

Ringworld

Larry Niven, 1970

>> **Stephen Baxter on the Hugo Award-winning tale of a Big Dumb Object...**

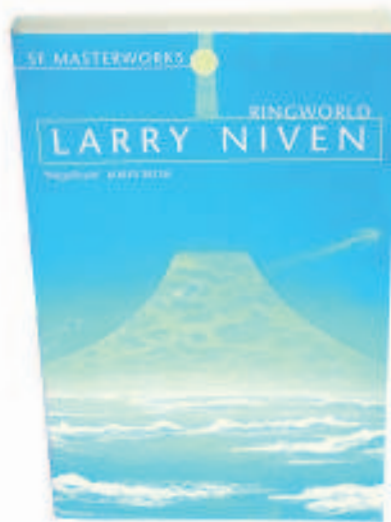
The Ringworld is a ring around a star. "You don't know the Ringworld until you've grasped its size," Larry Niven once wrote. "A friend was going to build a scale model for an upcoming convention. He had a marble, a blue immy, to serve as the Earth, for scale. Turns out he'd need a ribbon five feet tall and half a mile long. The hotel wasn't big enough!" *Ringworld*, Niven's best-loved novel, became an essential inspiration for later generations of hard-SF writers.

Laurence van Cott Niven was born in California in 1938, and started writing in 1963. "I lived off a trust fund... My great-grandfather once made a lot of money in oil." Financial independence enabled Niven to write what he wanted: hard SF. From his first published short story he established a "future history" set in a chunk of the Galaxy, centred on the Sun, called "Known Space". "It was fun, fitting the pieces together," Niven said.

Ringworld would prove the capstone to this sequence. A dysfunctional pilot, Louis Wu; an enigmatic girl, Teela Brown; and a ferocious cat-like alien called a Kzin are recruited for a voyage of exploration by a "Pierson's puppeteer". These famously well-conceived aliens have one dominant characteristic: their entire ethos is based on cowardice.

The depiction of the Ringworld itself is a triumph of disciplined imagination. "But this star wore a barely visible halo... From the edge of the system, the Ringworld was a naked-eye object." We discover aspects of the Ringworld – its carved underside, the sun-orbiting "shadow squares" that give it day and night – mostly by the explorers crashing into them. At last the ship falls to the Ringworld itself, which from the ground looks like an arch. There is no vague "fine writing" here; Niven makes us see what he imagines with direct verbs and specific terms, and shows us the object's meaning too: "The Ringworld was obtrusively an artefact, a *made* thing. You couldn't forget it, not for an instant; for the handle rose overhead, huge and blue and checkered, from beyond the edge of infinity."

Ringworld is the archetypal BDO (Big Dumb Object) story. Niven claimed:



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"Arthur C Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* and Bob Shaw's *Orbitsville* are in that class, and so is my own *Rainbow Mars*. *Ringworld* came first." Actually, not quite. Think, for example, of the Krel's mighty machinery in *Forbidden Planet* (1956). And the notion of a made universe has deep roots. Niven mentions *Dante's Inferno*, where the world is a complex divine artefact. But the Ringworld has a central place in that mute pantheon.

Down on the Ringworld there is breathable air and exotic humans. The story becomes a "planetary romance"; SF with deep roots going back to the explorations of Captain Cook. And Niven

draws on another favourite trope when it proves that civilisation has fallen and the Ringworld is a romantic ruin. Niven could hardly have included more appealing ideas if he had wired the book direct to your brain's pleasure centre.

And yet Niven was unsure about his novel's reception.

Niven was probably the only major hard SF writer to emerge at a time of great controversy in science fiction, when advocates of the "new wave", who pushed for stylistic innovation, taboo-breaking, and sheer literary worthiness, argued against the attitudes of the past. As Niven remarked decades later, "James Blish wrote that he thought it would win the Hugo, but it *shouldn't*. The readers gave it a Hugo Award anyway. The writers gave it a Nebula."

So Niven served as a bridge between the Golden Age that went before him and the modern generations of hard SF writers. It was very important for me, aged 15 or so, to pick up *Ringworld* and to discover hard SF of the sort I unashamedly loved, but hard SF that was *new*.

Known Space itself didn't survive *Ringworld*. Niven explained that "Writing [*Ringworld*] made me realise how tangled and complex my basic assumptions had become." He did go on to write three sequels, and with collaborators produced volumes set in the Man-Kzin War period. But though he continues to produce mega-ideas, his writing doesn't have quite the clarity and grace it used to.

Niven was pivotal in the development of modern hard SF. But in the end he may be best remembered for the marvellous, joyful, technophilic perspectives of his most famous creation. **SFX**

Stephen Baxter's latest book, Resplendent, is reviewed on page 107.

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Big Planet by Jack Vance (1957)

A marvellous planetary romance set on a vast low-density world crowded with exotic civilisations. Our heroes come face to face with them as they undertake a 40,000-mile trek along the planet's surface.



Orbitsville by Bob Shaw (1975)

The first in a trilogy, Shaw trumps even the Ringworld here with his Dyson Sphere, by entirely containing a star within a shell with a habitable surface area equivalent to five billion Earths. Awesome.



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>> "The concept is simply too big for one book. It needed to be a trilogy – which, eventually it was. It should be read as the first book in a series, rather than as a standalone." **Essan**

>> "100 pages in and I'm not enjoying this at all – it's just not gripping – I'm completely ungripped." **scarecrow**

>> "It's fun. Niven couldn't do characterisation if his kitten's life depended on it but he can do travelogue like nobody's business. That and 'you tied a tourniquet around his neck, doctor?' keep me happy!" **umopapisdn**

>> "*Ringworld* has a slightly tongue-in-cheek air, and Niven manages to get across some big scientific ideas in a way even I can understand." **DocSavage**

>> "In some respects exactly what good sci-fi should be: brimming with new ideas and having diverse and imaginative alien species." **bookworm192398**

>> "I felt unfulfilled – like Niven ran out of a decent way to end the book." **Hawthorn_Abendsen**

>> "Exactly the kind of high-concept old-fashioned sci-fi I love. It's all about the ideas, and the people are almost incidental." **trollface**

>> "I read it in 1970 and loved it – but it wasn't as good as I remembered." **swlir**

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