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Dragon's Island

Jack Williamson

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Jack Williamson : Dragon's Island before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dragon's Island:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Not a paperback book as expectedBy A. HobartI love this story. My surprise was when I received it in a newsprint publication format as an issue of a 60s (or thereabouts) black white pulp magazine. I was expecting a paperback book. I guess I got extra stories, but the paper is not very sturdy and of course it smelled pretty musty. Oh well. I had no indicating this was not a paperback book so be aware of this if you are buying anything from this seller.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great book. Found it by accidentBy Linda C.Great book. Found it by accident.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Half Noir, Half Jungle Adventure...All Great FunBy s.ferberThe five-year period from 1948 '52 was one of superlative productivity for future sci-fi Grand Master Jack Williamson. Although he'd already written some 75 short stories since his first sale at age 20, in 1928 ("The Metal Man," in the December issue of editor Hugo Gernsback's "Amazing Stories" magazine), that five-year stretch saw him produce some of his most fondly remembered longer pieces: the novels "Darker Than You Think" (1948), "The Humanoids" (1949), "The Cometeers" (1950), "Seetee Ship" (1951) and "The Legion of Time" (1952). Tucked away in that impressive quintet was another novel that is seldom discussed today, but one that is, as I recently discovered, every bit as wonderful as those others. That book was called "Dragon's Island" when it was initially released as a \$2.50 Simon Schuster hardcover in 1951. The following year, an abridged version of the novel would appear in the 6/52 issue of "Startling Stories," as well as in a Popular Library paperback. And then there is the edition that I was fortunate enough to lay my hands on: the 60-cent Tower paperback from 1968, with the novel's title inexplicably changed to "The Not-Men." Both titles are appropriate enough, actually, although the picture on the

Tower cover--of a Graham Chapman-like dude with a big bloody brain sticking out of his noggin--is completely out of place. The original hardcover, with its image of a dragon's shadow looming over the outline of a New Guinea map, is most to my liking, although the "Startling Stories" cover is beautifully faithful. Today, "Dragon's Island"/"The Not-Men" is historically important for one reason: It is the first piece of fiction, it is believed, to incorporate the term "genetic engineering"... more than 20 years before this newfangled scientific supposition began to be applied in fact. But the book is much more than a musty historical footnote; typical for Williamson, it is a compellingly readable and exciting page-turner that manages to hold up very nicely today. The book cleaves into two fairly discrete sections. In the first, noirish section, which transpires in a gloomy and rainy NYC, in the futuristic year of (what I gather is supposed to be), uh, 1973, we encounter a young scientist named Dane Belfast, who has been continuing his late father's experiments in genetic manipulation. Dane has come to NY to interview elderly millionaire industrialist J.D. Messenger, who has recently cut off his monetary support for Dane's lab, and who Dane suspects of having robbed his father's mentor, the long-vanished Charles Kendrew, of his genetic research. Messenger's New Guinea plantations have lately begun producing strains of wood and plant life never before seen by the outside world, only increasing Dane's suspicions. While in the Big Apple, Dane also has three other interviews. The first is with John Gellian, who solicits the young man's help in aiding his organization, the aim of which is to find Kendrew and wipe out the genetically engineered mutant race that he is supposedly creating. And then there's beautiful Nan Sanderson, who insists on giving Dane a series of tests to examine his mental capacities. And finally, there's Nicholas Venn, a snoopy reporter who had investigated Messenger's operations in New Guinea, and had come back with a strange story of metallic trees...and the corpse of a 3-foot tall, green, amphibian-like creature, the likes of which Dane has never seen. This noirish section comes to an abrupt conclusion when the young man is given a dose of cerebral encephalitis--a drug secreted by genetically engineered New Guinea flies--which has the effect of completely wiping away his memory! And this sets the stage for the book's second section, the jungle adventure segment, as Dane is kidnapped by Messenger and Nan and brought to the wilderness of New Guinea (the dragon-shaped island of the book's title), where he will be coerced to genetically create thousands more of those yard-high, greenish slave workers...Of those other five Williamson books that I alluded to up top, "Dragon's Island," it seems to me, has the most in common with that great tale of modern-day lycanthropy, "Darker Than You Think." Both books feature female characters (Nan here; April Bell in the earlier book) who turn out to be far more than we originally imagine; both feature a pseudotechnical rationale for their central thesis; and both have as their main characters men of science (Dane here; Will Barbee in "Darker") who learn of their own unsuspected depths (yes, I am being deliberately coy here so as to avoid spoilers) as the novels proceed. And both feature monstrous players (mutants here; werewolves in the earlier book) who are ultimately revealed to be sympathetic in nature. Actually, none of the lead characters here (Dane, Nan, Messenger) turns out to be what we initially think--not for nothing did that Popular Library edition sport on its cover a beautiful image of redheaded Nan, beneath the legend "She was a century ahead of her sex"--and that uncertainty on the reader's part goes far in ratcheting up suspense and unease. Even that fanatic mutant hunter, Gellian, as it turns out, is hiding a dark secret. Speaking only for myself, as a fan of both the film noir and jungle adventure genres, I must tell you that I really did enjoy "Dragon's Island" immensely. Pulpmaster Williamson was a hugely entertaining writer, who always kept his books moving along with exciting set pieces and colorful description, and this one here is no exception. I'm not sure if the author ever actually visited New Guinea before writing this book (he did serve, during WW2, as a weather forecaster in the U.S. Army Air Corps, so perhaps he did), but he sure does make us feel and see the terrain involved. Still, good as the book is, Williamson does stretch the reader's credulity in at least two instances. First, there is the matter of how the race of genetically engineered "Homo excellens" has been created. Rather than employing high-tech laboratory gadgetry, as might be expected, the so-called "Maker" here uses the power of his mind alone, working through time! Williamson offers us some high-tech mumbo jumbo to explain how this might really be feasible, to all of which this reader was forced to think, "Uh, OK, Jack, if you say so." And even this notion is more believable than that other credibility stretcher: the idea that those metallic trees could be forced to sprout buds that will grow into fully functional spaceships! Personally, I can't help feeling that the author's story would have gone down a whole lot easier with a more conventional means of genetic manipulation, and with the Not-Men utilizing their advanced IQs to build a spacecraft by hand, the old-fashioned way. But that's just me, and I suppose that the accusation of having a bit too much imagination is not the worst one that could be leveled at a sci-fi writer. The bottom line is that whether you call it "Dragon's Island" or "The Not-Men," this is one highly entertaining piece of work, and one that comes with an added benefit: a right-on plea for tolerance between different races and types, as a means of evolutionary survival. And, oh, one final thought: Messenger's head foreman on New Guinea is a character named Victor van Doon (still another personage in this novel with a secret--actually, multiple secrets--to hide). Could this book, of all sources, have been the inspiration for Stan Lee, when he created the Fantastic Four's archenemy, Dr. (Victor von) Doom, 11 years later? As Dane declares in shocked disbelief at one point in the book, "It's too much to accept, all at once...."(By the way, this review originally appeared on the Fantasy Literature website ... a most ideal destination for all fans of Jack Williamson....)

Tower #43-531, 1965. First Tower printing in fine condition.