

## BOOK APPRECIATION

Title: Speaker for the Dead

Author: Orson Scott Card

Publisher: Arrow Date: 1988 (1986)

There is a picture of a space-ship on the cover of this book, but it is not about space-ships. It is a proper novel, with believable people and real emotions. It is in fact one of the deepest and most beautiful novels I have read. But I am not going to talk about the story, which is not only complex in itself, but also depends partly upon a previous book called *Ender's Game*, to which it is a sequel. All I would like to draw attention to is a set of scientific distinctions which are referred to many times in the book.

There are four labels used in the science of xenology. Xenology (from the Greek Xenos, a stranger) is like anthropology, but extended to other worlds. And by making this extension it shows up some important points about prejudice and racism.

“The Nordic language recognised four orders of foreignness. The first is the otherlander... the stranger that we recognise a being a human of our world, but of another city or country. The second is the framling... This is the stranger that we recognise as human, but of another world. The third is the ramen, the stranger that we recognise as human, but of another species. The fourth is the true alien, the varelse, which includes all the animals, for with them no conversation is possible. They live, but we cannot guess what purposes or causes make them act. They might be intelligent, they might be self-aware, but we cannot know it.” (pp.37-8)

So an example of an otherlander would be a German, or a Muslim, or an Army officer – someone we would recognise as of this world whether we liked them or not.

An example of a framling would be a Klingon, or Princess Leia, or Mork – someone we could communicate with even though they came from another planet, and who takes generally human form.

An example of a ramen would be any of those strange creatures we see in the bar of USS Enterprise, or in some of the haunts in Star Wars, who are clearly not in any human form at all, but who can communicate and converse sufficiently to get by.

And an example of a varelse would be a mountain lion, or a red and yellow macaw, or a Koi carp. We might tame them, but we could not really treat them as human, such as giving them the vote or letting them open a bank account.

Perhaps the first thing to notice about this is that the highly prejudiced person cannot use such categories at all. There are only two categories – us and them. And it is very doubtful whether *they* are human at all. They are just animals.

One of the beauties of this book is the way in which it sensitively explores the problems of distinguishing between ramen and varelse. When something looks and behaves in ways which we do not recognise and at first cannot understand, how do we begin to explore the possibilities of understanding?

Two ways of doing this are explored. One is the attempt to understand the other without disturbing the native culture. At first this sounds very wise: there have been too many examples of a technologically advanced culture wiping out native cultures without even realising it. But what emerges in this book is that the careful approach has problems too, because it is basically condescending and patronising. Inside it is a hidden colonialism.

The alternative is to draw up a proper treaty with the ramen, such that rights and duties are laid out, negotiated with and ultimately agreed to. But to do that requires introducing a native culture to the idea of a treaty – something very advanced and containing a thousand implications about ways of thinking which may just not be there in the native culture.

All this is convincingly wrestled with in this book, with believable characters and carefully explored motivations.

There is much more in this book – considerations of Calvinism and Catholicism, ecology and plague, morality and lies, the effects of close-to-light-speed travel and so forth. I was glad to have previously read *Ender's Game*, although that is a violent book which I did not enjoy much. There are also a number of further sequels, of which I enjoyed *Children of the Mind* most. But for anyone who wants to explore the whole realm of prejudice, this is a key text.

John Rowan 17 November, 2011