

RED RISING
(PIERCE BROWN)

May 4, 2023

“I would have lived in peace, but my enemies brought me war.” This is the attention-grabbing opening line of *Red Rising*, the first book in a popular young-adult science fiction trilogy, published between 2014 and 2016. The author, Pierce Brown, aims to draw Space Rome in roughly A.D. 3000. Within these books (the other two are *Golden Son* and *Morning Star*, and I read all three) are themes that could be fascinating, of hierarchy and oppression, of love and war, of duty and honor, of the price a man will pay to make his dreams real, of how our future should be organized. But, sadly, it’s all downhill after the first line, straight into the pit.

The core problem is that Brown cripples his books by refracting Space Rome through Late-Stage Leftism. This creates a funhouse mirror sensibility, where lines of action and behavior become nonsensical and confused, jarring the reader out of the story on nearly every page. The feel of the books is doubly odd because, deliberately or not, Brown’s stories seem at first like they might lean Right—the chief protagonist is a heterosexual male with a keen sense of honor and duty, for example, something rarely, if ever, found in today’s young adult fiction. But reality, that fundamental Right characteristic, is totally missing in Brown’s trilogy. Now, that may seem like a stupid objection. After all, no part of Space Rome is real, last I checked. What I mean, however, is that little of Brown’s story reflects the reality of how men and women make choices and interact with each other and the wider universe.

That said, the world of *Red Rising* is cleverly built. Mankind has conquered the entire Solar System, completely terraforming all the smaller planets and the larger moons of the gas giants. The first planetary body terraformed was the Moon, and seven hundred years before the events of the trilogy, the rulers of Luna destroyed the decayed empires of Earth (using men dropped from orbit in armored spacesuits, the “Iron Rain,” an idea Brown stole from *Starship Troopers*) and then expanded outward. This expansion was made possible largely by genetic engineering, and it is that engineering which is the central plot device of the trilogy.

Mankind is divided into fourteen castes, each genetically engineered for a specific hierarchical and practical role. At the top is Gold; at the

bottom is Red. They include Silver (“innovators, financiers, and businessmen”), Blue (“pilots and astronavigators bred to crew starships”), and Obsidian (“a monstrous race bred only for war”). Each caste is physically unique and identifiable, both by gross characteristics (Obsidians are huge) and, more importantly, by hair and eye color, along with embedded “sigils” on the back of each hand. Cross-breeding is impossible, so really, these are separate species.

Already here the disconnect from reality shows up. The genetic engineering makes no sense. These people can directly edit DNA with great subtlety, but all changes are exclusively physical—greater or lesser height and strength, along with superficial cosmetic changes such as hair and eye color. Even there, the “slave” class, the Reds, are portrayed as being identical in physical capacity to average humans of today. If you were designing a slave class, wouldn’t you make them stronger, as you did with the Obsidians? More to the point, wouldn’t you change their personality to be subservient? But what really gives the game away is that each caste is portrayed as being equally intelligent, in order to avoid touching in any way on one of the greatest Left taboos of all, admitting that human groups in the twenty-first century vary in intelligence. We are told explicitly that Golds are made to be “a superior brand of humanity,” but apparently it never occurred to anybody to improve their intelligence, or improve other genetically-linked undesirable characteristics common among some human groups, such as high time preference and lack of impulse control.

Anyway, the hero is a Red from Mars, a sixteen-year-old boy named Darrow (no last name, not even an informal patronymic, another strange omission, given no society of any complexity has ever made it impossible to identify individuals to third parties). On Mars, most of the Reds, millions of them, live harsh lives, entirely underground, mining helium-3 in hundreds of different, unconnected mines (Darrow’s is called Lykos; most of the names in the book are a farrago of Greek and Latin). The miners are told, and they believe, that they are part of a grand project to terraform Mars, which thanks to their efforts will someday be suitable for human habitation. (Technically, therefore, they are not slaves, but men bound to the land.) From them is concealed that the surface of Mars is already a paradise. Mining is an extremely dangerous job, and the lives of the Reds are short and physically brutal—although

their society is depicted as virtuous and strong. Sex roles in Lykos are sensible. Women aren't allowed to be miners, and the only births of children in the entire trilogy occur there (occasionally children appear elsewhere, as if by magic, never attended to by a mother). Homosexuality is regarded as vile. Hard work is honored. Religious belief is the norm. Lykos is, in essence, right-wing.

You'd think this would make Haywood happy, given Darrow's love for his home, which never wavers. But we see, by the end of the first book, that the right-wing flavor in Lykos is meant to be read as integral to their slave status. Only when the Reds rebel can they achieve the total emancipation, from reality, from natural hierarchy, and from all other unchosen bonds, that is the right of every man and woman. This pretty much encapsulates Brown's propaganda project. Darrow's claim that he would have lived in peace, had his enemies not brought him war, is false. Darrow could never have lived in peace, Brown implies, because obtaining emancipation requires war against reality and those who adhere to it.

The Reds are kept down by a variety of control mechanisms, among them limits on food and medicine. The miners' ruler, from their perspective, is their local mine administrator, whose superior is the Arch-Governor of Mars. The relevant control limitation, for the plot, is that singing a particular song, seen as emblematic of rebellion, results in prompt execution by hanging (with the added gruesome touch that due to low gravity, the victim's relatives have to pull on the victim's feet to hasten death). (It is never really explained why the miners would rebel, and to what end, given what they universally believe about the surface of Mars, but let's ignore that.) Darrow's father was executed some years before, and the rising of the title is sparked by the execution, by the Arch-Governor, of Darrow's young (and pregnant) wife Eo, for singing the same song. Hence the opening line of the second book: "Once upon a time, a man came from the sky and killed my wife."

Darrow tries to get himself executed too, and nearly succeeds, but is rescued by the Sons of Ares, a mysterious group dedicated to overthrowing the existing order. They reengineer him as a Gold, and send him off to infiltrate and then destroy the society of the Golds. The remainder of the trilogy is the implementation of this plan—its ups and downs, its betrayals and heroism, the accommodations Darrow has to make, and

so forth. The action takes place all across the Solar System, and millions die. Brown reaches for a grand scope, you have to give that to him.

At first, it's pretty compelling. Brown writes competently, if repetitively and with a lot of cardboard characters and purple prose, and the story seems different than most young adult fiction (looking at the current bestseller lists for such fiction, the books all seem devoted to worshipping fierce women and celebrating delicate male homosexuals). You can get through the first book and not be wholly dissatisfied. But what makes the books increasingly unreadable is three things. First, they're bloated, padded with endless interchangeable fight scenes. They're well-enough-done fight scenes, and I enjoy fight scenes. But most of them could have, and should have, taken place off-camera. Second, the technology is all magic, with no attempt to explain it, and zero coherency even within its magical frame. Anti-gravity is common, but spaceship propulsion is not tied to anti-gravity? And, as with spells and tools in Harry Potter books, very frequently some unexplained new technology is introduced a single time as a *deus ex machina*, and never heard of again, even when it would be just the thing for another situation.

Third, the books jar the reader most of all, endlessly, painfully, by their treatment of women. Or, more accurately, by their erasure of women. There is not a single woman character in these books, other than Darrow's dead wife, and Darrow's mother. Oh, there are many men with female names, who we are told have female anatomy. But not only does not a single one of these people act in any way that could be called feminine, their physical abilities are literally indistinguishable, except to the extent superior, to every man, and their psychological drives are purely male. Sexual dimorphism does not meaningfully exist. In this regard, this trilogy is the farthest thing from *Space Rome*, or from any real human society, possible.

None of the men in this book, not a single one, would have any reason to be attracted to any of the women in this book. There is nothing alluring, nothing feminine, nothing but sheer repulsion that any man, and even more so the fighting alphas who populate these pages, would feel for these women, who would all be treated with contempt and disgust, seen as distasteful freaks, in the real world, whether that of *Space Rome* or any other period of human history.

Nearly every character is a warrior; as I say, this is a book about fighting. All male warriors have faults and idiosyncrasies, and some are occasionally used as comic relief. Female warriors are invariably flawless, driven solely by blood lust and the desire to dominate and conquer. Their only faults are caring too much about winning and working too hard to kill their enemies. The greatest individual warrior in all the Solar System is, of course, a woman. At the end, when Darrow has defeated and slain the "Sovereign," the female ruler of the Solar System (who overthrew and killed her own father in her lust for power, and is defended by the aforementioned greatest individual warrior of all, who requires four men to defeat her in simultaneous combat), he does not seize the ultimate power for which he has suffered enormously and risked everything for many years, and impose his vision, which seems to be emancipating everyone from whatever they don't want to do, or something along those lines (it's never really made clear what Darrow wants, except that he's super pissed his wife is dead, and hierarchy is always bad, so he wants less of it). No, why would you think he would do that? Instead, a woman, one of Darrow's closest allies, but certainly not his follower (no woman is ever subservient to any man in these books, except for a bunch of rape in the first book, which is the most realistic thing in the book, but is never mentioned again), is named the new Sovereign, to which Darrow naturally has no objection, even though he has no intention of retiring. She then pulls out of a hat a six-year-old child she had by Darrow, knowledge of whom she concealed from him, because his maternal instincts might have lessened his drive (she, however, has spent the past six years being a girlboss war captain up and down the Solar System, killing millions). It's a cringe ending to a cringe trilogy.

What, a tiny little bit, redeems *Red Rising* is the occasional compelling turn of phrase. I've noted the opening lines of the first two books; in keeping with the general downhill trend, the third book has no such clever opening line, although the flyleaf map does bear the pithy legend, "The Solar System. At the time of the Second Moon Lords' Rebellion." And sometimes, Brown shows a little understanding of how actual men think and act. In the culminating battle of the book, Darrow and his allies defeat a mighty armada under the command of Roque au Fabii, the "Poet of Deimos," sometime boon companion of Darrow. Roque is

a sensitive man turned successful space warrior, and he is about to die by his own hand like the Roman general Publius Quinctilius Varus (not that Brown makes the comparison), because he has been dishonored by his loss of the greatest fleet ever assembled. Darrow, still driven by his wife's death, confronts Roque on the bridge of Roque's flagship. "Ships detonate in his irises, washing [Roque's] pale face with furious light. 'All this . . .,' [Roque] whispers, feeling the end coming. 'Was she so lovely?'"

So, yeah, I don't recommend Brown's books. The subversive way to read these books, perhaps, and to make them a little more worthwhile, is to view the Golds, who are meant as the villains, with their hierarchy, their binding by tradition and collective pursuit of achievement, and their continual extreme striving for glory, as the heroes, and the caste system as a simple reflection of the reality of human difference. Inverting a book's frame is a lot of work, though, and really, it's not worth it.

I remind myself, however, that I'm not the target audience for these books. What does the target audience think? I'm not sure what the demographics of readers of these books are. In general, today, boys don't read books. At the children's bookstore where I went the other day, none of the books are directed at boys, none at all. I suppose they are directed at girls, or maybe feminized boys, or maybe at feminizing boys. But I doubt if girls love the endless fight scenes in this trilogy. Maybe young men read this, thinking it's "based" because there's a lot of fighting, not realizing that the oozing propaganda is colonizing their minds (something also true of every action movie nowadays). Somebody must like these books; on Amazon, *Red Rising* has 47,951 reviews (not including mine; the court in my lawsuit against Amazon for deplatforming me has ignored my case for more than six months now). Brown has talked about how he writes for "outsiders," naming specifically homosexuals and trannies; maybe his readers are all the supposedly sexually-fluid Gen-Z types, who like to imagine that a real Space Rome would allow them to be heroes while still catering to their mental illness. Maybe it's older lonely women, Karens and wine aunts who want to imagine themselves as girlboss warriors; at least some of the reviews on Amazon seem to come from such people. Beats me.

Completing the downhill trend all the way to rock bottom, though no doubt he'll keep digging as long as there is money to be made, Brown has written a second trilogy, taking place ten years after the events of

the first book. I had ordered, and received, those books when I was reading *Red Rising*. However, I learned that the Late-Stage Leftism of the first trilogy has been, uh, fortified in the second trilogy. I returned the books of the second trilogy, marking them as defective, writing that the reason was they “are homosexual propaganda.”

Somewhere there could have been a good trilogy with the ideas in this book. We could have explored the tension between hierarchy and freedom. We could have evaluated whether an honor culture (dueling is depicted as common among Golds, for example) is a good or bad thing. We could have talked about, shades of *Fitzpatrick's War*, how to avoid the cycle of regimes and civilizations, and how whether collective sacrifice to avoid prosperity fading into decadence followed by collapse might be a method to that end. But no. That's not what we got. Ah well. I read fiction very fast, but still, I wasted a good ten hours of my time. Dumb me.

Let's shift gears a bit, to discuss Space, in the here and now. I wrote a long piece, “On Space,” back in 2019, and the first pillar of Foundationalism is Space. My claim is that conquest of Space is a crucial element of mankind's future flourishing. I insist that conquering Space is necessary because it provides, in modernity, the only possible great external, temporal focus of achievement, and such a focus is necessary both to bind together and to impel forward a great civilization, our potential successor civilization. From this can be reborn a necessary mental attitude, an attitude which views great deeds achieved through daring and a love of excellence as the core of a civilization, the duty of achieving which is the chief duty of the ruling class. Without this attitude, a rising society quickly stagnates and falls far short of glory, in the same way as all non-Western societies have ultimately failed to achieve much of anything.

I don't insist on the manned conquest of Space, but I do insist on its conquest. I call this Heroic Realism, and you can read more in my earlier piece. Yet there are many who reject this vision, who see little or no value in Space. Their condensed objection is that we don't bother conquering Antarctica, a far more hospitable environment than any place outside of Earth, so why would we bother leaving Earth? To these naysayers, Space is a way to avoid focusing on and fixing challenges

and problems we have at home (though most of those problems would disappear under a Foundationalist society, to be sure).

The objection is really to manned conquest of Space, so we can treat that first. The obvious rejoinders to the objection don't really hold water. Yes, doing anything in Antarctica is strictly controlled by a variety of international treaties, but there's no push by either nations or men seeking glory to loosen those treaties, which suggests the treaties aren't preventing anything. And while there may be no glory to be found in Antarctica, because there is nothing new to be found and nothing to exploit, there is certainly a great deal of personal challenge in, say, climbing mountains in Antarctica, and such personal challenges are closely related to the collective societal spirit of seeking to achieve great deeds. Yet it is rarely done.

Some say the conquest (whatever that would mean) of Antarctica, and any other place on Earth, is not a goal worth reaching for because all of Earth is claimed, individually or jointly, by some government. Space, they say, will be different, a realm of freedom, a libertarian paradise, where the government will not tell you what to do and every man can sink or swim on his own. But that's not plausible—even if some government doesn't micromanage your life in Space, which is unlikely, social controls in harsh, dangerous environments are, of necessity, extremely strict. Unless we discover a forgotten wormhole network that allows people to find habitable planets and easily relocate there, no part of living in Space will be free of control by earth-bound government.

Others argue that we "must" colonize space for "planet redundancy," ignoring that it would be impossible for us to make the Earth as inhospitable as Mars currently is (and that we are not terraforming anything in the foreseeable future). Yet others claim we need to start with the Moon or Mars in order to go further, which is probably true but does not make colonizing the Moon or Mars any easier. These responses don't answer the challenge either.

My first order response is that the real problem, why nobody climbs mountains in Antarctica or reaches for Space, is that our society is terrible, and that awfulness is encapsulated in our failure to dream—not of fantasies, but of possible realities—combined with our failure to organize our society to reach those dreams. Still, true as it is that our society is awful, maybe that response is cope. If we were the type of

society that dreamed, would we in truth dream of Space, and waking, make those dreams real?

Let's consider under what circumstances men would choose to go to Space. By "go to Space" here I mean settlement, the permanent expansion of mankind into Space, rather than mere manned excursions. Elon Musk may get to Mars, and he can certainly find many men to sign up to be the first to Mars, even if it's likely to be a one-way trip. But, as with going to the Moon, you get rapidly diminishing returns—after all, any exploration or exploitation to be done on Mars, or anywhere else, can be done a lot better, cheaper, and safer by machines, so after getting there, what is Musk going to do next? Ongoing settlement in any place won't happen unless people have a good reason to leave wherever they are.

So why would men and women leave Earth to go to space? Historically, those who abandon the land of their fathers to risk it all on the frontier do it for one of two reasons. Either they are so unhappy with their present situation that they decide the risks are worth the rewards, or they are satisfied enough, but they believe that highly desirable opportunities unavailable to them now will become available when they go to the frontier. American versions of the former include the Pilgrims and other settlers looking for religious freedom, and famished Irish immigrants. Most other arrivals to America fall into the latter group, as did the Spanish conquistadors. As David Gress wrote of the latter, in one of my favorite quotes of all time, "Living under [God's] judgment, men conceived life as an adventure, and their vivid imaginations conceived great tasks—sometimes bloody, cruel, and murderous—and impelled them to surmount great challenges. Hernán Cortes conquered Mexico for God, gold, and glory, and only a mundane imagination would distinguish these impulses, for they were one and the same."

Do either of these two reasons for settling a new place apply to settlement of Space (leaving aside technical challenges, which we will talk about in a moment)? Not the first, certainly. There are plenty of people in America unhappy with their situation, but even if they were willing to take risks, which given the spiritual ennui affecting us is very unlikely, how would relocating to Space make the risks worth the rewards? The reality is that everyone in the West is, by historical standards, rich and comfortable, and that, combined with enervation, makes it very unlikely they would ever choose to up stakes and leave Earth. (This is less true

of those in the Third World, perhaps, but they're not going to Space, now or ever, at least on their own initiative and under their own power.) Even in a remade, Foundationalist, society people will not feel the need to leave Earth because they are unhappy here—quite the contrary, in fact, if Foundationalism is everything it's cracked up to be.

That leaves the second possibility. There are always men, a small percentage to be sure, who will risk everything for God, gold, and glory. God isn't really on offer in Space. It is true that religious freedom and the desire to convert others is a common driver of moving to the frontier, but there's nobody to convert in Space, and you're not going to get more religious freedom in Space. You can imagine, I suppose, a religious organization deciding as a corporate entity on some type of space colonization; in *The Expanse* the Mormons do so. But they are not fleeing persecution. You could also imagine a new religion adopting the conquest of Space as a key doctrinal element, but there is no reason to think such belief will arrive.

As to gold, there are many worthwhile resources in space, theoretically exploitable by asteroid mining and the like. But unlike past gold rushes on Earth, an individual could not grab that for himself. He would be dependent on a vast infrastructure owned by and run by others, and he could not hide any wealth he found. He'd be an employee, and it's very hard to get rich as an employee, which reduces any incentive to take the risk. Those getting rich would instead be cretins like Larry Fink, the chief of Blackrock (whose wealth I am going to confiscate some day). That leaves glory, which is certainly achievable in Space, up to a point. But again, as with gold, individual action is going to be tightly constrained in the hostile environment of Space, and it's tough to achieve real glory in those conditions, except in the narrow sense that Neil Armstrong achieved glory by being the first man on the Moon.

So maybe the manned conquest of Space doesn't make sense. Or maybe we should pull back the camera a bit and view it from the perspective of a society, rather than individuals. A society as a whole can seek for God, gold, and glory, and that is somewhat different than individuals so doing. This is related to Oswald Spengler's view of the Faustian West, for very few societies have ever sought for glory. But the West has long since lost this drive; it would have to be a new, or reborn, society, where woven into the society's fabric is the demand for achievement.

At that point the conquest of Space would follow naturally, not from the exhortations of random internet writers such as myself.

Such a renewal seems, upon reflection, to be a precondition for the conquest of Space. It would, or could, become a self-reinforcing process—a strong society strives, as a whole rather than through the decisions of individuals seeking personal gain, to conquer Space, and its collective effort makes it a stronger society. At least in theory, that's possible, though if I am being honest, I am perhaps more skeptical of the likelihood of this than I was a few years ago. Still, even if manned conquest never arrives, I think unmanned conquest of Space is a practical alternative, and avoids many of the objections to manned conquest. We can still have Heroic Realism with robot space explorers and miners. Maybe it won't be quite as heroic, but it is still an external focus of achievement with real benefits for a civilization.

Regardless, if we today decided that conquering Space, by any method, was an overriding goal, and our society was reborn entirely to remove the many organizational blockages to that end, the conquest of Space would be impossible unless we found a new source of cheap, inexhaustible energy. It's not impossible we could discover such a new energy source, but there is no indication we will anytime soon, if ever. It is also true, however, that were we to find one, as with all technology, it would be a double-edged sword, perhaps used to extend the Brawndo Tyranny, which is now on life support and will hopefully expire soon if no external aid arrives.

Where does that leave us? Well, as much as I enjoy watching Musk strive, it strongly suggests that any effort put into Space within the confines of our present society is a waste of time. We are going to have to go backward before we can go forward. Yet we should still dream, that someday, we, or our children, or our grandchildren, can make those dreams real.