

“A REAL JOY TO BE HAD”

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON INTERVIEWED BY TERRY BISSON

David Hartwell once said that the Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve. Was that true for you? What was your first literature?

I didn't know science fiction existed until I was eighteen; then I fell in pretty deeply. The first book I remember reading was *Huckleberry Finn*, and I still have that copy of the book with me, it has a gorgeous cover depicting Huck and Jim pulling a caught fish onto the raft, in vibrant colors. For years I pretended to be Huck Finn. My parents subscribed to the Scholastic book of the month club, and I read those when they came in the mail pretty much the day of arrival. I read everything that caught my eye at the library when I was a child, then as a teenager did the same, but became a fan of locked-room detective mysteries, chiefly John Dickson Carr but also Ellery Queen, and all the rest of that crowd from the 1930s. Then just as I was leaving for college I ran into the science fiction section at the library, all the books with their rocketship-and-radiation signs on the spine, and that was very exciting. In college I majored in history

and literature, and on the side majored in science fiction, absorbing the New Wave pretty much as it happened.

Did your parents read to you as a kid? Did anyone? Do you read to your kids?

Yes, my mom read to my brother and me at bedtime, and then I read on by myself with a flashlight. I read at bedtime to my older son throughout his childhood and youth at home (my wife read to the younger son) and we made our way through all of Joan Aiken, the entire Patrick O'Brian sequence, many kids' books I remembered from my childhood and found in used bookstores, and many more. Now that my son is off to college I miss that very much, and have tried to horn in on the younger son, but no luck. It's sad to be done, and I have to say, along with everything else, it certainly helped me with my public readings of my own work. My mouth just got stronger and more versatile.

Do you touch type? Do you write on a computer? I hear you and Karen Fowler like to write in cafes. What's that about?

Yes, I touch type, and I can go really fast, although not accurately. I write by hand in a notebook, and then on a laptop for fiction. I'm trying to work outdoors now, in the shade of my front courtyard, it's very nice. Being outdoors helps a lot.

I wrote in cafes for many years, and I liked that too; I liked seeing the faces, which often became characters' faces, and I liked hearing the voices around me, I think it helped with dialogue, and made my writing even more a matter of channeling a community. Karen

Fowler joined me in this at several cafes downtown, all of which died, we hope not from our presence, although we may have killed three. It was good to meet with someone going through the same issues, it was a kind of solidarity and also a bit of policing, in that there was someone to meet at a certain time, who would then be watching in a way. It was a great addition to a friendship. But now Karen has moved, and on my own I'm finding I like my courtyard better than any of the cafes left in town. I thought I was getting tired of writing, before, but now I realize I was only tired of spending so much time indoors sitting around. When it's outdoors it feels completely different.

Were you ever tempted to keep a journal? Did you give in?

Tempted maybe, but I never gave in. Except in this way; long ago I started filling out a Sierra Club weekly calendar, which has only a narrow space for every day, with a week per page—you know the type. So every day could only be given a few sentences at most, basically a bare description of what that day held, very minimal. I now have twenty-three years of those filled out, and my wife and I have a game where I keep the ones from ten and twenty years before on the bed table under the new one, and I tell her what we were doing ten years ago and twenty years ago on that day. It is a way of placing us in time and our own lives that is very interesting, and we get some good laughs and often some groans. Twenty years ago we were young, without children, living in Europe, dashing all over in trains and planes, seeing romantic cities like Venice and Edinburgh, etc; in the present, going to work and buying groceries, the entry

for every day almost identical. But oh well. It's also a very interesting test of the memory, because sometimes we won't remember events or even people, but other times a single sentence will bring back a very full memory of an event; and that memory, there in the brain waiting, would never, never have come back to us if we hadn't had the spur of the sentence in the journal. So, as memories may need to be remembered to hold fast as structures in the brain, this is a good thing in itself. But we've become convinced that an evolutionary accident has left us in the curious state of having brains that can remember huge, huge amounts of incident; but we have no good recall mechanisms in us to go back and get them, so they sit there as knots or configurations of synapses, doing nothing but waiting. Very strange.

As for journals, I love the journals of Henry David Thoreau and Virginia Woolf, and often feel they are the whole story as far as literature goes; they are novels written as first person hyperrealist accounts of a single consciousness, say. And we don't have any other novels that come even close to doing what they do as far as getting inside the head of another human being—except possibly for Proust's novel. So they are considerable works of literature in that sense and I often wonder if a journal would be the best way to go if you were intent to do this particular thing, which it seems to me most literature does indeed want to do. But neither Woolf nor Thoreau had kids. There's a time problem here, and also it takes a certain mentality to keep at it year after year, which is what is required. Also, with both of them, when really bad things happened, their journals went silent, usually for months and sometimes for years. So there seems to be some kind of problem there with what the journal can actually face up to, as a form. Maybe.

I know that you write and publish poetry. Have you published outside the SF field? Have you published fiction outside the field?

No, all my poetry is stuck inside my stories and books. It helps me to think of my poems as being by someone else. And all my fiction has been published in SF magazines or books, although sometimes brought out as “general fiction,” by my publisher, but booksellers know which section to put it in after it’s off the front tables.

Are there special “chops” for writing SF? Are there ways in which SF is less demanding?

I don’t know, I guess there are some techniques particular to SF, maybe the ways in which the future background is conveyed, or something like that. I can’t imagine it’s less demanding than any other kind of fiction, it feels about as demanding as I can handle, anyway. My near future and my farther future stories feel about the same in terms of writing, although I will say that when I came back from years on Mars to write about Antarctica, it was a huge relief to have other people making up the culture for me, rather than trying to do it all myself. In that sense I think SF is a bit harder. But it’s all hard, and none of it is “realism,” so I think distinctions here are very fuzzy.

What part of the process of writing fiction do you like best? Least? Is there a process to writing fiction?

I like the writing. These days I write only novels, and I like most the last three to six months of writing

a novel, when I bear down and really go at it like a maniac. There is a real joy to be had in submitting to a task like a madman. It feels like things are coming together, and the process is one of identifying problems and then solving them on the spot, and then moving on. So there is a problem-solving aspect to it that reminds me of hiking cross country in Sierra, where every step is a decision, like every word coming up in a sentence. You get into a flow and then it's problem, solution, problem, solution, and that goes on at a smooth good pace for a long time, and at the end you're somewhere else. Often when in this flow state I will have a couple of hours pass and it feels like only about fifteen minutes have passed, and that I take it is the blessed state, the Zen state, prayer, what have you. Writing as hiking a prayer.

The part I like least. . . . Well, first draft when faced with a hard idea can be tough. It makes you feel stupid. But I have learned to ignore that and grind on, and so it's not so bad once you get in the habit. I don't much like dealing with editorial comments, but truthfully, my editors now are so good that that part is not so unpleasant either, because it's helping the book and that always feels good. I like readings. I don't like the wasted time associated with business travel, but this is not a very bad thing either. I guess I mostly like all of it. I don't like people telling me what fiction is or is not, in the sense of what I can or cannot do (see below).

Do you research and then write, or do the two overlap?

I usually research as I am writing, on a need to know basis. If I did my research first, I would never get started writing. I call this the Coleridge Problem,

because he listed all the things he would need to learn before he could write his epic poem, and he never wrote his epic poem. And I find the research is so much more effective when it is specifically to support a particular scene or chapter. So in the *Mars* books, the *Years of Rice and Salt*, and the climate books, I researched as I wrote and it worked very well to suggest to me what the scenes needed, or better, how they could be extended or made even more interesting. It's a good stimulus to fiction, researching on the fly.

Where did the idea of Years of Rice and Salt come from? That's got to be one of the great UNDISCOVERED high concept ideas of SF. Mostly we recycle old ones (apocalypse, first contact, etc). Was that a 'eureka' moment, or did it just leak in from somewhere?

Thanks, I like that idea myself. It came to me in the late 70s, and it was indeed a kind of AH HA moment, in that I was thinking about alternative histories, wanting ideas, and thought of the one for "The Lucky Strike" too, and looking over the alternative histories I decided what was needed was the most major change you could think of, that did not simply change the game so much that it wiped away everything. Because you want comparison. So that Harry Harrison's novel in which dinosaurs evolve to high intelligence instead of mammals, is an alternative history in a way, but not—useless as such, because the comparisons are invalidated by the fact that the difference there is too huge to be able to play the game. So I was thinking, well what would be the biggest change that would still work in terms of comparison to our history, and it seemed to me that Europe's conquering the world was so big that if it hadn't

happened—and then it hit me, and I said *Wow* and ran to write it down quick before I forgot it and ended up wandering around moaning saying I had a good idea, I had a good idea but I can't remember it now, it won't come back—which has sometimes happened to me.

So, once I had the idea, I knew I couldn't write it, that what it implied was beyond what I was capable of expressing. I wondered if I would ever be capable of such a thing (I have a couple of good ideas I've never written because I can't think how to yet), but after the Mars novels I figured I had worked out the method, and I was feeling bold. I'm glad I wrote it when I did; I don't know if I have the brain cells for it now. Although that's partly that book's fault, because I blew out some fuses writing that one that were never replaced.

Antarctica. You were there. Was that scary, or just fun?

It was fun. I was having fun every waking moment, and I seldom slept. It was so beautiful, and alien; like being on another planet.

I did have one scary twenty minutes, when we were in a Kiwi helicopter, pilot about twenty-eight, a real vet, and co-pilot about twenty-four, and we were trying to fly around Ross Island's north end to get from Cape Crozier back to McMurdo, rather than taking the straight route around the south end; and we were flying toward a cloud bank and the co-pilot, flying, said to the pilot, "you don't want me to fly into that do you?" and there was a silence of about ten seconds before the pilot said "No," and we turned around. But then we had about twenty minutes flying back toward Cape Crozier, where it wasn't clear that the winds would allow us to land. Under us was

black water with orca pods visible (very cool before) and the very steep snowy side of Ross Island. And there are a fair number of crashed helicopters still half-buried in snow all over Ross Island and the dry valleys, so we knew what could happen. In the end the co-pilot stuck the landing straight into the wind at Cape Crozier and we retired to the penguin scientists' hut there and hung out for twenty-four hours until the winds died down.

Other than that, it was heaven. I would love to go back.

You're pretty good at landscape. What's that about? Is it a fictional skill or something else entirely? You're also pretty good at erotic scenes.

Thanks. I like landscapes and think they are worth some sentences to describe. Also, I've seen some landscapes and paid attention when in them, so that I feel I can bring something new to the page when I write them, something I saw myself rather than read in a book. There are a fair number of writers who write down only things they have learned in books, and in their personal relationships. They think that being nifty or tasteful with the word combinations is enough to make it good writing, but I'm not so sure. I think new perceptions out of the world are better. So this is something I can bring.

As for erotic scenes, I decided long ago that I wasn't going to put violence in my stories just to jazz up the plots, like Hollywood and TV—that that was fake too, it was all out of books and TV and movies, and the writers didn't know what they were talking about, and if I tried I wouldn't either. It's guesswork, it's lazy, it's a cheat. So, but fiction these days and maybe always

is pretty reliant on sex and violence, and so without violence, that left sex. Everyone's an expert there, so the test for writing about it is finding ways to make it sexy. That's not easy, but it is fun to try.

Someone once described your Mars books as an infodump tunneled by narrative moles. I think it was a compliment. What do you think?

No, not a compliment. I reject the word “infodump” categorically—that’s a smartass word out of the cyberpunks’ workshop culture, them thinking that they knew how fiction works, as if it were a tinker toy they could disassemble and label superciliously, as if they knew what they were doing. Not true in any way. I reject “expository lump” also, which is another way of saying it. All these are attacks on the idea that fiction can have any kind of writing included in it. It’s an attempt to say “fiction can only be stage business” which is a stupid position I abhor and find all too common in responses on amazon.com and the like. All these people who think they know what fiction is, where do they come from? I’ve been writing it for thirty years and I don’t know what it is, but what I do know is that the novel in particular is a very big and flexible form, and I say, or sing: Don’t fence me in!

I say, what’s interesting is whatever you can make interesting. And the world is interesting beyond our silly stage business. So “exposition” creeps in. What is it anyway? It’s just another kind of narrative. One thing I believe: it’s all narrative. Once you get out of the phone book anyway, it’s all narrative.

And in science fiction, you need some science sometimes; and science is expository; and so science fic-

tion without exposition is like science fiction without science, and we have a lot of that, but it's not good. So the word "infodump" is like a red flag to me, it's a Thought Police command saying "Dumb it down, quit talking about the world, people don't have attention spans, blah blah blah blah." No. I say, go read *Moby Dick*, Dostoevsky, Garcia Marquez, Jameson, Bahktin, Joyce, Sterne—learn a little bit about what fiction can do and come back to me when you're done. That would be never and I could go about my work in peace.

But I thought you liked infodumps.

I do! But let's call them something different and also think of them differently. Think about all writing as narrative, because it is (outside the phone book and other such places). Scientific abstracts, *TV Guide* summaries, all writing has information that traverses time in the telling and in reality too, so it's ALL narrative. So, okay, some of these omnipresent stories are about us, and some of these stories are about the rest of the world. And what I think the people who speak of "expository lumps" or the smart-asses who reduced that to "infodumps" are saying is, you can only talk about us. The proper study of mankind is man (Pope) etc., etc., well, that's just silly. Why be so narcissistic? There are many, many stories that are extremely interesting that don't happen to be about us. That's what science is saying, often, and that's what I'm saying in my science fiction. So, my *Mars* novels are a narrative, the story never stops for even a sentence, even in the list of tools that goes on for two pages, it's just that sometimes it's the story of the rocks and the tools and the weather, and sometimes it's the story of the people

there in interaction with all that. I know it reads a bit differently and freaks some people out, but I can see others like it as well. Even some of the people freaked out read on, irritated and mystified.

What do you think of the current state of Earth's Mars enterprise?

Well, the robot landers are sending back some fantastic photos. And the orbiting satellites. A balloon floating at low altitude and taking good photos and moving images would be mind-boggling too. As for human landings, those would be exciting, but they seem a long way off; I don't know if we are going to see them in our lifetimes. But I don't think there's any hurry there. I'm not in the group who says we have to go there fast to save our civilization, etc. I don't believe it's true. We need a healthy Earth and a sustainable civilization, and the Mars project will come. So it may be some time.

How come you only drive Fords?

Ha, well, my dad worked for Ford Aerospace and so he got to buy Fords at dealer cost or lower, and his family too, and this was therefore something he could do for us. I've driven a Cortina, an Escort station wagon, and a Focus station wagon, those have been good cars, and my wife has driven two Tauruses, we won't talk about those. I want my next car to be a little electric station wagon that I can sleep in the back and fit in my bikes and bales of hay. If Ford makes one, fine. If not I may be off somewhere else.

You're a big supporter of Clarion, the science fiction "boot-camp" workshop. Why?

I'm a big Clarion supporter because I tried to express my thanks to a dead person. Maybe not the best idea.

Clarion gave me a six-week party and a group of good friends, a cohort, a block party in the small town that is science fiction. It gave me tangible evidence that I was serious about becoming a writer, and taught me a lot of craft points, some of which I agreed with, others not. It gave me some time with six fine writers and people (Delany, Wolfe, Zelazny, Haldeman, Knight and Wilhelm) whom I've read with intense interest and pleasure ever since.

What do you think of the current MFA-in-writing boom? Do you think working in a commercial field (like SF) sharpens or dilutes a writer's vision?

I think getting an MFA in creative writing is a bad idea. If you want a graduate degree to help get a job, then the PhD is stronger and gives you more options. With an MFA you need also publishing credits to get a job, so it is not sufficient in itself, as a PhD is, and it only gives you a chance at teaching writing anyway, not all literature. So it's weak in that sense. If you are going for that MFA in order to learn more about writing, I'd say any other graduate degree will give you more raw material for your writing, while you can teach yourself writing on your own; you will be anyway.

I don't know what working in a commercial field does to a writer's vision. A lot of the effect must be unconscious. Ultimately you seem to be saying, does the

desire for readers change what you write? Surely it must. But isn't the desire for readers pretty basic to writing? So, maybe it sharpens your vision, in those terms.

Have you ever thought of yourself as part of a "school" in SF? Did it last? Was it fun?

Oh I hate all literary schools, not just the ones in SF but everywhere. In science fiction they are particularly small and stupid: marketing ploys, herding instincts, white guys wishing they were back in high school and were the tough guys smoking cigarettes out in the parking lot—that's a deeply stupid thing to wish for—gee, I wish I was back in high school. Sorry, but no.

I was called "literary science fiction" for a while, that's the kiss of death in terms of sales, then I was a victim of certain cyberpunks' need to have somebody to mug to show they were punks, that was fine, but a "school" was invented to "oppose" them in a rumble like the Sharks and the Jets, so then I was a "humanist," that was dumb; then I wrote the *Mars* books and I was suddenly "hard SF," but hard sf is only hard in its attitude toward the poor, in other words right wing, so that didn't seem to fit very well, even though I talked about technology. Now people have given up. Sometimes I am called "utopian SF" but that could not be a school, as there is only you and me and Ursula in it: a study group more than a school. Well, I just don't believe in them. I believe in science fiction, which is a kind of small town in literature, not highly regarded by big city people, but I like it, and I like the big city too. The whole point is to be as idiosyncratic as possible, the town madman. Although in our town that's a tough label to earn.

Were you ever close to any of the “old-timers” in SF? Which ones? What did you get from them?

Not really close, but I loved the several interactions I had with Jack Williamson, one of the kindest, smartest people in writing, modest but incisive. He published science fiction from 1928 to 2008—isn't that eighty years? I'm having trouble believing my math. Anyway he was great.

I've met Asimov and Bradbury, and talked with Clarke on the phone, and they are all generous friendly people. I guess I get from them the sense that the community is a real community, that the people in it function like neighbors in a small town, helpful to the young people.

Your first big trilogy was the Orange County (Wild Shore) series. Did you feel you owed that to your birthplace or was it because Orange County California somehow concentrates all the tendencies good and bad in modern America?

That trilogy is called *Three Californias*, as the handsome Tor trade paperbacks say. I guess it was a little of both. I wanted to ground some of my science fiction in my actual home town, and I also felt like I was the beneficiary of a lucky coincidence, in that my home town seemed to me to represent some kind of end case for America, some kind of future already here for the rest of the country to witness and hopefully avoid following. I'm not sure that was a true perception, but it had to do with the westward movement in American history, and the fact that when people reached the Pacific there was no where else to go, so the leading edge

of malcontents and dreamers was stuck there and had to make something of it. LA is the big exemplar of how that can go wrong, San Francisco how it can go right, and Orange County is like the purest expression of LA. And in my time it was so beautiful, then it was so destroyed, and it was so drugged out; it seemed a good spot to talk about America, so I used it. It still feels like a lucky thing, and I think it was fundamental to me becoming a science fiction writer in the first place. When I ran into science fiction at age eighteen, I said, Oh I recognize this, this is home, this is Orange County.

My favorite of that series is Pacific Edge, the Utopia. What's yours? Are there any particular problems in writing a Utopia?

My favorite is *The Gold Coast*, for personal reasons, but I think *Pacific Edge* is more important to us now. Anyone can do a dystopia these days just by making a collage of newspaper headlines, but utopias are hard, and important, because we need to imagine what it might be like if we did things well enough to say to our kids, we did our best, this is about as good as it was when it was handed to us, take care of it and do better. Some kind of narrative vision of what we're trying for as a civilization. It's a slim tradition since More invented the word, but a very interesting one, and at certain points important: the Bellamy clubs after Edward Bellamy's *Looking Back from the Year 2000* had a big impact on the Progressive movement in American politics, and H.G. Wells's stubborn persistence in writing utopias over about fifty years (not his big sellers) conveyed the vision that got turned into the postwar order of social security and some kind of government-by-meritocracy. So utopias have had effects in the real world.

More recently I think *Ecotopia* by Callenbach had a big impact on how the hippie generation tried to live in the years after, building families and communities.

There are a lot of problems in writing utopias, but they can be opportunities. The usual objections, that they must be boring, are often political attacks, or ignorant repeating of a line, or another way of saying “No expository lumps please, it has to be about me.” The political attacks are interesting to parse. “Utopia would be boring because there would be no conflicts, history would stop, there would be no great art, no drama, no magnificence.” This is always said by white people with a full belly. My feeling is that if they were hungry and sick and living in a cardboard shack they would be more willing to give utopia a try. And if we did achieve a just and sustainable world civilization, I’m confident there would still be enough drama, as I tried to show in *Pacific Edge*. There would still be love lost, there would still be death. That would be enough. The horribleness of unnecessary tragedy may be lessened and the people who like that kind of thing would have to deal with a reduction in their supply of drama.

So, the writing of utopia comes down to figuring out ways of talking about just these issues in an interesting way; how tenuous it would be, how fragile, how much a tightrope walk and a work in progress. That along with the usual science fiction problem of handling exposition. It could be done, and I wish it were being done more often.

Your two early “stand-alones” anticipated some later themes: super-longevity and terraforming in Icehenge. And in Memory of Whiteness the exploration of ten-dimensional space. What keeps you coming back to these themes?

I like the super-longevity theme because I'd like to live five hundred years, and also from time to time when I think back on my past, it feels like I've lived five hundred years, so it works as both wish and metaphor. And the whole thrust of medicine leads toward that wish, I think. So it's good science fiction. Same with terraforming Mars, which is very achievable, and even the idea of terraforming other places is interesting to contemplate. It's also a good metaphor for what we now have to do here on Earth, for the rest of human time. As for ten-dimensional space, physicists keep coming back to it, ever since Kaluza and Klein in the twenties, and I keep thinking, what the heck can it mean? It seems to stand in for all the deep weirdness of modern physics and what they are saying about this world we live in, but apparently don't see very well. Also, if you have foolishly taken on a time travel story, it's the only way to make it look like it makes sense.

Are you sorry Pluto is no longer a planet?

No, not at all. I think it's a good lesson in words.

These books came out at about the same time as the Three Californias. Were they written earlier? Or in between?

I somewhat wrote them all at once, or overlapping through those years. It went something like, *Icehenge* part 3, *Memory of Whiteness* early drafts, *Icehenge* part 1, *Wild Shore*, *Icehenge* part 2, and *Memory of Whiteness* final drafts. *The Gold Coast* and *Pacific Edge* came later.

You once said that a writer had to perch on a three-legged stool. I think (!) you meant that you had three readerships: the SF community, the science community, and the more “literary” types. Does that still work for you?

Yes, I think that might describe the three parts of my adult audience, although I think college students and high school students form a group as big as any of these three. Also, leftists, environmentalists, and wilderness people. I like all these readerships very much, indeed I am deeply grateful to them, as providing me my career and my sense of myself as a writer. I’m not a writer without them. So, thinking of the SF community as my home town, I guess I think of the “literary” community as another small town, with pretensions, while scientists are the real big city, but they tend to act like a big city, in that they don’t know each other and usually don’t read fiction; so word of mouth doesn’t work as well there as in the other communities. Younger readers use word of mouth and also listen to their teachers, a bit, so they are crucial. Getting word to people who would enjoy my books if they were to give them a try; this is the big problem, and ultimately it comes down to word of mouth. So again I depend on my readership. It’s a real dependency!

You are firmly ensconced in a genre (SF). Many writers regard that as a trap, and others as an opportunity. How do you see it? Is working in a field with a developed, opinionated and rambunctious “fandom” a blessing or a curse?

It’s the home town. It’s a floor and a ceiling, in some respects. I love the genre and the community, but want readers who don’t usually think of themselves as

SF readers to give me a try, as they have in the past for Bradbury, Asimov, Frank Herbert, Ursula Le Guin, and so on.

These days there seems to be a lot of permeability. Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* was a great SF novel, an alternative history, but that's SF too, and it was widely read and enjoyed by people. Maybe Philip K. Dick's takeover of the movies helped break down part of the barriers.

Anyway there is no reason to pretend it's a ghetto and we are oppressed artists that the world won't give a break. In the 1950s that was true and drove many writers mad. Now to hold that position (which some do) would be only a confession that you'd rather be a big fish in a little pond than swim in the big ocean. I like the ocean, but I love SF too. And really, to have a literary community as a kind of feedback amp on stage, loudly talking back to you and ready to talk at any moment—any writer is lucky to have that. The solitude and alienation of many writers from their audiences strikes me as sad. It's solitary enough as it is, in the daily work.

You wrote your PhD thesis on PK Dick. Did you ever meet him? He seems to be on the verge of replacing Asimov as the most familiar SF name. How do you think he would fit into today's market?

I met PKD once in a hallway at Cal State Fullerton, where we both had come to see a lecture by Harlan Ellison. PKD rose to his feet during the Q and A after the reading to thank Ellison publicly for raising the level of respect for SF in the general culture; PKD really felt the put-downs of the literary culture back in the 1950s. (This was 1973). Afterwards in the hall I said to him

how much I had enjoyed his novel *Galactic Pot-Healer*. He looked at me like I was insane. He may or may not have said thank you, or anything. But I'm glad I did it.

I guess he is "the SF writer" in American culture now. I think it's fitting; we live in a PKD reality in a lot of ways, crazier than Asimov's vision. So many of PKD's visions now look prescient and like perfect metaphors for life now. He had a big gift that way.

Many of his novels were written in two weeks on speed, and it shows. In today's market (especially if all his movies had been made) he would have been able to afford to slow down. He was skillful; if he had to start in today's market, he would do okay; if he were still alive and had his real start, he would be huge. And his books would be very interesting no matter what. He was a good novelist.

Tom Disch once said that all SF is really fantasy. Was that just Disch or is there a grain of truth in it?

I think it's a little of both. Imagining the future; that has to be fantasy, by some definitions. But some of these fantasies of the future can conform to what we think is physically possible, and that would be science fiction, by my lights. A fictional future, meaning there is a historical connection explained or implied between that future and our now, with whatever's in that future sounding physically possible. This would rule out faster-than-light travel and time travel, which are in science fiction all the time, so maybe that's what Disch meant. But you can dispense with those and have a "real" SF I think.

Disch got very angry at the SF community, as his home town that had somehow rejected him despite his

great work. Too bad. It's not the whole of his story, by any means, but part of it. I like many of his books and stories, but distrust anything he said about SF. He was too angry.

SF writers are always complaining about the state of publishing. What do you think would be the proper role of SF in a proper publishing world? Would there be genres or categories at all?

I don't know! That's a real alternative history. If there were no genres or categories, people might be more open to trying new things. That would be good. I'd love to try it. But it's not the world we have. Going forward from now, I guess I think every science fiction section in every bookstore should have a sign saying "Science Fiction—You Live Here, why not read about it?" or "Science Fiction, the Most Real Part of This Store" or something like that. Something to remind people of reality, which is that we are all stuck in a big SF novel now, and there's no escape; might as well accept it and dive in.

You are a minimalist in your long-distance Sierra treks: superlight pack, no tent floor, no poles even, no stove, just a pellet and stones. Does any of this apply to your writing? I know you cover a lot of ground....

No, in my writing I am more of a maximalist. I'll try anything, include anything; I don't think I have a method that works for everything, as the literary minimalists seemed to think.

I hike ultra-light in the Sierras because I can be just as comfortable in camp, while suffering less on trail

when I've got my house on my back. It's a version of the technological sublime. It's very high-tech, it's not a Luddite thing at all. My mountain experiences are philosophically complicated, but they feel like bliss to me, like devotion or prayer in a religion, so I do it and enjoy it, and at home like to think about it too. But I will spare you my ultra-light ultra-cool gear list and technique.

If you were to take up a trade, what would it be? If you could play music what would you play? Do you listen to music when you work?

I like working with stone and would love to be an artsy drywall mason, like Andy Goldsworthy or the more local and practical drywall stone artists in New England. I'd be good I think: it's like novel writing, the pattern work, and I like stones.

I play the trumpet and would love to play like Louis Armstrong or Clifford Brown, but good luck with that! Every trumpet player says that, but it can't be done.

I do listen to music when I work, mostly music without lyrics in English, and lots of different kinds. I pick the music to fit the mood I want for the scene I'm writing. I don't really hear it while working, but I'm sure it has an effect.

Who are your favorite poets? Who do you read for fun?

I like Gary Snyder and W.S. Merwin among living poets, also many more American poets, especially Stevens, William Bronk, Rexroth, and the whole 20th

century American tradition, also the English romantics, and the Elizabethans. I like poetry. I read it for fun, usually one poem last thing before sleeping; before that I've read a half hour or so in a novel. I'm always reading a novel, I love novels, and I try to read widely, try new writers. Non-fiction I read for work or at meals.

Your recent "Global Warming" trilogy (40 Signs of Rain; 50 Degrees Below; 60 Days and Counting) was about global warming—which leads to a deep freeze! What do you think of Obama's "green" agenda? Is it headed in the right directions?

Climate change will mostly be warming, but that will add such energy to the world system that the turbulence will lead to areas of greater cold in winter, as well as more severe storms, etc. So I followed a scenario that describes the "abrupt climate change" that the scientists have found in the historical record, that results when the Gulf Stream is shut down at its north end by too much fresh water flooding the far north Atlantic. That could happen with Greenland melting, though now they think it is lower probability than when I wrote (oh well).

I like Obama's green agenda and hope his whole team and everyone jumps on board and pushes it as hard as possible.

One thing happening is that the Republican Party in the USA has decided to fight the idea of climate change (polls and studies show the shift over the first decade of this century, in terms of the leadership turning against it and the rank and file following) which is like the Catholic Church denying the Earth went around the sun in Galileo's time; a big mistake they are

going to crawl away from later and pretend never happened. And here the damage could be worse, because we need to act now.

What's been set up and is playing out now is a Huge World Historical Battle between science and capitalism. Science is insisting more emphatically every day that this is a real and present danger. Capitalism is saying it isn't, because if it were true it would mean more government control of economies, more social justice (as a climate stabilization technique) and so on. These are the two big players in our civilization, so I say, be aware, watch the heavyweights go at it, and back science every chance you get. I speak to all fellow leftists around the world: science is now a leftism, and thank God; but capitalism is very very strong. So it's a dangerous moment. People who like their history dramatic and non-utopian should be pleased.

Have you done any audio books? What about film or TV?

I haven't read for my audio books, but several of my books are on audio books. No film or TV, though the AMC channel is in the early stages of developing *Red Mars* as a TV series. That would be nice but it's a long way from happening right now.

Where does Short Sharp Shock fit into your canon? Is it fantasy?

I think of it as my version of fantasy, what I think fantasy ought to be: strange, new imagery, a possible science fiction explanation (science fantasy is that sub-genre of science fiction set so far in the future that it

looks like fantasy, done well by Vance and Wolfe). My vision of fantasy does not seem to have been picked up on, but what can you do.

I wrote it when our first kid was born and I was not sleeping much nor writing much. I decided I would write no matter what, and it might be best to try a dream narrative. It was right before *Red Mars*, and I knew I would be spending years on a very rational, historical project, so I thought it might be good to discharge some craziness in the system before I embarked on that. I very much enjoyed working on *Short Sharp Shock* and I appreciate my publisher Bantam keeping it in print.

You wrote a wonderful book about Everest, Escape from Kathmandu. Was any of that based on personal experience? Was your prediction about Mallory and Irvine based on secret info just luck?

Yes, a lot of it was based on the trek my wife and I took in Nepal in 1985. We ran into Jimmy Carter, laughed hard every day, enjoyed our Sherpa handlers, who took care of us like pets, and loved the country and the mountains. I'd like to go back and write a book called *Return to Kathmandu*, using George and Freds again. There have been so many changes in the twenty-three years since, but I bet much is the same too. I got some calls right, about the revolutionary forces, and also about the Mallory find on the north side of Everest. That was just luck, but I could see how it would be possible.

How would you describe your politics? What was your relationship to the anti-war movement and the political currents of the 60s? Were you an activist? Are you today?

I call myself an American leftist and try to point to all the left activities in American history as a tradition of resistance, activism and successes. Indeed today I read in the paper about the election of a leftist president in El Salvador, and the chant was “The left—united—will never be defeated.” Very nice thought, especially since the divisions in and among the leftisms have been such a problem. Those are so often what Freud called “the narcissism of small differences” and that is an important concept everyone should study....

I was at UCSD during the anti-war movement, or I should say, after 1970. In the 1960s I was in Orange County in high school and it might as well have been 1953, except for the news of distant places. At UCSD things were more up-to-date, and I transitioned into anti-war sentiments as part of my group cohort feeling, and my draft number (89). I saw Marcuse and Angela Davis speak at a rally at the gym, and gathered on campus a couple times, but I was a follower. By the time I had ideas of my own the war was over.

I am only an activist today in the local politics of my town, Davis, California, where I am trying to fight a real estate development proposed by the university. It's pretty draining and uphill work. I think of my writing as an activism, and we give financial support to a lot of activist causes.

You were a student of the famed post-modernist Fredric Jameson. How has he influenced your work?

Famous Marxist Fredric Jameson, you mean. What he managed was to rearrange everyone's definition of postmodernism from a fashion or a style, to a period in the history of capital and the world. So that was quite

an accomplishment. And his persistence over the years has given a kind of lens for leftists and everyone else to understand modern history in Marxist terms. So, that has been a major influence on everyone, I think, even if for most people it is indirect.

For me it was direct. Fred is very educational in person, a great teacher, and after our time together at UCSD I kept reading him, and by reading all his work gave myself a good ground for understanding world history and our moment today. That's a great thing for a novelist to have. I've stayed in touch too and he is a good person to know, perpetually interesting.

I understand that you live in a utopian community. How does that work? Is it pre or post modern?

A little of both I guess. The model is an English village really; about eighty acres, a lot of it owned in common, so there is a "commons" and no fences except around little courtyards. There are a lot of vegetable gardens, and the landscaping is edible, meaning lots of fruits, grapes and nuts.

It's really just a tweaking of suburban design, but a really good one. Energy mattered to the designers and we burn about 40 percent the energy of an ordinary suburban neighborhood of the same size. That's still a lot, but it's an improvement. If every suburb since this one was built (1980 or so) would have followed its lead, we would have much less craziness in America; because the standard suburb is bad for sanity. But that didn't happen, so for the 1,000 people who live here it's a kind of pocket utopia. Not the solution, but a nice place to live right now, and it could suggest aspects of a long-term solution. It's been a real blessing to live here.

You gave one of the Google talks. Was that cool or what? What did you tell them?

It was a lot of fun. The Google people were great, and their free cafeteria is out of this world. They put the talk online so you can find it on YouTube. It was my first Power Point talk ever, so that was a bit clunky, but fun. It was configured as a talk to the Googlers, telling Google what it could do to fight climate change and enact utopia. I'm not sure the folks at Google.org (their charitable/activist foundation) were listening, but it was worth a try, and basically a way to frame my usual talk about what we all should do. Mostly I say, go outdoors and sit and talk to a friend: this is our primate utopia and very easy on the planet.

Your latest work, yet to be published, is about Galileo. Or about the relationship between science and politics. Or is it ambition and religion? Or work and age?

A bit of all those things, but mostly I was thinking science and history; what science is, how it has affected history, how it could in the future. And also about Galileo's actual work, which is ever so interesting. He was a great character.

What's your favorite city?

San Francisco is my favorite city, but I also like New York, London, Edinburgh, Paris, Venice, Sydney, Vancouver, and Kathmandu.

You broke into print the "usual" (old) way for SF writers—through short stories. Do you plan to go back to

short fiction? What do you think of today's dwindling story "market?"

I don't rule out going back to short fiction, but I like novels better and that's what I'm focused on; that may never stop. I think it's too bad about the dwindling market and wonder if reading habits are changing with the Internet. In a way shorter fiction should possibly benefit by the quickness of web life, but I don't know. I'm enough outside it not to be thinking about it too much.

SF used to have an agenda—the future, and in particular, space travel. Does it have an agenda today?

I don't know! I think it has to have the agenda of the future. But when the future doesn't include space travel as the obvious next step, it gets a lot more complicated. Things on Earth don't look so science fictional. And yet the whole world in a sense is in a science fiction novel that we write together. So it's all very confusing. My response is to say "just keep writing, one novel at a time" and hope for the best.

Do you think there is life on other planets? Intelligence? Do you think we will even "make contact?"

I do think there is life on other planets, and also intelligence, but what kind of intelligence I think is very mysterious, and making contact will be a serious problem, maybe too much a problem to ever really happen, partly because of the size of the universe (bigger than we think) and also the potentially inexplicable nature of alien intelligence, so that we won't be able to

communicate with it (the *Solaris* problem, after Lem's great novel).

How come there is no space travel in Years of Rice and Salt? Do you think space travel is a Eurocentric enterprise?

No, I think any technological civilization would think about space travel, because of the moon, and the simplicity of rockets, and so on. I didn't have it in *Years of Rice and Salt* partly by accidental omission, partly because that book only takes history about seventy years past us; and I think without Percival Lowell, we might not have gotten to the moon yet, and might not for another century or so. That was a freak event, with a genealogy that runs from Lowell's fantasia to the novels of Lasswitz/Bogdanov/Wells to the German Rocket Society to von Braun to WWII to NASA. Without all those elements, including Lowell's hallucinations about Mars, we might still not have gotten to the moon. So, in my alternative history, I thought it was okay to leave it out. It would have only gotten a sentence or two anyway if I had thought of it.