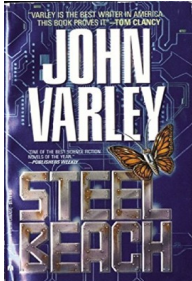




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



Steel Beach
By John Varley
Discussed April 2003

Discussion Questions

1. Did you like the book? If so, why? If not, why?
2. What did you think of the World Building? Varley often introduced concepts by having the characters bring them up without any background to the reader. Did he provide enough detail to allow you to figure out how his world ticked?
3. Gender and sexuality play an important part of the story. Did you find total sex change on demand believable? How about the multiple genders? When people changed their gender, some changed their sexual orientation. The book implied that while science could change a person's gender at will, a person's sexuality was something that came from within. Therefore sexuality was not a conscious choice. This feeds into the nature vs. nurture argument over what causes homosexuality. What did you think about this aspect of the book?
4. The protagonist, Hildy, starts the book as a man, and becomes a woman half way through the book? How did that change your perceptions of the character? Was she the same character, or a different one? Did Varley succeed in conveying first a character with a masculine mindset and motivations and later a character with a feminine mindset and motivations?
5. Immortality, and the heavy price one pays for living forever, are themes explored not only by the human characters but also by the Central Computer. Do you think immortality brings with it the price of boredom, restlessness, and suicidal tendencies?
6. Nudity was taken for granted. Will humans evolve enough so that it won't matter if you go out in public in your birthday suit?
7. Are dinosaurs really good to eat? And do they have the same rights as people? Perhaps Varley was making fun of the PETA movement?
8. Hildy nonchalantly tries to kill himself/herself several times. The Central Computer either stops him or facilitates putting him back together? People rarely try to kill themselves out of the blue. Why do you think Hildy tried to kill himself/herself many times? Had he been infected with a death-wish virus? If so, did the Central Computer infect him, or did suicidal people infect him through the Central Computer?

9. After Hildy, the most important character in the book was the Central Computer. Did Varley portray a believable artificial intelligence? Did you buy the Big Brother aspect of the Central Computer? Did the Central Computer have the right to interfere with Hildy's life and place him/her in a suicide study against his/her will?
10. *Steel Beach* spends a lot of time philosophizing about the nature of depression: cultural, "not being able to stand it anymore," boredom, inability to visualize death, and "The Seasons of Life." Are there other reasons? What about biological reasons? Chemical imbalances in the brain? Why did Varley choose not to include chemical imbalances when discussing depression? Perhaps medical science could restore chemical imbalances, so it was no longer a reason to commit suicide? Did you find the lack of discussion about biological causes of depression a flaw in the book?
11. What did you think about the Heinleiner community that was introduced late in the book? Did this anti-Central Computer, anarchist society in hiding make sense? Did this section of the book flow with the rest of the book, or was it jarring?
12. Why did Hildy's baby die at the same time the Central Computer died? Were the nanites the computer placed in everyone's body so integrated with the Central Computer, that his death could cause the death of Hildy's naturally born child?
13. Did you enjoy the end of *Steel Beach*? Weighing in at 566 pages, a lot of plot gets wrapped up (or not) in the last few chapters? Should the story have been longer or shorter, or was it just right?