




# BOOK REVIEW

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| Book Title | <b>Big Red</b>  |
| Author     | <b>Damien Larkin</b>  |
| Date       | <b>February 2019</b>  |
| Stars      |  |

Big Red is described as Military Science Fiction and while that is true, I'd add the caveat that it's also an intensely human story. As all good and great SF should do, it examines the human condition and what better way to do that, than through the eyes of a soldier.

There's so much of this novel that reminds me of the stories I read as a youngster, like Joe Haldeman and Robert Heinlein. In fact Heinlein's Starship Troopers stayed with me throughout the book. Heinlein had seen active service and his experiences coloured his writing. The same is true for Damien Larkin.

There are two factors that make this a stand-out story for me.

Firstly, it is the realism. This is why I've referenced Heinlein because really good SF needs to be grounded in it. We need to believe. Sure, there are fantastic elements to it but we're prepared to accept those premises if we can find something realistic to accept first.

In Big Red you experience the events through the eyes of a soldier. A real soldier. Someone who knows what it's like, who has the military vocabulary but who understands the military mind. It's this last point that captures the realism for me. We see a range of military minds in Big Red – some of them are brutal, dark and inhuman. Yet still we believe in them because we get to experience the factors that make them like this.

The second factor that made me love this book – the Unreliable Narrator. To avoid spoilers, I'm going to avoid saying too much here. I'll simply say this – I couldn't put the book down because I didn't know where it was going and what was going to happen next. I wasn't even certain what was real. The concept of an Unreliable Narrator is a risky approach for a writer, get it wrong and you alienate your audience, but get it right and you are gripped. I was definitely gripped!

I was intrigued by the book's promotional material about Nazis on Mars but a little sceptical about how it might work. Yet the premise of the novel overcomes this instantly. But I'd emphasize that the book is much more than that, and it's why I rate it so highly.

I started by saying how the story is intensely human and its issues are explored through the lens of a soldier's experiences. This is not just a shoot-em-up for that reason. There is drama and heartache here, insights in the light and darkness of humanity's soul. This book makes you think. It parallels so much of what is happening around us today. That's what makes it brilliant science fiction.