so many of his stories, and like Jason's grandfather, perhaps he was at the top of his mountain.

It is, however, Simak's last quest, his last journey, and perhaps his last testament, written obviously from a sound mind. It is his final expression of the hope that Man will not be just another failed experiment. But to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, he takes some very surprising twists.

There is a surrealism in this novel the like of which I do not find in any of his other works. The book starts with two friends, Tom Boone, a veteran, globetrotting newspaperman, and Jay Corcoran, a former CIA agent and now big-ticket private investigator. Both have a talent. Boone, in moments of mortal danger, has "stepped around the corner," stepped out of time and space long enough for the danger to pass. It has occurred only a few times and he has no conscious control over it. Corcoran, as a result of brain surgery, has the ability to see in a different way.

Corcoran had a mysterious client, Martin, who had disappeared. Martin had been paying Corcoran in large wads of thousand-dollar bills for odd information. The last piece of information Corcoran gave him was about the disappearance of a place called Hopkins Acre in 1615. Investigating Martin's apartment, he 'sees' something and he thinks Boone might be able to get into it. They end up transported to Hopkins Acre, an English manor encapsulated in a time bubble (made to disappear from normal time and space). It is a sprawling, two-story, stone building. It is about the only pastoral setting in the book and is reminiscent of Simak's other great houses. It is the sanctuary for a group of refugees from the future, about a million years into the future. In the time bubble they do not age. They

[63] Even the vast complexity of human DNA is made up of only four 'letters.' Scientists say most processes in the universe are formed out of simple rules and a small number of them at that.

have been in Hopkins Acre for some 150 years. They make excursions to various time periods and they have agents all over time. Martin was one of their agents in the twentieth century.

Simak introduces us to the "family" at Hopkins Acre and gives us just a glimmering of their story. I will introduce just three of the characters at this point. First, Spike, a spherical metallic alien covered with spikes. Spike romps around the property in mysterious hopping games, rather doglike. Second is a "ghost" by the name of Henry. Henry had been partially converted from corporal life by the diabolic race of Infinites from whom the refugees had fled. About halfway through the process of being converted he broke away. He retained his human form but is immaterial, a mere shadow, capable of communicating clearly by telepathy. He is still very much in touch with the world and considers himself still human. He is content as he is. His condition has both advantages and disadvantages. He is the only one able to wander in time on his own. Third is Timothy, a scholar, who sought the root of human error, as civilization developed into the future, in the earliest part of human history. There are problems like economics, the profit motive, war motive, "the need of huddling—the need of men and women to huddle in tribes, nations, and empires, reflecting that terrifying sense of insecurity that is part of the human psyche" (back to *City*). Not all of the family agree with his conclusions. He is considered an eccentric. The travelers have brought him a great trove of ancient writings, many lost to the modern world, a now very familiar motif.

Something in the future had, in fact, gone wrong with the human race. On the verge of establishing a true Utopia, the race had collectively collapsed and lost its motivation, sinking into a society that does nothing but sit around and talk, in impoverished circumstances, but with their needs met by robots. The Infinites brought a new "religion" that encouraged and assisted the mass of humanity to change from biological corporeal to incorporeal beings, pure intelligences. They become immortal. They are also bloodless abstractions, no longer human in form or function. The Infinites have done this to a number of races. The refugees at Hopkins Acre, and others that escaped, had stolen the secret of time travel from the infinities. They built time-traveling machines and fled. There are many other small groups widely scattered but being hunted down. The Infinites are now getting tough with the dissidents.

Shortly after Boone and Corcoran arrived, one of the refugees returned and crashed into his traveler. He is mortally wounded but manages to tell the others with his last breath that the Athens station (ancient Greece) had been destroyed by a killer monster sent by the Infinites. The killer monster just then attacked Hopkins Acre without warning. They fled in three travelers, each leaving in panic without taking the time to plot a course. By chance Boone and Enid were transported to the American Southwest, about 50,000 years in the past. They found a great buffalo bull being harried by wolves near where they landed. They decided to make a camp for the night and wait for Henry to track them down. Boone elected to sleep outside, in a sitting position to keep the fire burning. He dozed too long and woke up with a wolf looking him in the face. There is also a being, a great hat with no face, sitting on the other side of the campfire, which offered to translate for the wolf, which takes a liking for Boone.

The next day the killer monster tracked them down. Boone, who is too far away from the traveler, yelled at Enid to move it to safety. The monster made the mistake of getting too close to the harried buffalo, which got a horn into it and wrecked it. We find that the killer monster is a robot and that it can communicate telepathically. It has now been reduced to no more than a brain case, blind and immobile and begged not to be left behind, alone for an eternity. Boone had no sympathy for it. Enid, meantime, can't figure out how to get back to him. Boone decided to reconnoiter. He is followed by a wolf. He left a note that he would be gone for several days.

Henry is able to track Corcoran and David to a place nearly a million years into the future, just about the time the Infinites first arrived. They met an old man in the ruins where they landed who told them he had spent a lifetime traveling the stars but now just sat and contemplated nature. They shared a meal in a village near the ruined city with a group of men engaged in endless conversation. This is future man in decline. This is where Henry found them. Henry could not locate Boone, however. Henry went in search of Enid again, following the trail of the traveler, leaving Corcoran and David who elected to camp out.

David told Corcoran more of the story of the decline of Man and the flight of his family. The refugees were misfits: "The hillbillies of our time." They clung to traditions. Humanity had built a great interstellar civilization, left war behind, everything provided. There was no money, no economy. They were taken care of by robots. Perhaps they felt they had made it and had no place else to go. A saber tooth got David during the night while Corcoran was asleep.

Enid ended up in the far future and met an alien she called Horseface. Horseface asked her help to construct a traveling device, a great net-like object, which can travel through space and time. They traveled to a world where Horseface stole a great trunk, barely escaping a tentacled monster that pursued him. The trunk turned out to be a galactic map, which inflates and allows one to wander around, seemingly inside the galaxy, even to the black hole in the core. Enid found a small visor. With it she was able, by focusing her attention, to find the other members of her group.

Boone, meanwhile, has found himself trapped and in mortal danger. He "goes around the corner" and ends up beside a road in an empty land along which runs a trolley. The wolf is still with him. The trolley took them to a place with a small building, tables and chairs. There he again found the Hat. A robot attendant brought a sumptuous meal for him and a platter of raw meat for Wolf. The Hat told him that he is on the highway of eternity. No, not the highway <u>to</u> eternity. They were in eternity. Boone learned that he is one of many travelers along the road. About then Enid and Horseface descended from the sky on the net.

Meanwhile Timothy and a couple of others were having their own adventure. They met a large band of robots that were busily engaged in a war on trees, cutting them down and burning them. The robots had heard that the trees would succeed man, now vanished from this world, and they want the privilege themselves. They are organized as a military unit under one with the rank of colonel. Investigating an Infinites 'castle,' they all manage to get transported to another world. There, Spike, after destroying another of the killer

monsters, kidnaps Timothy with the aid of an alien in a flier, and he is taken to a city. There Timothy was installed in a replica of Hopkins Acre.

The city is a place of knowledge, a form of university, in which a vast variety of entities are working. A panel interviews him to test his fitness to join them. They want to know what he has been working on. He explained that his work was in history and philosophy, mostly imagination. He was told that most of the reality of the universe started out as imagination. He was questioned about the Infinites. He explained that his group, "the outlanders—the hillbillies," were lagging behind humanity and for a reason. Again, the story is about the human race on the verge of developing a perfect society, but something happened to bring that to an end. With nothing to do they just sat down and talked. Everyone decided that progress wasn't worth it. The Infinites came along and offered them immortality: no physical ills, no danger, and no disappointments.

Timothy was told that Man had been but only one of the victims of the Infinites and that the Infinites had now been quarantined. The Infinites considered themselves saviors of the races they brought their religion to. They thought they were a highly moral people. The panel spokesperson who questioned their motive considered them an arrogant and objectionable lot. Timothy learned that the panel members were representatives of Galactic Central and he was invited to become a member, the only human member. He asked to have Horace and Emma brought to the house. The robots, we learn, could not come into the city, but they did not want to. They wanted to make their own place in the world. They set up farms around the city to feed it, one of its greatest needs. This is what Simak's robots do.

Meanwhile, on the highway of eternity, Martin appeared with one of the travelers. He is something of a soldier of fortune. He has three of the Infinites with him. Horseface bundled up the lot on the net and took them to the planet of the Rainbow people. Martin was dropped from the net. He did not belong there, said Horseface, but he didn't say why. The Rainbow people, Horseface explained, were the oldest people in the universe. They sat in judgment of the Infinites who were accused of interfering with human evolution, indeed ending human evolution before it had run its course. Man was "simply resting," the Rainbow people pointed out, and would have, in time, developed a new intellectuality. The Infinites were condemned. They would take the sentence back to their people. The sentence was that they would spend the remainder of their racial life accusing each other for their crimes and injustices.

The Rainbow people poured a vast knowledge of the universe into the minds of Boone and Enid. The universe, they learned, was like a factory to produce life and consciousness. This gave it meaning. Horseface transported the group to Galactic Central on the net and the adventure came to its conclusion. Galactic Central is a place to seek understanding, in terms the Rainbow people had said: "So long as the drive to learn existed, there was hope that the puzzle of universal purpose would eventually be solved." Boone and Enid are in love and they elect to stay and study. Corcoran elected to return to his life in the twentieth century.

Martin, meanwhile, had been deposited in the twenty-third century, near the place where Boone and Enid had been stranded. The world economy had collapsed. It was a

miserable place, lawless, without money. He found a small village and was offered shelter. They gave him a job working in the fields with them. Wandering the desert one day he found the brain case of the killer monster and they talked (great coincidence). The telepathic robot brain gave him the idea for a scheme. The people of this time were filled with a sense of hopelessness. There was nothing to strive for. He asked the robot if it had any ethics, to which it replied that it did not know what he was talking about. He set out with it for the village to establish a new religion.

Simak gave us a parting insight into Horseface. Horseface was delighted with the turn of events. We learn that he had stumbled on the highway of eternity millennia ago. The road had already been there for a long time. He added the trolley, built the shack, set up the tables and chairs, and brought in the robot with a stove and food machine to serve travelers. The Hat was recruited as an accomplice. Horseface set alarms to tell him when a traveler arrived. Boone had triggered the alarm the first time he had "gone around the corner." This was a highly unanticipated trait, a talent, for Man. It gave Horseface a solution to the problem of Hopkins Acre. He had already put Spike there as a spy. He arranged for Boone to be transported there. He had hoped Corcoran would not be brought along but that was just a detail. The wolf was a problem. Boone had let the fire burn down and the wolf was planning on making a meal of him. Horseface had the Hat adjust the wolf into something of a dog with affection for Boone. Now the Hat was a plaything for Wolf at Galactic Center, placed there to keep an eye on Boone and Enid.

Horseface's mission was to help intelligence along, a chancy enterprise at best[64]. Very few life forms had managed to evolve to a higher state. Most of them failed for various reasons. Horseface's own race had failed when it had achieved immortality and sacrificed racial fertility. The Rainbow people, as ancient as they were, had also failed. They had given up emotions and lost their sense of values. The Infinites had failed, lost in a fanatical crusade. The Hat was the last of its race, a relic left in the corner of a museum where Horseface found it. The Galactic Center was the home base of representatives of races that had succeeded. Enid and Boone are now the key to the future of the human race. Boone had a real talent. Enid represented the toughness of the little group who had defied the Infinites. They were a great genetic mix and Horseface knew a lot about genetics. Now he needed to find suitable mates for their unborn children.

Horseface checked in on Martin. He was holding a religious service using the robot brain case as an object of worship. They had a ritual. Martin would raise their expectations and then the robot would speak to their minds. Martin would bear watching.

Henry, we learn, ended up at a distant time of the Earth with a bloated red sun in the sky. He was addressed by a sentient tree, an ancient entity but one that knew man only by virtue of ancient legend. Yes, they had succeeded Man. Man, like so many species, had run its course and disappeared. The lattices of incorporeal forms had gradually faded and gone away. Now the trees whiled away the last days of the Earth. Horseface would fetch Henry. He belonged with his family.

[64] It is not clear if he is a Galactic Central agent or on his own.

A PHILOSOPHY OF HIGHWAY OF ETERNITY

In the last year of his life, terminally ill, Simak had one last epic novel to write, *Highway of Eternity*. Despite his age and health there is no evidence of any slackening of his form or imagination. *Highway of Eternity* is a quest novel. It contains a full assortment of common themes. It is pastoral in the same sense of his other quest novels: pastoral mostly to the extent that they are camping trips. It's about an empty world. There is a great manor house, first, briefly, set in an English countryside and appearing again at the end of the novel in the citadel of the Galactic Center.

The plot is precipitated by paranormal abilities, which trigger a chain of events. Parallel to this theme is a time-travel scenario as a group of refugees flee religious persecution a million years into the future of this planet Earth. Religion is a major sub-theme. But so, once again, is the failing of the human race. In that time Man has given up the stars and settled down to an impoverished state, sitting around philosophizing while their simple daily needs are met by robots. The second crisis of that future scenario is the arrival of a group of alien missionaries, the Infinites, whose proffered salvation is the conversion of the mind and soul of corporate beings into incorporate form[65]. Such entities are immortal, beyond pain and need, in a sense transported to a paradise. But they are abstract entities, no longer human. The Earth is being emptied of human life and the race systematically extinguished. Here we return to the theme of *City*. The refugees have fled conversion, escaping to the past in order to maintain their humanity. At Hopkins Acre they erect a time bubble in which they, like Enoch Wallace, no longer age. But they are being pursued by vicious killer robots.

One of the refugees, a gifted scholar named Timothy, has been combing the early history of human civilization to find a root cause for the failure of society in his time. The group has agents in many time zones, including one who brings Tom Boone, a newspaperman, and Jay Corcoran into the plot via their paranormal sense and project Boone onto the Highway of Eternity. Timothy has concluded that the key lies in:

> *the problem of surpluses, the profit motive, and the war motive which arise from one man or tribe having more than another man or tribe may have; or the need of huddling—the need of men and women to huddle in tribes, nations, and empires, reflecting that terrifying sense of insecurity that is part of the human psyche.*

In the future, human society has made huge progress, in science, space travel and social consciousness. It was a society of peace and prosperity, with little governance, no money, no economy, everyone served by robots. Life spans had doubled. But the human race had lost its motivation, withdrawn, collapsed and fallen prey to the schemes of the Infinites. The refugees consider themselves "hillbillies," in fact traditionalists who embrace older values and stronger ethical codes.

Simak does some new and interesting things with this plot. For one there are several key characters each who has his or her own sub-quest. They include one who was partially converted by the Infinites, who broke away from them and now lives a ghost-like existence. Henry has the ability to travel time and space without mechanical assistance and is impervious to physical force. He is content with his strange existence.

[65] A similar scenario has been established by science fiction writer Vernor Vinge, something technical entrepreneur Richard Kurzweil called the singularity.

When Hopkins Acre was attacked by the Infinites' killer robot the band escaped in three different time machines, in three directions and times. Some would die. New players are introduced, including an army of robots committed to stopping trees from becoming the natural successors of humans, and a couple of strange beings, The Hat and Horseface.

In a complex and interweaving plot not only Boone, but the resilient woman, Enid, and Timothy travel merging lines of development. Boone and Enid are separated and Boone winds up with a friendly wolf as a companion who together set out on their own quest. Eventually Timothy is kidnapped and taken to the Galactic Center where he is interviewed to test his fitness to become the first human member of that collective, a university-like place where the best minds of the galaxy work to solve its problems. He learns that the Infinites have been quarantined but have escaped to work their mischief on the human race.

Enid found Horseface who turns out to be the game master of the plot. They pick up Boone and apprehend four Infinites (analogues of the four faceless card players in Special Deliverance) and take them for judgment by one of the most ancient races in the universe, the Rainbow People. Horseface claims the human race was only resting and should not have been interfered with. The Infinites are condemned to spend the rest of their existence in a racial hell blaming each other for their crimes and injustices[66]. As Boone and Enid depart the Rainbow people pour into their minds all of their ancient knowledge (*Time Is The Simplest Thing*, the Pinkness).

Horseface transports the group to Galactic Center where Timothy has been installed as a resident scholar to continue his work in history and imagination (most history he is told begins with imagination). Boone and Enid decide to stay, to explore their own vast new knowledge and to start a family. Horseface finds their union a genetic advantage to the future of the human race. Corcoran opted to return to his own time. The army of robots is settled outside the walls of Galactic Center and take on the much-needed job of farming to provide food and other products for the Center.

Meanwhile the agent of the Hopkins Acre refugees, who first brings Boone and Corcoran into the plot, Martin, is dumped into the twenty-third century by Horseface. That time is impoverished. The economy has collapsed, and Martin must take up life in a primitive village. He was dumped, however, with that incredible coincidence, where Boone had been stranded and the Infinity killer robot, which had followed him, had been destroyed, leaving nothing but a brain case. Martin found the braincase and he and the robot are able to communicate telepathically. Martin decided to use the robot's powers, after finding the robot knew nothing of ethics, to form a new religious cult. Here Simak takes his parting shot at religious exploitation of poor and ignorant people, and his parting warning of the imminent failure of human society.

There are yet two important scenes to develop. At last we learn more about Horseface and the idea behind the novel. Horseface is an ancient being. He is one more of that long line of Simak characters whose longevity gives them a far different perspective on human life, the long view. Horseface had discovered the Highway of Eternity long ago and set it up to capture those who had special abilities. He had become aware of Boone's

[66] This has the more than familiar feel of the lives of evangelicals.

unique, for humans, ability, when Boone first involuntarily used the talent to “step around the corner” to avoid danger and had triggered an alarm set by Horseface to alert him to new players in his game.

Horseface at first saw Boone as a solution to the problem of Hopkins Acre. But there was a bigger game in motion and one into which Boone and Enid would play a crucial role. They were genetically suited to having offspring with abilities. But the larger picture concerned the success of the condition of intelligence in the universe itself. Race after race had failed to achieve the potential of intelligence. Each had made a choice that thwarted its evolution. His own race had failed by achieving immortality by losing racial fertility. The Hat was the last of its race. The Rainbow people had failed by giving up emotions. The Infinites had failed by launching their fanatical crusade.

Boone and Enid gave the human race a new chance. Boone had his talent and she had the toughness to defy the Infinites. Now they possessed the vast knowledge of the ancient Rainbow People. What is never clear is whether Horseface is an agent of the Galactic Center or, more probably, completely independent. He appears to play the role, like the four card players in Special Deliverance, in recruiting its staff only now from throughout the galaxy instead of alternative worlds.

Meanwhile Henry has gone to the end of time, to a distant future for one last view of Simak’s bloated red sun fills the sky. All that remains of life is a sentient tree. Simak has now turned full circle. The ancient tree knows the legend of Man. Yes trees, despite the robots’ war on them, succeeded all other intelligence. But they simply st in the sun, waiting for the ultimate end of life. Horseface decided to fetch Henry back to rejoin his family. Unlike Simak’s earlier stories this is not the end but a new beginning. With his “last breath” he has spoken of a second chance for humanity, indeed for that experiment in this universe called intelligence.

Chapter Fifteen: On the Bluff

Clifford Simak's imagination inhabited many worlds. But clearly those worlds were defined, like those of all of us, by the one in which he grew up, a world where his mind evolved from the playful imagination of childhood to the more informed and mature imagination of youth and adulthood. Most of us lose our playfulness as we grow up. Simak never did.

Simak's view of the world was defined by life on a small farm perched on an isolated ridge in a remote corner of Wisconsin. It was a land of rolling hills and ravines and river bottoms covered with old forest. The farm was near the confluence of two great rivers, the Wisconsin and the Mississippi which, over a geological age, fed by glacial runoff, sculpted majestic bluffs. The glaciers themselves bypassed this ancient topography. The Wiseman-Simak farm was on the top of one of these bluffs overlooking the Wisconsin River and, the hilly sweep of land to the north, and to the west the murky bluffs of the Mississippi. I found the location appealing. I also found it had swarms of gnats and mosquitos. Nonetheless a place of remarkable beauty.

Simak, a science reporter by day, knew the geology, the history of the earth, of his homeland. He wrote and edited several nonfiction books at the time of the International Geophysical Year. He knew that the great ice sheets had come down from the North and transformed the land. But he also knew that they had been diverted from his little corner of the world by a ridge of hills to the north of the farm. That land along the Wisconsin River is ancient, as Enoch Wallace knew it. In its vast span of undisturbed years, we find a mystique that draws our imagination. Those ice sheets covered only part of Pennsylvania and ended just north of where I live. I see the difference between the two landforms. The mostly rural alley where I live is defined by the roots of a mighty ancient mountain range. There is even a place not far away named Millville.

The isolation of the Simak farm undoubtedly produced a dreamy state of mind in young Cliff. It was a world of horse and buggy and team-drawn plows and oil lamps and wood stoves. Books and newspapers formed a vivid if rather detached view of the world outside. Those were the days of the formation of the National Geographical Society. School Boards used geographies, atlases and gazetteers with marvelous lithographic illustrations that excited the minds of generations of children. That world strongly drew Cliff's boyish imagination. There was a Great War in faraway Europe and young men in the area went to serve and brought back stories. Cliff was in his adolescence then. Then came the radio and the theater of the mind. There was the world of the Great Depression which weighted less heavily on rural farmers, already poor but for whom the land produced the means to live, a self-sufficient life he returned to again and again. Clifford Simak had worked in various Midwestern newspaper offices during those difficult years.

Simak was a newspaperman during much of the unfolding history of the world during an important part of the twentieth century. The newspapers caught and held young Cliff's attention. He was drawn to the magic of the printed word and found his vocation as a wordsmith at a young age. He became a reporter and quickly rose to become the editor in a succession of small town mid-western newspapers where he studied the lives and culture of the people of the Midwest that came to us in his stories and novels. These years must

have been very important to the formation of his world view. He moved on to a big city newspaper (Minneapolis Star-Tribune) just in time for a world engulfed in blood and brutality, a truly global war that ended with the mind-numbing blast of two atomic bombs, blasts that obliterated entire cities. Simak edited wire reports from around the world during the war. During this period Simak also made his mark as a writer of science fiction.

Like many boys of his time young Cliff was drawn to the pulps and especially to science fiction and fantasy. He tried his hand at the craft and found a publisher in the legendary John Campbell. Simak first wrote for the genre of his day: rockets and rayguns, Martians, Venusians and other often not very friendly neighbors, god-like entities like the Creator, and the contest of morals and wills between human beings enlisted in the opposing armies of dark and light. But Simak returned again and again to a place called Millville. It is a fictionalized place, not so much the one he grew up in. Today Millville bears little resemblance to the towns in his stories, towns with three block business districts with a drug store and a soda fountain and coffee bar and a two-story brick schoolhouse and a mix of older and more contemporary houses (I'm surprised there are so few trains and so few sumptuous country dinners in his stories). The Millville of his stories was indeed a composite of the small towns in which he lived in work that stretched to the Dakotas. Prairie du Chien, just across the river, was of this style in his youth. We find these places and people in his stories. I grew up in one of those towns. I know those people.

From perhaps the very beginning of his fiction, a deeper theme runs in Simak's stories, one that touches the essential nature of "Man" and the question of our purpose in this universe. Simak found little solace in dogmatic faith—indeed came to question it, perhaps with a longing in his heart, but from an increasing distance. The early stories often pondered creation, the alpha, and especially the end, the omega, of the span of the human condition and of the Earth itself. The early stories share perhaps something of the glowing optimism of the World's Fair of 1939 and of the Campbell crowd. Many of his stories depicted a lofty optimism of men and women driven by penetrating rationality and advanced sciences. But, like in Campbell's own writings, there is a dark side. From the beginning there is a deep pessimism in Simak. Many of his stories end badly, first on Earth and then on alternative worlds when Men not only fail to prosper and progress but to even survive as a species. He often took us to a dying sun glowing feebly over a long-vacant Earth and to empty worlds scattered with ruins. This is strange for a kindly and humorous man who showed no signs of depression or morbidity in his personal life.

The brutality of World War II deepened Simak's pessimism. He could no longer see a world fit to live in where Man pursued technology and predatory commerce. As he matured as a writer, with a growing audience, a philosophy, I believe, took form in a series of stores that became his most famous collection, *City*. We find in those stories, starting with the first, the world of Man transformed not by war (a subject he rarely more than touched upon in his science fiction) but from technological progress. Atomic energy made the city obsolete. Hydroponics opened the land for people to settle, each family on broad acres. Robots gave these isolated families a manorial independence. Unfortunately, manorial isolation resulted in a neurotic (or worse) introversion that killed the spirit of Man. We see this again in *Highway of Eternity*, his last book. Finally, a technology with the power to transform a Man into another, immortal and sensual form, emptied the Earth and

brought humanity to an end, all but for a tragic remnant, the dwellers of Geneva who attained immortality through the dream sleep of suspended animation, and a band of wild youth who proved too violent to allow to remain among the Brotherhood of Animals.

There is, however, something of a catharsis in *City*. After these dark and tragic stories, stories that would hold their own with the best of the Greeks and Shakespeare, I believe a gleam of hope reentered Simak's writing. He never saw salvation for the generality of humankind, but he did see hope for a chosen few, one or two or a handful who give humanity a second chance.

With *City* Simak turned to the countryside, to an idyllic life in a great house in which a fire burned on an ancient hearth, surrounded by books, a spring breeze blowing through an open window and beyond, ancient trees, often shrouded in fog from the river, and clothed in apple blossoms in the Spring and the bright splendor of the Fall season. And into the river ran brooks filled with trout, along which lady slippers bloomed. This is a contemplative world. It is the alternate world of a busy newspaper editor living in a bustling metropolis. It is a longing shared by many of us besieged by our frantic lives.

City is one of only two of Simak's books that still find their way to the press. The other is *Way Station*. In *Way Station* book Simak achieved the penultimate sense of isolation. Enoch Wallace has lived alone for a century. This story started on a battlefield, during a war his grandfather skirmishes in, whose sword hung over his desk at home, fought. Enoch appeared on the field of battle shrouded by gun smoke.. The last shot has been fired and for a moment a deep and mystical silence has descended on a nervous system shattered by the pounding fury of musket volleys, cannon and men with bayonets screaming in rage and pain in pitched hand-to-hand combat. The battle fought, Enoch, against all odds, stands in the moment surrounded by the moans and cries of the wounded and the sodden bundles of the dead bring him back to reality. It is at such times, and Simak himself was never a soldier, that men awaken to something primal in their beings.

THE BLUFF

On the topographical map at coordinates -91.01601 Longitude and 43.00610 Latitude is an outcropping on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River valley and the rolling countryside to the north—an ancient land that had been untouched by the sheets of ice. A satellite photograph shows the fields and a farmhouse near the bluff just as Simak described it. Each day Enoch walked to that point, a spot on the edge of the farm once tilled by a Simak and a place where young Cliff must have often walked. It is the center of Enoch's world and for me Simak's world as well. It is certainly the center, the Greenwich meridian if you will, of my map of Simak's world, the reference point around which I wrote this book. I have captured that scene in my cover photo.

Today it is a different scene. Trees have regrown over the last century along that ridge, as they have across the country. My prospect from that ridge is a composite of spots from which I could see the world beyond, but not what must have been the awesome panorama of Simak's youth. I believe that over the years, in his imagination, "The Bluff" was a synthesis of memories and imagination. Enoch saw it, Asher saw it and Jason Whitney saw something from that ridge. Simak saw something as well. There is autobiography in the expression of authors. But I think it is what he saw with the mind's

eye that comes out of his stories. This is the philosopher's vision, perhaps the mystics' vision.

What does Enoch tell us about Clifford Simak? For Enoch, the battle is the end of a world. He retreated from it. In *City*, the world has also ended and John Webster retreats to his own splendid isolation. Following the pathos of *City*, with *Way Station*, rather than empty the Earth he turns to the isolation of that farm standing isolated on a hilltop. Enoch lives alone. The girl who hoped to come back to, had died during his absence in the war. His mother and father lie buried on the farm. All he has is a few acres and a house, the house in which he was born. Then came Ulysses and he becomes the keeper of the way station.

The way station only increases Enoch's isolation from the Earth. He is now completely independent of the Earth, physically if not emotionally. The farmhouse is turned into something more than a dwelling but to the outside world it is still an old house on a hill. *City* gave us more of a dwelling place than *Way Station*, but it is still a place to draw the imagination.

Simak's houses share something with Frank Lloyd Wright's designs. Wright lived just a few miles upriver. On my visits to Millville, I visited Taliesin as well. The doors to Wright's houses are often hard to see. That gives the owner a sense of isolation. But the vast windows and balconies give the prospect that Wright so loved. And indeed, Wright's Taliesin has a grand prospect, one over a valley along the Wisconsin River. Wright sought to buy all the land he could see, creating his own little kingdom of the Fellowship, a splendid isolation from the world. I cannot stand on Wright's hilltop or look out from his magnificent house without thinking of Simak. I cannot read Simak's stories that have great houses, as in *City* and *A Choice of Gods*, without thinking of Wright. That splendid isolation was repeated, indeed amplified, in Wright's second Taliesin in the Arizona desert, where I lived many years, and often visited.

Enoch is a watcher, a listener, in his own right. He too has taped the greatest minds of a vast galaxy. Rather than projecting his mind like the travelers at Fishhook and the Listeners of the Vatican, he sat with the countless aliens who stop for a visit before moving on, many of whom with which he shares the common galactic speech. He also ordered newspapers and journals and books to inform himself of his own world.

Enoch is a seeker and his medium, like journalist Simak, is the written word. His curiosity has become legendary in the galaxy and many visitors come with gifts for him, both artifacts and text, some of which he learns to read in native languages. He is systematic and painstaking in recording what he learns. He has an epistemology gleaned from some of the most advanced races in the galaxy and tools that give him a penetrating insight that would make him a genius by earthly standards.

Enoch, for all his doubts and fears about the human future, is committed to the Earth and Humanity above all things. He loved his job as keeper of the way station but when the crisis comes, as it must in Simak's books, he makes the hard choice: He will stand with the Earth despite the great personal cost. He will do what he can to use his vast accumulation of knowledge in the unlikely hope of saving it from inevitable ruin.

Enoch is a character with whom I plainly identify. Like him I enjoy isolation, albeit not as extreme as his – I have wandered the country and a bit of the world. Like him I surround myself with books and journals and like him I have spent many years pondering the fate of the human race, a collective of which I feel a part, a species that gives me an identity, but one that troubles me deeply. And like him, like Simak, I have loved the land and the life that fills it, in forest, field and even in the harshest of deserts. Like Enoch Wallace and so many of Simak's characters to come, I have stood or sat on bluffs and pondered the history of the Earth. I marvel at its geology and especially the signs of life fossilized in ancient stone. Like him I've spent long hours gazing into the starry night and wonder what beings and civilizations might be out there. The alien knowledge I collect, however, comes from the library.

Like Enoch and Jason Whitney and other characters, the events of the world have often invaded my isolation. Enoch was comfortable and content in his distant isolation and seeming complete anonymity. As isolated as he was, as Millville township still is, as accepted as he was by the passing generations of simple folk who wondered but never questioned his longevity, he could not avoid the inevitable discovery by agents of the government. They do not come to knock on his door. Their prying and probing upset a delicate balance in the galaxy. The galaxy itself, however, was already torn by contention. It has lost its spiritual center. Enoch finds that he is a pawn in a game of which he had no inkling.

Enoch is a man of great rationality. He has the mind of a scientist and mathematician. He is empirical in his approach to things. Yet he sheds a precious hour from a virtually immortal life to walk the hilltop fields and forest of his farm every day. He has a profound attachment of the heart for the land and for the life that inhabits it. He has no real identity with the human race yet is ready to surrender his immortality in the faint hope of helping it. In the end a great mystical power comes to the rescue not only of humankind but the great galactic federation in the form of a simple and profoundly handicapped neighbor girl within who resides the true essence of what it means to be not only human but a member of the class of things called intelligence.

Where *City* ends tragically, *Way Station* ends triumphantly. Here is the spirit of optimism of the earlier novels. Simak is coming back from the deep depression of World War II. He is not yet convinced that the human race would survive. *Way Station* came at the height of the Cold War, just a little before Vietnam but in an age of the ICBM and constant little bloody conflicts that pitted Democracy against Tyranny. Simak was a senior editor with the responsibility of turning the daily events of the world into stories for his newspaper. He was far more aware than his readers, or for that matter academicians and politicians, of the conditions of the world and the deepening Cold War.

Way Station came, as well, at the end of the decade of philosophical despair marked by the rise of existential philosophy. It came at a time, however, when heroes of humanity, like Einstein and Schweitzer, strode the earth, and when the United Nations and world citizenship were upheld as banners of hope for the evolution of human civilization. Simak, who had given up on faith, still sought something of a spiritual quality, perhaps only a rare gift like Lucy's, to light the way for all of humanity. His characters are earnestly searching for a clue, for a principle, a system, that would allow humanity to turn around. Yet, for all its

vaunted qualities, the only route open to guarantee salvation was to rob humanity of the intelligence it used to build its weapons, and its cities, and its materialistic way of life. He couldn't do that. Extinction was preferable to the loss of conscious intelligence. For the rest of his life Simak would continue that search and out of it came marvelous stories and flights of a brilliantly imaginative mind.

DESTINY

Between *City* and *Way Station* came four novels, *Ring Around the Sun* (1954), *Time is the Simplest Thing* (1961), *The Trouble With Tycho* (1961), and *They Walked Like Men* (1962). Tyco was a good space opera. *They Walked Like Men* I read as an indictment of business and the law of money buys everything. That is a frequent theme with Simak. The other two, and the novel that came out before *City* but was written well after the *City* stories, *Time and Again* represent stages in the evolution of Simak's philosophy from *City* to *Way Station*.

Time and Again began Simak's exploration into something like but very different from what is normally called religion. *Time and Again* is a very mature and very original story. The plot is intriguing. In it, Asher Sutton brought a very spiritual system he called "Destiny." The story denied that Destiny was a religion. It would have none of those dogmatic and authoritarian dimensions of 'religion.' Simak, I believe, had begun to look for a source of energy or inspiration that could save humankind from itself. Asher Sutton had died and been reborn. He looks human enough, but he has been transformed both physically and mentally, no longer human in fact. There is something in him. It is something more than just a "still small voice." It is a personality he called Johnny. Its kind has inhabited all sentient beings everywhere and every time from birth to death. Very few have the power, or interest, to listen to that presence. Asher Sutton, because he has been remade by an unknown alien race after he crashed and died, has the power to hear and converse with this entity. This inner voice possesses a wisdom that if heeded will unleash the potential of any perceptive being. It will allow each to achieve its destiny if it works to do so. This is an approach we find in the quest stories – the will to become.

Sutton's mission is to write a book about destiny. Its theme is simply that no sentient being is ever alone. All have the potential of achieving their destiny if they can get in touch with their inner voice. In the distant future, his book has caused a war because those in power, who have created a galactic caste system that permits human beings to rule, have interpreted Asher's book as relevant only to humans. The human race has spread out over a vast domain of space and are far too few to rule it. They depend on human-like androids and robots and subjected aliens to support their rule. But androids and robots are chattel, they have no rights. Sutton's book has been the cause of revolt by them and non-humans. Indeed, he has not even started his book. The war started in the remote future. But in that future time machines have been developed and the war rages over space and time. Sutton has thus become both a target and a pawn in this war. The future knows he is back and wherever he goes.

Sutton needs time to develop his powers before he can write his book. He finds an ancient letter, a family heirloom, from an ancestor some 6,000 years earlier, in the twentieth century, who lived on a farm in Wisconsin. This farm, very clearly located, is the

Simak-Wiseman farm. The ancestor is named John, Simak's father's name, and adopts a fatherly role during the time Sutton needs to prepare himself. In the letter, John wrote about the arrival of a stranger who worked for him those ten years, and of a man and a machine he believed to be from the future. He also wrote at length of his life on the farm and his deep satisfaction living on the land. He wrote about the bluff, the same point that a dozen years later Simak would have Enoch Wallace stand on, visiting it on his daily walks. Asher knows that there and then is where he must go, and that he is the stranger.

Asher learned that his destination is near Bridgeport, Wisconsin. Bridgeport is on the north side of the Wisconsin River just about across the river from the western border of Millville Township. Immediately after he arrived in that time and place, Asher met Old Cliff fishing on the river at Bridgeport, who pointed out the bluff on which the Sutton farm can be found across the river. I sought out that spot. Sutton swam across the river and climbed the bluff and with an assumed name, asked John Sutton for a job as a farm hand, a job he does very well. Asher adds his own description of the land and the life in it to which he awakens as he develops his powers, as he, as all beings should, responds to the inner voice. He achieves a sensitivity to the small life in the grass, the trees and the sky and he learns to enter the minds of men.

Two characters attach themselves to Asher Sutton immediately after he arrives. Both turn out to be androids, one marked as are all those who serve humans, the only thing that distinguishes them from their masters, and the other unmarked, an android created by androids. They are fighters in the time war. They are also the game masters in this story. It is they who guide Asher and try to protect him during the years he spent in his wilderness in preparation for his great work. Herkimer and Eve make sure he never learns that he is but a pawn and they are the players. It is these two who finally spirit him away from the Earth on a small ship to travel to the frontiers of the galaxy to stay with a robot who had once been with the Sutton family.

THE HUNCH

In *Ring Around the Sun* Simak took Asher Sutton's philosophy of Destiny a step further. Gone is the sill, quiet voice. In its place is the "hunch." The hunch is but one paranormal aspect of mutant human evolution, not an alien presence. There is a war, but it is relatively bloodless and quickly smothered by removing its fuel, the human paranoia of the protagonists. There are androids. There is a distant and accessible alien knowledge from which "Man" may learn and progress. There are alternative worlds. There is a Millville to which we travel. There is a quiet pastoral life for those who have been displaced by the dark satanic mills and brutal warmongering agencies of governments of the old and decaying earth. Mutants, like androids, have the power to organize and to grow in power to confront the old order of failing humanity. Humanity will have a second chance.

A DIFFERENT DRUM

Time is the Simplest Thing is the next in the order of Simak's novels but came out seven years after *Ring Around the Sun*. Simak had been busy establishing himself as a popular science writer, indeed, an award-winning writer and also newspaper editor during one of the most exciting periods in the development of the post-war scientific enterprise. The launch of Sputnik put man into space but the coming of the ICBM had darkened the

wintry skies of the Cold War even more. A national educational enterprise to "catch up" with the Russians had been launched. It was also the time of the International Geophysical Year of which Sputnik was only one, indeed unplanned, outcome[67]. Obviously Simak was far from satisfied with the course of human progress. What was it that the rapidly evolving science of Earth could not give us that mutant paranormal abilities and alien knowledge could? And why is there such a deeply ingrained aversion to differences that might well lead to the improvement and betterment of human life?

In effect, however, *Time is the Simplest Thing* takes up where *Ring Around the Sun* left off. There are paranormal mutants in great numbers but the prejudice and bigotry against them had launched a pogrom in the United States, a country that had gone to ruin. An organization, Fishhook, had been set up to use certain mutant powers, like Flanders's mutants, to glean the galaxy for knowledge and turn it to the good of humankind. Due to the prejudice against its mutants the project had moved to Mexico, just south of the border. What unfolds in the story is an America turned backward and as impoverished as an undeveloped country. This condition reflects, perhaps, the existential despair of the time in terms of a poverty of the soul.

One of Fishhook's travelers, Shep Blaine, hits the jackpot of alien knowledge when he encounters a being, large and pink, who has lived for millennia and had acquired knowledge by trading minds. In an instant Blaine became the recipient of the accumulated knowledge of these uncountable minds. However, he is thus tainted, knows that this will be known within minutes of his arrival home, and that he will be taken summarily to an isolated holding facility (luxurious but still a prison). Instead he fled to preserve his freedom. Here is another quest story.

Blaine is arrested in a small town north of the border. He learned about the organized religious persecution of the mutants. He got out of jail and encountered mutants who he mobilized to help in an encounter with another tainted and escaped Fishhook traveler, one whose contamination is dark and satanic, who was driven to paranoia and thus to persecution of his own mutant kind. Blaine is, of course, victorious using his vast acquired knowledge, knowledge that gives him new paranormal abilities, but in the end, he must move the mutants to a new and empty world where they can build their own life and, once again, provide a second chance for the human condition. He is able to teach them to move to this new world but only with what they hold in their hands. This has happened before in Simak's stories.

THE ANSWERS

We can only wonder what was going on in Simak's mind during the near decade lacuna. There were stories, like the "The Answer" in 1953 which left no hope for the human condition. This story, however, is one of my favorites. It is about a band of mutants who move to a remote star to probe the meaning of life. They had disappeared without a trace millennia ago, 100,000 years in fact, but the legend lingered.

[67] The US had a satellite rocket prepared but President Eisenhower order a delay in its launching for a variety of political reasons. When the post-Sputnik Vanguard rocket spectacularly failed, this rocket was launched and America entered the space race. The Soviets beat us into space only because of that human folly Simak dwelled upon.

A small ship lands near a deserted small town with a crew of four; a globe, a spider, a dog and a human. Of the four, the human is considered an inferior species, good with gadgets but barely capable of galactic citizenship. They immediately recognize this as the place the mutants had fled. There was something about the place. After a brief survey, the ship leaves, the human chooses to remain behind.

David Grahame explored the town. He had always felt a loneliness. He believed there was more to humanity and gadgets, that there was a destiny to be found. He saw that the people of the town had lived a simple and comfortable life, had a love of beauty, and there were rows of books that went to dust as he touched them. There was a sense of peace and leisure, of intelligence and comfort. But what had happened to them?

David walked over a hill beyond the town, overlooking a valley and a river. He saw smoke, and walking through the farmland and orchards saw a house beneath mighty trees. With the sight of it he felt that he was coming home. There he is met by a man of middle age, an elderly woman and a young woman. Upon their face was calmness, deep and settled. They welcome him. He stays and goes to work on the land, getting to know the people in the valley, learning that there are other valleys.

They speak of what these people had sought in the town over the hill. "The Truth," they answered. And yes, they found it. It was not religion, just plain and simple Truth. An inner truth. It had nothing to do with machines. And with the Truth they settled on the land, a "pastoral life of achieved tranquility."

David settled into life and felt great contentment. They knew that another ship would come. Will he be going back? David is unsure. He is told that it is time he learned the truth. He is taught the language and taken to the town. The door of a building is unlocked and within is a computer, and it looks like it could still function if anyone cared to. It had been used for thousands of years to seek the truth. On a table he finds two short statements preserved on a table. He is told that there is a ritualistic reading each hundred years. Exceptions, as in David's case, can be made.

'There were two questions and two answers:

The first question: "What is the purpose of the universe?"

The first answer: "The universe has no purpose. The universe just happened."

The second question, left unsaid as David read the answer: "Life has no significance. Life is an accident.

And these answers, David is told, is why we live simply: "All we do is live."

David is asked again if he would like to wait for the expected ship. "David shook his head. 'Let's go back home,' he said."

I find this story haunting. I've read it many times. I personally don't believe that life is without purpose, but I believe, as Simak clearly did, that humankind had taken the wrong path. If there is a tagline for Simak's work I believe it is that statement: "All we do is live."

OTHER STORIES

My focus has been on Simak's novels. David Wixon has produced, so far, twelve volumes of Simak's short stories. There were zany and entertaining stories like "Contraption" and "How-2." And there were award-winning stories like "The Big Front Yard," which he wrote the same year as my favorite of his short stories "The Sitters." Some are just fun, ironic humor. Some express more of his philosophy, but the main thread of his world view I believe is found in the novels.

Yes, there is an underlying sense of pessimism if not despair in Simak's work. Did that come out of his newspaper work? As noted, he was at this time a senior editor, working the world desk, reading copy from everywhere and digesting it to fit the appetite of the paper's reading public. He obviously didn't find the work distasteful. Indeed, he worked years beyond normal retirement. But could that constant immersion and artful evocation of public emotion have worked their own dark effect on his soul? That period coincides with my own awakening consciousness of world events, of science and war and technology and industry and the effect of change on the rural and traditional society in which I grew up.

Simak was at that time writing and editing scores of popular science and technology articles, many of which were published in book form. Why, I have to ask, was the mood of his novels, and particularly his short stories, so dark and bleak? Given his immersion in the objective worlds of the news and science, where did his deepening interest in the paranormal come from? And why does he continue to look for profoundly spiritual answers in alien cultures rather than in the wisdom of the Earth?

That time made room, albeit grudgingly, for the paranormal, much as the culture of rural Wisconsin must have, as did my Southern agrarian culture, and perhaps even to a greater degree. Perhaps it came from looking at the stars and imagining traveling among them in search of the unknown and wondrous. Perhaps my identity with his stories came from my own crisis of faith and search for a great knowledge that would provide guidance for myself and for the race of which I saw myself as a member. I spent a lifetime promoting technical progress, but it took me a long time to come to terms with the machine. Actually I don't think I ever did. I have increasingly turned to the literature of a return to an agrarian life, an enlightened life much as Jefferson had hoped would emerge in America.

Simak had by now staked out his own ground, a growing reserve of plot and characters and themes that he would continue to explore for years to come. He said that he felt he had lost something after *City*. He didn't say what it was or even what type of thing it might be. To me he gained something, albeit unclear. It would in fact be nearly another decade following *Time is the Simplest Thing*, before he would pick up the theme of the books about which I have written when he published *A Choice of Gods*.

ALL ALONE

A Choice of Gods is by far Simak's most complex novel. Ironically it is also his simplest setting. There is a house and it is a grand one. It is on a bluff located, it sounds like, a little west of the Simak farm. It is actually at the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers. There is a nice park there. It has a great prospect but is very high and not readily accessible to the river basins by foot.

In the house are two people, Jason and Martha Whitney, who are 5,000 years old. They had been 20 years old when the entire population of the world disappeared overnight leaving only a group of 67 people gathered for Jason and his brother John's birthday party. The only other people they know of are a tribe of Indians, a small number of whom were also left behind and who had returned to their ancestral ways, living close to nature and with each other.

Jason and Martha live on a manorial estate supported by a band of robots. They are the only two of the Whitney clan left on Earth. The others, and their many descendants, had developed the powers of teleportation and telepathy. All had gone to the stars except Jason and Martha, and his grandparents before them. Upstairs a ballroom had been set aside for family to come to visit. Martha spent her days talking, mind to mind, with the family spread across the galaxy. Jason spent his time walking the land he loved intensely and with a vast collection of books culled from libraries in the years following the disappearance. His principle ability is the power to communicate with the occasional aliens who traveled the stars much like the Whitney clan, by teleportation. I find the most remarkable feature of Jason's personality is his total lack of weariness of his long life. He relishes each day, each moment. He will live another 3,000 years and anticipates that each day will be as joyous and fulfilling as the last.

As the story unfolds, we learn there was another small group left behind. They lived on the West Coast, a group of migrant farm workers. They lived in fear of a Dark Walker, a shadowy figure that stalked them. Periodically a group of them would feel compelled to build a boat and sail out into the sea never to be seen again. There is one surviving member of this group, David, who was compelled to travel towards the rising sun in search of something. One morning he arrived on the bluffs on the west side of the Mississippi River and gazed across the autumn tinged land at the great stone house on the far bluff. He carried a bow and around his neck hung bear claws, one for each he had killed. Nearby he spotted a young Indian maiden communicating with an ancient oak. He sees the response she evokes from the tree and is amazed. She is Evening Star.

A Choice of Gods is also about robots. They play a major role, several roles, in fact. In addition to the group that tends the manor, there are groups of "wild robots" who wander the land. There is also a group of robots engaged in a Project upriver, where Minneapolis-St. Paul is today. And there is a group of four robots who have taken up residence in an old monastery adjoining the Whitney estate. Of the estate robots we know only Thatcher by name. Thatcher has been in charge of the household for 5,000 years and is extremely proud of the butler-like service he provides. The Project robots, we learn, have built a giant robot brain into which they have collected and fed all they could glean of human knowledge, some hundreds of university educations worth. But now the Project is communicating directly with a vast intelligence somewhere near the center of the galaxy.

Simak has, typically, introduced us to a host of characters and created an intricate patchwork of plots and themes. The robots play very important roles in this plot but by far the most vivid is that of Hezekiah and his little group of robot monks. They have devoted their 5,000 years to the study of sacred texts, particularly Christianity. Hezekiah is an unadmitted fully sentient personality who is struggling to find his soul. He doesn't know if robots have a soul. Indeed, Jason doesn't know if humans do. Between Hezekiah and the

Project, led by a robot named Stanley, much of the theme of religion that dominates this book (about choosing gods) unfolds. This is one of Simak's most powerful characterizations and a profound insight into robot psychology. To add to the plot, Simak brings in an alien, a hideous, squirming "can of worms" who, after an afternoon spent with one of the traveling clan, teleports itself to Earth to find its own soul.

Another major theme of *A Choice of Gods* is the condition of the human race at the time of the disappearance. This occurred sometime around the year 2200. The population explosion had filled the Earth and drained its resources. The global economy was in shambles. The Whitney estate was a rare island of relative tranquility. The house, then 150 years old (built around the middle of the twentieth century) had been made of stone and constructed, against the custom of the day, to last, and it did. It was built on land acquired from the monastery that had fallen on hard times. Religion was, in fact, fading from human culture by the time of the disappearance.

The house was located in the midst of a large agricultural station. The 67 people left there, with their robots, were able to provide well for themselves from the land. However, they were unable to retain any technology above the team-drawn implements that characterized Simak's childhood. All the wonders of human technology decayed into rust; except, inexplicitly, robots.

Simak's stories are, as often noted, filled with contradictions and the robots *in A Choice of Gods* and Jenkins in *City*, are at the top of the list. Reduced to horse-drawn farm equipment (the robots retain blacksmithing to repair these primitive tools), candles and canoes, the robots never wear out; their power sources never expire. They are sentient beings, possessed of "brains" of complexity that exceeds by orders of magnitude those of the super computers of our time. Lacking the soup of hormones that fill our veins that define our humanity, they are nonetheless all too human, curious, gossipy, at times testy, and in the case of Hezekiah, troubled beings in search of a soul yet endowed with compassion.

The loss of technology set the stage for the realization of the destiny of the group of humans who were left behind. Some two thousand years after the disappearance, and the loss of technology, they began to develop paranormal powers and soon scattered to the stars. Jason remembered the old ways and like his grandfather pondered the change in human destiny caused by first the appearance and then disappearance of mechanical technology. The Indians had gone even further back to the land than those at the Whitney estate. They didn't like robots. Other than an incredible rapport with the natural world around them, the Indians had developed no outstanding paranormal abilities, not at least until Evening Star who played a very important role in the nexus of this evolutionary process. In a number of passages Simak displayed an ecological imagination I find on par with some of the best. After the disappearance, nature revived on the Earth and was cherished by the humans who remained there. If the Indians have a special power, it is their enhanced intimacy with life and land. This too is a highly developed theme.

I believe I have begun to outline why I consider Simak a philosopher and *A Choice of Gods* in particular, as a great literary treatment of a number of critically important philosophical questions of our day. It has taken me over a thousand words just to introduce

the outline of the themes Simak addressed in *A Choice of Gods*. It took me three chapters to develop the plot and 4,500 words just to summarize what I found of Simak's philosophy in that book.

Again: There is first the intensely pastoral setting and awareness of the human characters. We are on the bluff, in the house, and walking the land with Simak and these scenes are vivid. Second is religion. While the robots have little sense of the land and of beauty, a few have taken up the pursuit of religion and a quest of the soul where humans abandoned it. Robots become very real people. There is the urge to accumulate knowledge. Jason has collected books and art and keeps the journal his grandfather started. The robot monks helped Jason with these books in return for help finding their own library. The Project robots have created a vast computer to store and process information and to search out new knowledge beyond the Earth. The Whitney clan has traveled the stars and accumulated a vast knowledge, far greater than that of the entire earth at the time of the disappearance. But they find no practical application for it. They have given up technology. They have no need for gadgets. The Indians lived in a state of grace with nature. They have few books. Their study is the daily unfoldment of life in intense communion with the natural world.

Technology has ruined human civilization on Earth but, as we will learn, it now flourishes elsewhere and again threatens the Earth, on the planets where those who disappeared were deposed by some godlike power. Intelligence is not common in the universe traveled by the Whitney clan and technology even less common. The aliens who travel to the earth do so as the clan does, "unencumbered" by material contraptions. The loss of technology created the conditions whereby humankind developed paranormal, purely natural, abilities. They travel and communicate by mere thought alone. The struggle with religion is the other great theme in *A Choice of Gods* and in many of Simak's novels. This theme became increasingly important in Simak's stories.

I find a Zen-like quality in "mystical" experiences Simak wrote about in *A Choice of Gods*. Both Jason Whitney and Evening Star independently feel a communion with the long dead authors of the books of the vast library. As they sit among them they hear the whisper of voices and those voices unite in a symphony, a synthesis, of a common quest for understanding. Here the quest is through the medium of the mind. Harmony is implicit in nature as the music trees and the humans encounter with nature so clearly shows. But the study of dogmatic text by the robots creates not harmony but a deep angst. With the study of religious text came guilt and shame and uncertainty and a turning away from the goodness of the Earth. Perhaps this is why Simak gives the job to robots. While they have deep emotions, they lack the romantic qualities of human feelings.

On several occasions Evening Star has experiences which can only be called Satori: a profound blending; oneness with all things. Simak describes these states as if he has experienced them. Jason, and especially his grandfather, engaged in profound meditations on the meaning of human life. They sought no supernatural explanation but reached into that deep well that defines the human "soul." The Indians have the power to commune deeply with living things and inanimate things. To them the land and its life speak clearly and coherently. Evening Star is able to enter the consciousness of an ancient and wise grandfather oak, an incredible expression of the power of life, and awaken it to bestow

upon her a benediction. She is clearly attuned to its essential nature. David brings to their ultimate union his own power. Their encounter with the soul-searching "can of worms" is a description of a profound mystical state. The power of these two opens a new 'spiritual' destiny for humankind, one that will possibly, as Jason's grandfather had hoped, lead to a true communion and communication between Man and nature and the unfolding of a broader view, a longer view, and a deeper understanding of life as it is.

The crisis comes from two sources. First is the Principle, a god-like intelligence, a force so great it terrifies Jason's brother John who for thousands of years had wandered the stars and probed to find and approach this force which was known to members of the clan, who reported it to Martha. Here we find a god that is so distant and indifferent it is truly frightening. It is thus even worse than evil. Against it, humankind seems as nothing, unnoticeable – except it alters human history. It is a vast power that has the ability with but a thought, to change the course of human destiny.

John, highly coincidently, also found the People, the survivors of those transported from the Earth. They had been transported to three planets only a short distance from each other. They too had a long life and used it to develop increasingly sophisticated mechanical sciences. They had spaceships and were returning (another coincidence) to Earth to reclaim it. They had also learned of the paranormal powers developed by the Whitney clan which they saw as a means of power and manipulation to further not their spiritual but rather their material ends. The crisis the People precipitated is to threaten once again to spoil the beautiful Earth, to destroy the lives and meaning of life for Jason and Martha and also the larger collectives of the Indians and of the robots. Traveling to the Project, John, Jason, Hezekiah and Red Cloud find that he is in fact communicating with the Principle: two cold and vastly informed intelligences.

In the People we see both the calamity of scientific-industrial development and the consequent loss of essentially human powers of mind, of paranormal powers and spiritual sensitivities and of the capacity to live contently close to the Earth. They arrive on the Earth and start to bargain, merchants in search of profit. They will not believe Jason who tells them they cannot be given nor develop paranormal abilities because they have technology. They would have to abandon it, he told them, for thousands of years. Meanwhile David confronts the Dark Walker. He returned to the house, saw the People's space shuttle in the field beside the house, and from behind it came that great shadowy monster. He defeated it not with the bow in his hand but like Peter with the power of his will. But unlike Peter this is a transforming experience. He has become more human. The Dark Walker, we realize, is the shadow of industrialization, of the machine and the power it exerted over the human soul.

The problem is not resolved by the power of reason or the depths of the soul. It is decided by the Principle, by "god" himself. The People are instructed to depart. The Principle is experimenting with the human condition and the experiment must not be interfered with. The command comes with treats of sanctions. In the end god has spoken and again withdrawn to its summit. The star travelers, the Indians and the robots will each be allowed to pursue their natural destiny. The People, it is presumed, will pursue theirs.

SPECIAL DELIVERANCE

Special Deliverance is a basic quest theme with a minor undercurrent of philosophy. It fits the mold of 'pastoral" but the entire novel is fairly low-key. Edward Lansing is a college professor in New England and its fall. Simak quickly introduces the ideas of pending technological catastrophe—with a hope that humankind might thereby get a new start – and alternative worlds. Lansing is, of course, leading an uneventful life. His most pressing problem is how to spend his upcoming weekend. But fortune intervenes, he finds a talking slot machine, hits a jackpot on another one and fills his pockets with gold and then pulls another lever, as instructed by the first slot machine, and finds himself on an empty world, on a trail, in a place that looks like New England and still Fall. What he doesn't know until the end of the book is that he had been recruited to go in search of the destiny of the human race.

Arriving at an inn he met his five companions, each from a different alternative Earth, each with a distinct and very different history. One of the five is a robot. He finds that by the rules of the game he is the treasurer – he has the money to outfit his group. So doing, the following morning they set off in search of a cube and a city. As they travel the land becomes increasingly barren. At the cube they find the way is booby-trapped. The robot, Jurgens, is seriously damaged. Learning nothing more about the cube than that it is protected, they moved on to the city, a vast, ancient and empty city that at one time had been the home of an advanced race of human beings. Lansing found the city depressingly dead: It had no sense of life, no heart. It appeared to have been abandoned via a variety of doorways into alternative worlds and distant space. The city claimed two of their number. Both disappeared.

Continuing west the four remaining members encountered another inn and two other travelers who had lost four of their members to the city. The land had become increasingly barren, now resembling the North Dakota badlands. To the west is a singing tower and to the north Chaos. The singing tower claims one of their number, Chaos claims Jurgens who is drawn to it as a moth to a flame. The land beyond looking arid and unpromising, the remaining four return to the east. They find a group of survivors living in hovels eking out a bare existence. They have given up but two of the group decide to join them. Lansing leaves them most of his remaining money so they can buy seeds and other necessities from the innkeeper, whom he has learned will soon be closing for the season. He and Mary continue to the east.

Arriving back at the cube they decide it must be the answer. They carefully negotiate the barrier around the cube and gain admittance. Inside they find four faceless aliens who are the game masters. Very few have solved the riddle of the cube and almost never two together. It takes a special capacity to win the game. They have made the right decisions (shadow of the hunch?). Lansing is incensed by their callousness. They in turn explain that the human experiment is failing on all the world lines, has failed on many of them and is ultimately headed for extinction. But the human race is too rare, too precious a resource to waste. There are few intelligent races and few with creative potential.

> *We feel that intelligence may be the crowning glory of fumbling evolution, that nothing better can be found. But if intelligence falls of its own weight, as it is falling, not only here but*

elsewhere, then evolution will turn, blindly, to some other set of survival factors and the concept of intelligence may be lost forever.

Mary agrees with them.

The aliens "recruit" the best candidates from each world, six at a time and start them out, one group after another. Recruit? Abduct if you will. Who would volunteer? They offer as a reward a door that leads to another world where there is a small university where those like themselves are working together to develop a model for a new human civilization. They entered the portal and "Hand in hand they walked toward mankind's second chance." In the new world is a place. Of learning, a place where the special few can work for the future of intelligence in the universe. They are the "second chance."

Years later we get a glimpse of how this university might work in *Highway of Eternity*.

A HOLY MACHINE

Project Pope is another extremely complex plot and one that deals with many of the themes of *A Choice of Gods*. In many ways it is a sequel to *A Choice of Gods* but in other important ways it is an entirely different story. Coming out the same year as *Special Deliverance*, it is a profoundly different book. There are lots of robots including one who is very human, a wise sage, Cardinal Theodosius. There is a huge and very unhuman robot computer jammed with knowledge gathered from the universe by a group of human "Listeners." The setting, End of Nothing, is a beautiful but empty world, not by being emptied but by having so few settlers, and most of these are robots. It is so far out on the edge of the Milky Way galaxy that the great star system can be seen as a pinwheel in the night sky. There is only one ship that travels there, bringing loads of alien pilgrims and their money. Jason Tennyson arrives there, fleeing for his life, in the company of another passenger, a woman, Jill Roberts, every bit his equal and a partner in the unfolding drama. There are also aliens in abundance including. On end of Nothing is Whisperer, a loan entity, but a native of that world, a collection of dust motes visible only to a few sensitive humans, and the immortal Old Ones, ancient wardens of End of Nothing who quietly watch the settlement.

Project Pope has a complex and intricate plot, perhaps the most intricate in Simak's novels. There are familiar elements, as those listed above, and new ones. Robots are making robots. The older robots, those that came from Earth, have a reverence for Man. The newer ones do not. Robots are the source of contention that threatens to undermine the Vatican and there is at least one who is capable of killing a human being. There is also a rival Center that combs the galaxy for knowledge, but it uses that knowledge for power. The plot develops with the tension that develops between Vatican and the Center.

The whole plot revolves around religion and particularly the distinction between dogmatic belief and the pursuit of knowledge through reason. The Center becomes the keystone of the plot because one of the Listeners discovers it and returns with the story that it is Heaven. She thus creates the conditions that polarize the faithful and the reasonable. If there is a Heaven, then there is no need for the Listeners, no need to search, no need to collect and analyze knowledge in the hope of crafting a more perfect and far more functional religion suitable for all beings. The fate of the Vatican and of the Pope will

be determined by the outcome of this conflict. The Center is a place of cold, calculated reason, and is corrupt. The robot Vatican is a place of faith. It is also corrupt but for different reasons, for different ends.

The Pope, a vast computer of a robot, is of course extremely rational in its approach. But the Pope also makes it clear that it is focused only on the long term. Not, perhaps, as long-term as the Old Ones who see the robot-human settlement as only a passing event, but vast in terms of human discernment. How long that is cannot be determined but the Pope thinks nothing of a thousand years or tens of thousands of years. The Pope is in no hurry. His job is to sift through all the data brought back by the Listeners and piece them together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. There is a nagging feeling that the answer will actually come out of one tiny piece of knowledge for which they will search for a very long time. What is sought is a universal principle, not one that applies to just robots or humans or any single race but to all that dwell in the galaxy. This is why Theodosius doesn't want Jill writing articles about the Vatican. They have nothing to report and curiosity would only serve as a distraction. But perhaps her working to piece together the history of the Vatican itself would provide not just a distraction but a real source of knowledge, a task at which she, and not the robots, is an expert.

The Pope, however, is completely helpless in the short-term and with dealing with emotions, human let alone robots who should know better. He and Theodosius know that robots are different, more logical, less aesthetic. Theodosius knows that robots, who are in many ways like the humans who created them, are prone to certain mental limitations, that they will at times falter, like Man has, but that they too must recover and press on. They are at a loss to understand why a robot lead faction would wallow in a mindless emotionalism. They do not see why a robot should get lost in the moment and lose sight of the greater good. They do not understand why any robot would actively seek to destroy the mission for which the Pope had been so arduously constructed. But they admit that only a few of the robots have been trained to understand the course of events and the purpose of the Vatican Project.

End of Nothing was chosen because it would support human life. The older robots were not ready to break their ties with humans. And only humans can serve as Listeners. They left the Earth because they were not allowed to participate in human worship services. Here humans are adjunct members of the Vatican, some hold management roles but none in the clergy. End of Nothing is a robot-controlled planet.

In the recording of one of the Listeners, Jason finds an autumn world, which he comes to love to "walk." There is not as much of an ecological undercurrent, but the Old Ones are not displeased with how easily the humans and robots treat the land. There are farms attended with due efficiency by the robots to provide for the small human settlement. Jason is welcomed because he is a doctor and the community is in need of one. Jill, a writer, at first reluctantly, accepted and put to work writing a history of the Vatican, neatly sidestepping her intention of writing an article for a wider press which Theodosius does not want. Both grow to love End of Nothing. Both have a sense of coming home and finding a place to settle.

The development of paranormal powers is a mixed issue. The Listeners are a rare few who have the power to eavesdrop on other worlds and other life but not physically travel through space. What is unusual about Mary's visit to Heaven is that a being there was able to see her. The robots have found a technology to guide a ship by using the power of their minds. There are no coordinates for Heaven to guide them.

Jason is fascinated by a world of Equation people he found in the cube recordings. He has a hunch that they may be able to provide the knowledge needed to get to Heaven. Jason, and then Jill, can see Whisperer and Whisperer can enter their minds. Whisperer has the power to transport Jason (first) to the equation world. They go for knowledge, but Jason comes back with the power to heal by touch, by laying on of hands, as a result of his encounter with the Equation beings. He has absorbed a form of knowledge he can use. Whisperer lingered because it is the nature of his race to absorb knowledge and the Equation people have a vast amount of it. They know where Heaven, the Center, is and have the power to go there. Five of them accompany Jason, Jill and Whisperer to Heaven and there they encounter the triad, which includes a being of unusual and dangerous powers.

The crux of the plot comes down to the vast difference between the visions of the Center and the Vatican. The Center is thoroughly materialistic and disbelieves in anything spiritual. It is a mechanical culture. It employs fear as a weapon of defense. It is a tightly controlled world. The leader of the triad has the dream of ruling the galaxy. The Pope has the power, a technology the Vatican had discovered and developed, to suppress the energy of the dangerous and silent "Plopper" who fed the triad's leady, Bubbly's megalomania. There will be a state of tension between Vatican and the Center but it is clear that the Vatican is far from defenseless.

The crisis resolved, Simak returns his characters to a state of serene harmony in almost the blink of an eye. This ending is a rather strong finale. But it was not so for Simak He had two more novels published the following year, one another quest and one a very readable fantasy. He did indeed fall seriously ill after this but, after a pause of four years, he rallied for one last quest and one of his best novels.

FINAL JOURNEY

Highway of Eternity is a pure quest novel. It has lots of characters, including aliens and robots. It involves paranormal powers, time travel and more violent, but not human form, robots. These were robots trained to kill not to serve. It is another story about religion – one gone very bad. It is both critical of dogmatic religion and open to finding new forms of meaning. But at the heart it involves a pursuit of reasoned truth. There is an intelligent game master behind the plot who feeds a tiny stream of the best and brightest from the galaxy into the Highway of Eternity, some to win through to a university-like environment, the Galactic Center. Given the state of Simak's health, this is an amazing book.

The arch villains of this book are a religious cult, a race of beings, who have as their mission the salvation of people by depriving them of their physical identity. They grant immortality and freedom from pain but remove beings from their bodies and put their "souls' in a matrix, abstract, long longer capable of feeling and acting in the world.

The Infinites are able to compromise the human race because human society, a million years in the future, has failed. It rose to great heights and achieved great progress

not only in science but in society. At its peak humans roamed the stars and there was no government and no economy. But the race lost its motivation and collapsed into idleness and poverty, just sitting around philosophizing. Man fell easy prey to the Infinites. This is not unlike the time of the fall of Rome and the rise of Christianity. A few had fled and were pursued. These called themselves "hillbillies." Are these the Celtic pagans of early Christian times? They held to old traditions and ethics. They were determined to stay human. They had to flee into time and the Infinites pursued them with killer robots.

One of the refugees believed the fault in human nature lay at the beginning of human history. He collected information, using time-traveling agents, knowledge that had not survived to our day. That fault lay in materialistic values, in the profit motive and the urge to dominate, in war and greed that reduced the race to insecurity and to huddling, seeking protection through creeds and cults.

Their sanctuary discovered, they were attacked and scattered randomly into time and space. This set up multiple plot lines and brought in a host of new actors and plot elements for Simak. Into this chaotic scheme comes the game master, an immortal alien with the long view. This being, ages ago, set up a mechanism for recruiting those precious few who have a special creative gift, beings with special mental talents, perhaps paranormal abilities. He was recruiting for the Galactic Center institute where those who passed what could be called an entrance examination, or trial, would work together to advance the fate of galactic culture.

Intelligence has been a failing experiment. Race after race take the wrong path and fail to realize their potential and fail. The little group of refugees have a meritorious toughness, a promising lot of humans. Two of them are endowed with massive knowledge. They are also a genetic match the game master is looking for. And they are, of course, in love. The Infinites are condemned, and man and the other races of the galaxy are given a second chance.

Clifford Simak makes two parting gestures. First, one of the minor characters finds the brain case of one of the killer robots and decides to form a new religion to exploit another period of human failing. And then he has one character, partially converted by the Infinites but still partially human but of ghost-like form, travels to the days of the red sun, full circle. But this time Simak brings him back. That sad and tragic ending is no longer a done deal.

