

The Forever War

Joe Haldeman, 1974

>> Geoff Ryman fights his way through a millennium-spanning combat.

The year is 1974, and America had just lost a war. Helicopters deserted loyal South Vietnamese allies on rooftops. Photos circulated of US soldiers posed with severed heads.

In the same year, the first of a series of stories about a war with aliens appeared in *Analog* magazine. The author, Joe Haldeman, had degrees in both science and creative writing, and had served in Vietnam. At the time his stories were regarded as the first great SF response to that war. They slotted together admirably to make a novel that won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, *The Forever War*.

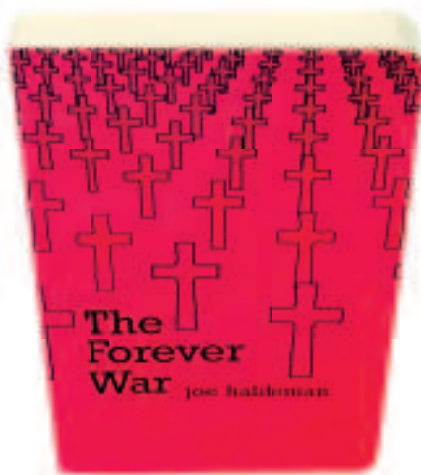
For us now, it starts out like *Battlestar Galactica*: hard-talking grunts in space with hubba-hubba female soldiers sharing showers with the guys. But this book doesn't just talk tough. It deals in real, palpable death. Joe Haldeman tells *SFX* of his time in Vietnam: "When I arrived with a bunch of newbies at my combat unit, before going out into the field, the sergeant lined us up and said, 'Look to your left and your right. Of you three people, one will be killed and one will be severely wounded. You want to be the third one.' In fact, he was too sanguine. There were thirteen of us, and only three were left standing after one year, and two had spent months in the hospital with wounds."

A training officer on a moon of Pluto says nearly the same thing. Mandella, the hero, will be one of only two survivors of the thousand-year War. He also discovers that he's been programmed to enjoy killing. Of this, Haldeman says:

"Killing people changes you permanently and absolutely – unless you were mentally ill to begin with. Then you might like it. That's the main change that was driving the book, not the social dislocation due to Vietnam or relativity."

In shows like *Galactica* and *Star Trek* spaceships zip around between star systems at no cost. Haldeman is more honest about the difficulties of space travel.

"Our top speed as we roared by the



"One of the novel's great themes is the absolute nature of change, as final as death." GEOFF RYMAN

orbit of Pluto was around one-twentieth the speed of light... Three weeks of carrying around twice as much weight as normal – it's no picnic... One girl got so fatigued that she almost slept through the experience of having a rib push out into the open air..."

Haldeman is also one of the few contemporary science fiction authors to face up to the time-dilation effects of near-light speed. Time dilation means his spaceship faces alien vessels from what is his future. They fire intelligent microscopic light-speed weapons, and he can't radio for advice. The fastest way to get a message back across a galaxy is to take it there himself. Ingeniously, Haldeman uses relativity

to solve one of the great difficulties SF authors face.

Change sometimes happens slowly, over hundreds of years. How do you tell that story if your characters keep dying? The hero Mandella comes back after just months of service to discover that years have passed on Earth. His mother is an old lady who was denied all medical treatment because of the expense. Each time Mandella returns after, say, a hundred years' Earth time, the culture shock gets worse. He finds that most people are gay as a population control measure. He comes back again to find that as an ancient heterosexual he is regarded as a pervert. By the end of the novel, Mandella has taken us through over one thousand years of future history. One of the novel's great themes is the absolute nature of change, as final as death.

Every page of *The Forever War* has a brilliant new character or science fiction idea. We get mindless telepathic alien hogs, glimpses of the alien Taureans, a violent and war-obsessed Earth, and a tourist planet of the far future. On frozen Charon, a box full of what looks like snow is labelled "OXYGEN". Despite the dark undertow, the novel is as light on its feet as the works of Alfred Bester, or William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. It's dizzyingly entertaining.

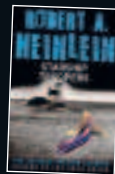
The Forever War is a total one-off. Science fiction authors have imitated it endlessly, but they can't copy its terrifying wisdom or sheer ingenuity. It slips down like a snake you haven't realised you've swallowed. **SFX**

Geoff Ryman won last year's Arthur C Clarke award for Air. His latest book, *The King's Last Song*, is a non-genre novel set in Cambodia.

Like this? Try these!

Starship Troopers by Robert A Heinlein (1959)

The Forever War is said to be partly a response to this more gung-ho military sci-fi novel (Heinlein had been a lieutenant in the US Navy).



Tau Zero by Poul Anderson (1970)

Anderson's hard SF classic, set on a colonisation vessel crewed by 25 men and 25 women, takes the idea of time-dilation travellers to the end of the universe... and beyond.



YOUR OPINIONS

Join the debate at <http://forum.sfx.co.uk>

>> "A damn good read, with one of the best opening lines of any book ever: "Tonight we're going to show you eight silent ways to kill a man." Kudos

>> "Although it was about war, death often came as a consequence of the preparation rather than the fighting. This book was less about war and more about change. It was fascinating to see how Earth had developed since the war began." Kixxykat

>> "I was never bored with the story or the pace, the characters were interesting, and I really cared what happened to the main character. I'd highly recommend this to others." Cally5000

>> "I just couldn't bring myself to care about the characters and the author's descriptive passages didn't draw me in at all. I'd have liked a couple of more scenes set on Earth. Having characters just tell the protagonist what was going on was a bit disappointing." bookworm192398

"The book is full of ideas that really work, like the fact that no-one initially knew what a Tauran looked like. On that first mission they're ordered to kill what seems to be a herd of three-legged animals, just in case they're the enemy. The final battle at Sade-138 sets this book apart. It's one of the best tension-building pieces I've read." DocSavage

Get reading!

>> In *SFX159* we'll be reading the collection *Dangerous Visions*, edited by Harlan Ellison. **NEXT ISSUE: Time for a children's classic: Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*.**