

SAVING THE WORLD THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

FRANK LUDLOW TALKS TO JAMES GUNN

James Gunn needs little introduction. He is the author of many novels, including **The Joy Makers**, **The Immortals**, **The Listeners**, **The Millennium Blues**, **Kampus** and **The Dreamers**, and has edited many anthologies and non-fiction books, including the seminal **The Road to Science Fiction** series. He has served as the president of the Science Fiction Writers of America and the Science Fiction Research Association. He has won Hugo, Pilgrim, and Eaton awards and has been a professor at the University of Kansas for 40 years. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Tell us how you became involved in SF.

There's a long answer in my autobiographical essays in **Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series #2** and **Contemporary Authors 199**. The short answer I give by dates:

1929: I discovered a treasure trove of *Tarzan* novels in my grandmother's back closet.

1933: My father brought home the first of a series of hero-pulp magazines, beginning with *Doc Savage*.

1934: I discovered science fiction magazines in a used magazine store called "Andy's" in downtown Kansas City and began trading my hero-pulp magazines, two for one.

1939: I discovered the first issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*,

reprinting stories from the old Munsey pulps, on the news stand.

1945: I renewed my interest in the SF magazines when a copy of *Astounding* arrived on Truk island; the addressee had already gone home.

1948: When my proposed radio series on Kansas City history didn't get any responses, I wrote my first story, 'Paradox', and on the third try, Sam Merwin, Jr. bought it for \$80, and I was hooked.

1955: My first two novels were published, **This Fortress World** and **Star Bridge** (with Jack Williamson).

1969: Gordy Dickson persuaded me to be a candidate for SFWA president.

1972: I was persuaded to run for the presidency of SFRA; **The Listeners** was published.

1975: **Alternate Worlds** was published; three years later the first volume of **The Road to Science Fiction**.

The rest is simply filling in the blanks, including the Pilgrim Award of SFWA in 1976 and the Damon Knight Grand Master Award in 2007.

Your association with SF has spanned more than half a century, which must give you an almost unique perspective on how the genre has developed.

As I wrote in the last chapter of **Alternate Worlds**, SF and the mainstream are likely to merge in

the middle - and that has happened, with many mainstream authors tackling science fiction topics, and many SF writers working in the mainstream - with a recognizable SF center. The magazines have lost subscribers and influence, and the book market has gained big numbers and greater influence; but the influence of the book market is dispersed so that it is only temporarily effective. Film and television have popularized the genre but generally at a lowest-common-denominator level, and in the process confused the essential nature of SF in the public mind. Fantasy, once the stepsister of SF, has risen out of the ashes to become the dominant member of the family; it's good that young people are reading, but I think the forward-looking SF is a much more effective influence on all of us. My motto has become "let's save the world through science fiction", which is marginally credible. Try "let's save the world through fantasy", as an alternative.

Considering the developments you have highlighted, with many SF tropes now becoming a reality, do you think SF is losing the ability to provoke a sense of wonder?

One of the dangers of increasing command of literary effects is to focus on surfaces and ignore the substance below. That happens, even in the best of short SF and

some novels. My aim, and what I like best, is to take what is good about SF - its concepts, its scope, its concerns - and write it better.

Do you think "speculative fiction" has much utility, or validity, as a unifying term for science fiction and fantasy, and indeed horror?

Speculative fiction is more commonly used as an alternative to science fiction. I prefer to stick to the traditional terms, even though they may not always be descriptive. But there are so many kinds of science fiction and fantasy, as well as horror, that no single term is going to be able to describe them all. If we're going to discuss them we need to specify what we're discussing.

You place fantasy in the same family as science fiction, but some would argue that SF and fantasy are very separate entities.

Fantasy and science fiction share the same initial premise: the world in which they are located is not our world of everyday reality. They differ in the laws that operate in those worlds: fantasy operates with laws that are not consistent with our world; science fiction does. As a consequence, fantasy asks the

...fantasy allows us to escape our world; science fiction forces an engagement with it.

reader to suspend disbelief; science fiction gives the reader reasons for doing so. Fantasy asks us to read credulously; science fiction asks us to read sceptically, to ask hard questions that illuminate the narrative, questions that would destroy our ability to read fantasy. Each genre has its role to play in our imagination, and I have enjoyed (and written) both, but if I had to choose whether I'd like people, particularly children, to read either, I'd choose science fiction - fantasy helps us understand our inner selves but science fiction moves its readers toward creating a better world. At its extremes, fantasy

allows us to escape our world; science fiction forces an engagement with it.

Do you think it is fair to say that much critical writing on fantasy is still preoccupied with discussing why fantasy is a legitimate genre to discuss critically?

I don't read much fantasy criticism, nor much SF criticism either. I think both have moved beyond the self-justification stage, however. Much criticism in the academic journals tends to be post-modern, however, and my approach is more reader-response modified by author responsibility for providing instructions on how to read the work and the belief that there is a 'best' reading. What I have tried to do in my writing about SF is to investigate my own response and try to analyze how it might work for other readers.

Could you elaborate on what you mean by 'best' reading?

In reader-response criticism, all readings are considered equal. I modify that by the belief that some readings are better than others - that is, the text offers

evidence for meaning, and good reading - which is what literature courses actually teach - results in the best reading, i.e., the reading that is best supported by the text and, from the most artful writers, the meaning the author intends. I am interested in how readers respond to texts, which is how I came to SF criticism, but I also am interested in how authors can control that response.

I guess that you are not a believer in the notion of 'the death of the author', where the author of a

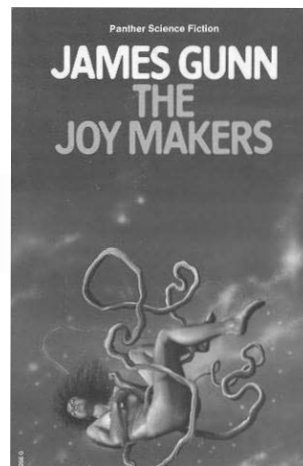
work is seen as having no real control over the response of prospective readers?

I think the author's control is in the text. Of course reader-response criticism suggests that once the text has left the author's hands, it is subject to whatever interpretation a reader chooses to make, but I think it is the author's responsibility to control the response by the care with which he/she writes the text. Of course, not all readers are equally skilful in reading and following the authorial 'instructions' embedded in the text, and that's where teaching comes in.

To what ends might a writer of SF attempt to control reader response?

SF is more didactic than other genres. Because it deals with alternative states of affairs, it implies comparisons, and the effective author attempts to bring the reader to the conclusion he writes the story to embody. Even science fiction is stories about 'interesting people in difficulties' and the story must appeal at the level of all fiction, so having that lead to a particular state of mind represents a blending of effects whose final success is a measure of the artistry of the author, but it also means that the didactic part emerges from the whole and that takes skill to achieve both on the part of the

author and the reader. In science fiction it also means that new reading protocols must be learned, since in SF the background (the nature of the alternative world) becomes foreground and the keys to that world must be ferreted out by the experienced reader. See my close reading of Phil Farmer's 'Sail On! Sail On!' in **Reading Science Fiction**.



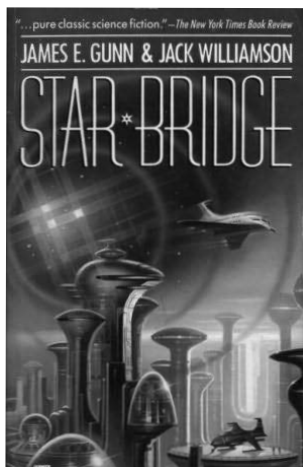
After reading your chapter, 'Reading Science Fiction as Science Fiction', a student of mine suggested the speculative science articles in magazines like *New Scientist*, might be better than SF at promoting an awareness of how technological advance might impact society.

I don't personally read *New Scientist*, *American Scientist*, or *Scientific American*. I used to read the last, but found my interest waning and stopped subscribing 25-30 years ago. I do read *Discover*, which is more my level of scientific understanding, and I find a good deal of material there. I also find a lot of good ideas in the Science and Health sections of the *New York Times*, and even in *Time* magazine. I used to belong to the Science Book Club and got some good material there, including Walter Sullivan's **We Are Not Alone**, which started me on **The Listeners**. So I agree with your student that the science magazines have good material for people who want to know where science and technology are taking us. What SF has to offer, however, is to create scenarios in which scientific and technological change impact upon human lives, to make them seem more real and immediate, and to accustom us to the concept of change and the realization that we can do something about it.

Speaking of Reading Science Fiction, can you tell us about how it came about? As a classroom text it's valuable in introducing complex topics without indulging in the technical or literary jargon that sometimes plague such discussion.

I was e-mailing Michael Kandel about a book proposal (a new

edition of **Alternate Worlds**, I think) and he suggested that the Modern Language Association was looking for someone to edit a book in their "teaching" series - in this case **Teaching Science Fiction**, and Kandel suggested teaming up with Marleen Barr, whom I knew and who had attended my summer Institute. I co-opted a graduate student, Matthew Candelaria, to help out (he was a lot of help), and we presented a proposal to MLA. After a couple of years of modifying the proposal to the editorial board's recommendations, the book got turned down, and Marleen looked elsewhere, finally finding a receptive home at the UK's Macmillan Palgrave. At Palgrave's



contributors, particularly the scholars, is that they avoid academic jargon. On the whole, I thought it came together well; it also convinced me that editing my fellow scholars is even more difficult than editing my fellow writers. Never again :-).

Could you give us a brief example of how a reader might misread a work of SF?

I offer several examples of misreading in my essay 'Reading Science Fiction as Science Fiction' (in **Reading Science Fiction**), related to applying the wrong protocols, as when the inveterate murder mystery reader dragged by his wife on a Caribbean vacation in James Thurber's 'The Macbeth Murder Case' can find only a volume of Shakespeare's plays to read and applies murder mystery protocols to **Macbeth**. When we apply science

fiction protocols to reading **Alice in Wonderland**, for instance, we ask hard questions and the text gives us the wrong answers. Even more likely, when we read a hard SF text like an adventure story, Hal Clement's **Mission of Gravity**, for instance, we fail to appreciate the way in which the crushing gravity affects everything the Mesklinites do, including their psychology.

Is it unusual that you became interested in writing SF and writing about SF relatively close together and quite early on in your career?

SF writers who have written about SF as well are not uncommon, a number of them distinguished reviewers such as A.J. Budrys,

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suggestion, we decided to aim the book at readers, to make it more helpful in the classroom. One of my requests to the

Norman Spinrad, Lester del Rey (who also wrote a book about SF), and, in particular, Damon Knight and James Blish. And many more have written about SF, including Fred Pohl, Samuel R. Delany, Barry Malzberg, Brian Aldiss, and Tom Disch. I'm probably overlooking a lot. There may be something about SF that encourages writers to inspect it critically. And even something that encourages people who write about SF to attempt it themselves, like John Clute and Tom Shippey. But I suppose that I am unique in dividing my time equally between the two, symbolized maybe by my having served as president of both SFRA and SFWA. And winning a Pilgrim Award from SFRA and a Grand Master Award from SFWA (Damon Knight also got both of these).

Do you get more satisfaction from writing fiction or non-fiction?

Writing non-fiction is easier. You don't have to make it up. Maybe because fiction is harder and is more closely related to the self,

doing it well is more satisfying. But the struggle to do it well is frustrating. Making the realization closer to the vision is one of the most difficult tasks in life. So, the answer may be that the act of writing non-fiction is less frustrating and more satisfying but the accomplishment of fiction done well is more satisfying.

You've collaborated both in fiction and non-fiction. How does it differ between fiction and non-fiction?

I'm not much of a collaborator, only once (with Jack Williamson early in

a good omen, because he became a friend for life. His wife had a sister who lived in Kansas City, and they used to visit her once or twice a year. I was freelancing in K.C. then and we'd get together. Shortly after we met, Jack told me he had encountered a writing block on several novels and would I like to help him with one. That was an unusual vote of confidence, since I hadn't written a novel yet (I had a contract for one) and had only half a dozen stories published. I agreed, and he sent me about 50 pages of the opening scenes and

accepted), and, of course, a couple of Ted's scripts, such as 'Amok Time', were classics. I've never wanted to write in anybody else's universe, but John Ordovery told me the Sturgeon heirs would get part of the royalties. I wrote it in a couple of months (and got a bigger advance than for any novel of my own!) and had some fun by playing with the concepts of the *Star Trek* universe, like the transporter, and fortunately nobody seemed to care. Ted's

scenario was only about 15 pages and limited, and what might have been appropriate for an hour show would have been less satisfying at novel length. I kept the characters, the title, and the situation but changed a lot more, including the ending. So there was some satisfaction in doing something creative

within the confines of the concept and trying to bring some sense of the original to the formula.

You wrote a foreword for volume 4 of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*. Why this volume, and did you know Ted well?

Ted was one of the three writers (the other two were Gordon Dickson and Fred Pohl) I invited to be guest writers at the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction, and he came every summer until his death. I had met him several times before, when I visited him during my visit to New York in the fall of 1952 (he had been asked by Horace Gold to cut my novella 'Breaking Point', but it eventually appeared in Lester del Rey's *Space Science Fiction*) and in conventions after that. But the summer programs were the closest, and I think Ted felt that this was a good time in his life, too. Noel Sturgeon, Ted's daughter and literary executor, liked the afterword

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my career) and with Matthew Candelaria and Marleen Barr on editing projects late in my career. And a special case of turning a *Star Trek* scenario by Ted Sturgeon into a *Star Trek* novel. In both cases, I took material the writer had done and turned it into a novel. But generally I found that it took as much time to collaborate as to do it on my own and got me only half the income. In the editing case, it was a way of getting projects done that I probably wouldn't have tackled on my own.

Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction was a project I had in a more limited form since I had put the materials together for a seminar I taught in my last years before retirement, and Matthew helped me put it together and do the heavy lifting. I wouldn't have attempted **Reading Science Fiction** as a solo project, and both Marleen and Matthew brought their special insights and extraordinary efforts to make it work.

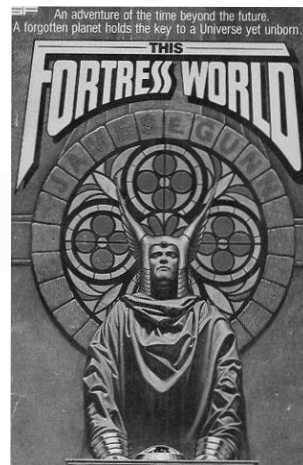
Tell us about how the collaboration with Jack Williamson came about?

I met Jack Williamson at the World Science Fiction Convention of 1952 in Chicago. He was standing behind me in the registration line. That was

150 pages of notes. I outlined the novel and Jack approved it. I wrote it in three months and Jack approved it. It was published by Gnome Press and we got \$250 each (not exactly a living wage), but it has remained in print somewhere in the world since, and many readers have told me how much it affected them - and some writers, like Ed Bryant, have said it turned them into science fiction writers.

With the *Star Trek* novel and your expansion of Sturgeon's scenario, did you find the experience of working within a pre-existing universe, and on someone else's scenario, confining?

Paramount and the *Star Trek* people are very careful of their property, and when I wrote the novel a *Star Trek* version was still on the air. So everything had to get their approval. But I was fortunate in that the Pocket Book editor was a former student and he had persuaded me to write the novel after the Sturgeon scenario was discovered among Ted's papers (it had been proposed for the original series but never



I wrote to **The Joy Machine** and asked if it could be used as the foreword for the fourth volume of the Complete Sturgeon.

There is a sense in which some authors look down upon others working on so-called 'media tie-ins'. Do you think this is justified?

I do think that writing tie-ins is not the same thing as an original creation. It is more like journalism - not to be despised and something that can be done well or poorly, but not the same as something that only the writer can write, which I tell my fiction-writing students is the only fiction worth writing. Doing tie-ins may be a source of income and even, maybe, a career move, but it's not what I want to spend my time on.

A concern with the directions in which humanity might be headed in the future seems implicit in your work, and explicit in your belief in the value of SF.

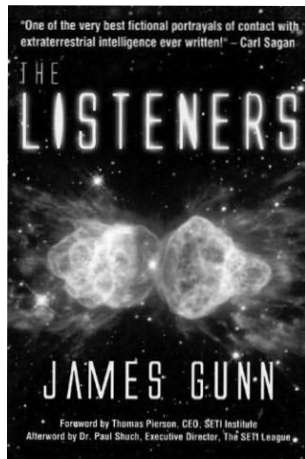
I've always felt passionate about SF. Maybe because of my early imprinting and maybe because the nature of SF is commitment to doing existence better, and I've seen the same dedication in other SF writers and readers and a few editors. It's only gotten deeper as I've gotten older. SF has a soap box in its kit bag and a missionary at hand. That's what makes critics consider it (mistakenly) something less than literature.

Do you enjoy teaching?

I think I've always enjoyed teaching, which I view as a counterbalance to writing. Writing is a solitary activity; teaching is a communal one, and when one gets tiresome the other offers a release.

Was it ever a possibility that you would pursue a career outside SF?

When I was in charge of University Relations, I didn't write much of anything for half a dozen years. It was an engrossing and fulfilling responsibility. At one point I was going to interview for a position with the newly appointed head of the New York state university system, but I got sick and didn't go to the conference where it was to take place. Who knows what might have happened if I had been offered a



broader venue. I also was invited to accompany the KU Chancellor when he moved to UCLA. I might have gotten into writing for film! But on the whole it has worked out well.

In Ireland and the UK, universities have downgraded the importance of teaching, scrambling for higher rankings through publication on university ranking systems. The students notice their lecturers aren't that interested in teaching them. Have you noticed any such trend in the US?

At the so-called 'research universities', research and teaching have always been in a curious relationship: on one hand the universities maintain that professors involved in cutting-edge research are the best teachers, and, on the other, top researchers are often partially (or sometimes totally) relieved from classroom teaching - while maintaining, they claim, the teaching of graduate students about research methods and resources. So this tension exists - but only at the top; a great proportion of teaching gets done at community

colleges, undergraduate colleges (both public and private), and by graduate students (many of whom are quite good and dedicated) and junior faculty.

You teach not only SF, but also how to teach SF.

I teach a two-week intensive workshop in writing SF followed by a two-week intensive class in the literature of SF (not teaching SF itself - the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction was founded to provide a basic instruction in the literature, which at that time - 1974 - teachers lacked),

I've always felt passionate about SF.

and I must admit that the class is more relaxing than the workshop, even though the class meets for three hours every day for 12 days straight. But I have the substance of the class down pretty well after all these years and the workshop requires constant adjustments to new stories and the nourishment of writers' attitudes and psyches. The workshop is more of a full-time two weeks; the class can be contained pretty much within the three hours a day. Of course these days I have an assistant or two to take the extra-curricular work and entertainment off my hands!

Has it been a struggle to establish SF as a topic for teaching in universities?

Not for me. Other teachers had to fight to get a science fiction class, but when I asked the Department if it would like to have me teach full-time (after my dozen years in public relations teaching one class a year), the chair replied that the vote had been unanimous 'and some younger members of the department wondered if you'd be willing to teach a course in science fiction'. I taught at least one class in SF every year, sometimes two, and a couple of seminars, as well as my summer

program, which still continues. I've probably taught more SF classes than anybody.

You mentioned earlier that you investigate your own response to a work of SF and then try and analyze how it might work for other readers. How do you approach this?

I guess I accept my response as typical, both my earliest untutored response to narrative (Edgar Rice Burroughs and A. Merritt) and my more experienced responses to

his/her story. The problem is determining what kind of reader the work is going to be read by - an inexperienced reader or a sophisticated reader (I try to solve this in my own writing by an involving narrative supported by other layers of image and symbol that a sophisticated reader will note and appreciate, and even the unsophisticated reader may sense as depth and substance while not being aware of what it consists of). But the diction and the

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sophisticated fiction (Bob Silverberg, Barry Malzberg, Gene Wolfe). Because I'm able to enjoy both - I'm still in touch with my inner child :-) - I hope I'm able to analyze both. I like to develop my own pragmatic theory rather than trying to fit stories into some more abstract theory.

How do you go about teaching a reader to attain a best reading?

The best reading is obtained by careful reading and paying attention to the clues the author has placed in the reader's way. This assumes the author knows what he/she is doing, including only what should be included and leaving out everything else. This is no different from the New Criticism. See my close reading of 'Sail On! Sail On!'. I think one teaches this by showing students how stories respond to this kind of reading - that is, doing what all teachers do which is how to be more like me :-).

How might an author consciously direct a reader towards a particular reading of their work, without making these directions too blatant.

The author has to be aware of what the reader will be reading and include the material that best tells

complexity of the narrative will self-select the reader, and it also provides a kind of instruction on how the narrative is to be read. The art of writing is largely a matter of controlling reader expectations.

Are there any risks associated with readers becoming too engrossed in attempting to decode an author's intended reading?

One of the things a writer gives up is the ability to read like a reader - although this can be regained by a conscious effort sometimes. The same thing applies to a sophisticated reader, but the pleasures of sophisticated reading are equal to or even superior to the pleasures of naive reading. I don't think anyone should have to struggle with a narrative. Learn how to read better so that the struggle becomes a satisfying experience.

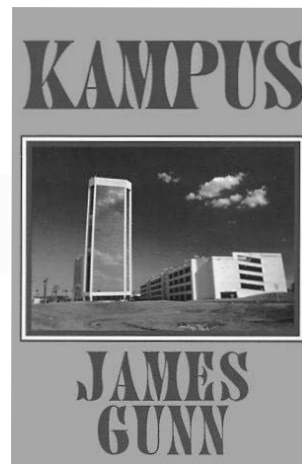
Have your views met with much opposition?

I don't think my ideas about SF have the necessary currency to stir up opposition. I've always viewed my critical approach as a consensus of long-time SF readers and **Alternate**

Worlds a consensus history. Opposition, as such, is more toward traditional views by post-modern critics and more literarily inclined scholars.

What advice would you give to someone beginning to write SF, or intending to teach SF?

For writers I would recommend reading broadly in the field and becoming aware of the history and traditions, and then writing a lot and revising it with a goal in mind. I'm reminded that Brad Denton, who had earned an M.A. here deciding that he needed to take my course in SF to have a good background for writing it. I guess I'd recommend the same



thing for teachers - read broadly in the genre and in the traditions, read the magazines, read the iconic texts (see my 'Basic Science Fiction Library'), and the iconic histories and books of theory.

Who or what are you reading these days?

I look through the three major SF magazines (don't read much), glance at the SyFy (ugh!) website daily, read *Locus* and check the website, read an occasional novel (not much these days), glance through the major journals (*Extrapolation*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Foundation*, and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*) but mostly read reviews, and read the on-line versions of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and a couple of daily newspapers, *Discover*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, and a bridge magazine.

What technology do you think has made the biggest impact on society in your lifetime?

The computer. No doubt.

What technology do you think will make the biggest impact in the coming decades?

Probably something to do with biology and genetics, though artificial intelligence may continue to make advances and thermonuclear energy might make a significant breakthrough.

Do you think we are now living in a SF age?

We're living in a science fiction world, as Isaac Asimov said a quarter century ago. You can catch that - and other comments about science fiction from the Lecture Film series I put together in the '70s.

SF has notoriously failed to predict the importance or existence of certain technologies, such as the Internet.

SF isn't in the business of prediction but of creating scenarios about possible changes impacting upon the human condition. Among those scenarios there have been some about the impact of new technologies such as the Internet, but most writers depend upon the events around them and the speculations of their technological and scientific peers. We have no special insights, just an interest in projecting contemporary events into a plausible future.

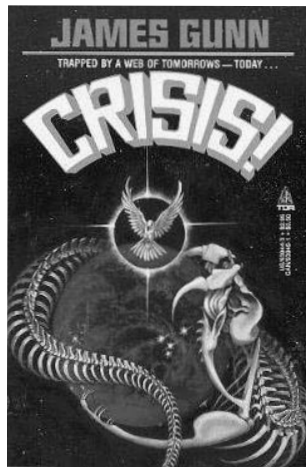
Of all your work, either fiction or non-fiction, do you have any clear favourites?

All books are favourites when you are working on them, but in the aftermath some books are more satisfying, sometimes because they tackle more fundamental issues, sometimes because they come out better than you hoped. My own

preferences tend to group themselves by their position in my writing career: **The Joy Makers** and **The Immortals** in the early period, **The Listeners** and **Kampus** in the middle, and **The Dreamers** and **The Millennium Blues** in the late period. Among the non-fiction books, **Alternate Worlds** turned into a coffee-table illustrated book and **The Road to Science Fiction** came out better than I envisioned when I started.

Are there any regrets regarding any particular past work?

The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction was the most frustrating. It was done through a book packager and I hesitated about doing it, because the work was more organization than creative and I didn't have control over the final product. I agreed to do it because I thought the British **Science Fiction Encyclopedia** hadn't done a complete job of reflecting American SF and I thought I could enlist a lot of US writers and



scholars. But I was handicapped first by a limitation on the number of pages (which was cut by nearly 100 pages at the end) and a few publishing dictates. I wanted to have a single comprehensive article about SF film, for instance, and the publisher wanted individual articles that used up a lot of space. So the final product, although it had many virtues, was not what I would have done given a free hand, and I spent far too much creative time on it.

I have to ask about The Road to Science Fiction because of the sheer volume of material covered. What brought you to attempt it?

I got a telephone call one day from Barry Lippman, the editor of Mentor Books, saying how much he liked **Alternate Worlds** and asked if I had any book in mind that I could do for Mentor. I first proposed a book on science-fiction theory (somewhat like my recent **Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction**), but the editorial board turned it down. So I proposed an anthology organized historically, did the first volume, which came out better than I had hoped and sold well, so I proposed a second and third volume. I changed editors about then (I had four or five different editors on the project) and was told I could do a second volume and they'd see how it did. It sold well, and I got a contract to do the third volume. I finally proposed a fourth volume focused on the literary aspect of SF rather than the genre evolution. That was not as well received as volume 3 (covering 1940 to about 1980) and when I proposed two additional volumes to Mentor, one featuring British SF, the other international SF, the editor looked at the sales figures and found the first four weren't selling

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the 5,000 copies a year required for the mass paperback format and decided not to reprint in trade paperback, which only required 1,000. But about that time my German publisher Heyne (actually the editor, Wolfgang Jeschke) asked me if I had any more volumes in mind and contracted for 5 and 6 (though 6 was never published by Heyne). Meanwhile White Wolf had agreed to reprint the first four volumes (and never got around to 1 and 2) and then 5 and 6. Then White Wolf decided to let them go rather than reprint, although volumes 3 and 4 were going well, the publisher reported. About that time Scarecrow Press, which had agreed to reprint my Asimov book, agreed to reprint the Road series. So, it's been a

remarkable ride down the Road. But I must admit getting all the permissions and doing the proof-reading was the dull and unrewarding part, and I wouldn't do that again. But it's been reprinted in a number of foreign countries, including China. And I think that's a plus.

The Immortals was one of the books that got me interested in SF. It's somewhat unusual in being gathered together as a sort of episodic novel. Did you have any concern that the stories wouldn't work together well as a novel? What brought you to the central theme of the novel, immortality?

When I spent three months each writing my first two novels, **This Fortress World** and **Star Bridge**, and made a total of \$750, I decided that I needed to sell my stories to the magazines first and then bring them together as books. So I began to write my novels like that (the only two exceptions after the first two have been **Kampus** and **The Millennium Blues**). I got the idea

wrote 'New Blood' for *Astounding*, but John Campbell wasn't interested in 'Donor', which went to *Startling Stories*, I think, and was scheduled for the issue that didn't appear. I resold it to *Fantastic*, I think. 'Medic' made its way down to Bob Mills' magazine *Venture SF* (as 'Not So Great an Enemy') and the final short novel, 'The Immortals', went to Fred Pohl's **Star Science Fiction**. Bantam published the novel, and a young screen writer named Bob Specht (who told me he knew it would make a great film when he picked it up from among the books sent to the west Bantam office, where he was working) and a producer took an option on the film and TV rights. After a couple of years, the producer dropped out but Specht had gotten some interest from Paramount because ABC-TV had just started its 'movie of the week' project. *The Immortal* was the second film shown, did well in the Nielsen's, and became a TV series for 1970-71. I've written elsewhere about my experience with that project. But the interesting

Hopefully we'll see a proper big screen treatment of The Immortals soon! What did you think of the TV version of The Immortals?

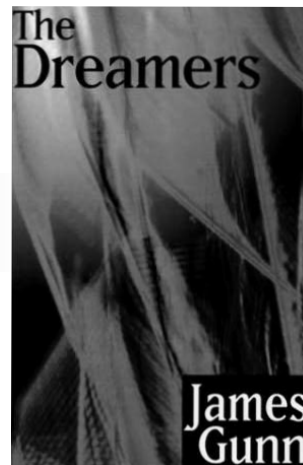
In **The Immortals**, my immortal man is a drifter who sells a pint of his blood in the first scene and doesn't appear again until the final scene (except for a couple of fleeting glimpses in Part Two), but he's a pragmatist who understands that his job is to sow his seed as broadly as possible to provide a evolutionary upgrade for the human species, and that powerful old people would destroy him in trying to make use of him. In *The Immortal*, the immortal man is a sympathetic test-car driver whose pursuit is the focus of the story and keeps making the same mistakes. So it wasn't really my story. Clearly it was the Hollywood interpretation of the film potential that brought it to the TV screen (in spite of my efforts, perhaps naïve, to

do something different), so I can't regret it. I would have liked something that explored the issues of life and death and their impact on society and the potential of immortality, and I did have a luncheon meeting with the producer of the TV series that touched upon these ideas, but the motto of the

...Bob Specht told me once, is "you can't care or Hollywood will tear you apart."

for **The Immortals** when I was doing some research in the **Encyclopedia Britannica** about immortality and discovered one theory that we age because our circulatory system is inefficient and our cells don't get adequate nourishment or their waste by-products removed, and I wondered what would happen if someone were born with a better circulatory system. The key speculation was that the change might be in the blood proteins like the gamma globulins, which confer a temporary immunity (as for pregnant women against German measles) for 30-45 days. Maybe the Immortal's immortality might reside in the gamma globulins that would confer a temporary rejuvenation or temporary immunity to death. I

aftermath was that Paramount bought only the television rights, not the feature film rights, and for the past dozen years one producer after another has taken an option on the feature film rights. And in the process my agent sold the reprint rights for the novel to Pocket Books, whose editor wanted a longer book. So, in response to one of the comments by a producer (that he saw it as 'the doctor's story', which I agreed with), I wrote a new middle novelette about the doctor's development of the 'elixir vitae', which I called 'Elixir' and (in keeping with my long practice - 'sell it twice') published in *Analogue*, where 'New Blood' had been published almost 50 years before.



Hollywood screenwriter, as Bob Specht told me once, is "you can't care or Hollywood will tear you apart." But I have continued to hope that a possible feature film might deal with something deeper than a chase story, and one of the Hollywood executives gave me hope (before the option was not renewed) that he understood the underlying issues when he said he "saw it as the doctor's story."

Has anything else been optioned?

I've had a number of novels and stories optioned over the years: 'The Reluctant Witch', 'Child of the Sun', **The Listeners**, **The Joy Makers**, **Star Bridge**. 'Feeding Time' and 'Kindergarten' have gotten some small filmmaker interest, and I've always thought **Crisis!**, **The Magicians**, and **Kampus** would make great films or TV series. I've had occasional inquiries that haven't materialized, but as Vonda McIntyre once said, "the typical Hollywood response is hysterical enthusiasm followed by total silence!"

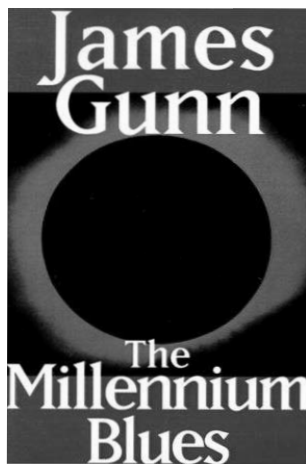
How did you get along with the editors of the houses that published your novels?

I always got along well with my editors, until they left. My experience has been that an editor will think your work is great and then they leave or retire. I've had books published by most of the major publishers of SF, usually three or four books before the editor moves on. My first contract, with Abelard Schuman, resulted in a copy-edited ms. that I wouldn't approve - now I wouldn't have been so uppity, but I was young and inexperienced. It would have been better to have been published there than by Gnome Press, probably. And my experience with **The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**, already described, had some frustrations. Harper & Row, which originally had **The Dreamers**, gave me some trouble, and I took the book back and sold it to Pocket Books. Generally, though, editors took what I wrote and published it pretty much as I wrote it, which may not be the universal experience.

Do you read reviews of your work, and have you ever responded to an unfavourable review?

I read reviews when I get them, love the good ones and hate the bad ones, particularly those that don't seem to have any insight into what I was trying to do or pick on minor matters. But I never respond. If a writer has to explain a book, he/she hasn't done a good job writing it or the reviewer hasn't done a good job reading it. Either way the writer can't win. I've had a good number of bad reviews, beginning with my first novel **This Fortress World**. I met Damon Knight in 1955, I think, at the World Convention. We were sitting in the bar and I asked him if he had reviewed it (he was publishing a lot of reviews in fanzines that were collected in **In Search of Wonder** - you can still read it there!) and he said he'd trashed it. I said, "I thought you'd notice the symbolism," and he

replied that "you don't look for symbolism in something that bad." So I got an early inoculation against



Jim Baen to reprint it again.

Given your 'sell it twice' policy and your use of short stories for later novels, you must have an interesting perspective on the relative merits of the shorter forms vs. the novel?

I've always felt that science fiction's ideal form was the novelette (see my introduction to **Some Dreams Are Nightmares** for the long rationale), which offers room for the creation of an alternate world but doesn't demand, by its length (like the novel), a solution for it. The endemic problem for the 'serious'SF novel is that it focuses on basic human problems (like overpopulation, pollution, war,

global warming, etc.) for which there are no satisfactory solutions. A typical SF novel starts at a high level of tension from which there is no direction but down. My typical example is Michael Crichton's **The Andromeda Strain**, for which the appropriate ending is that of all human existence, but instead at the end the virus mutates into a harmless form. Of course the model for that is Wells's **War of the Worlds**, in which the Martians are defeated by human bacteria against which they have no resistance, but in this case Wells did prepare the reader for that outcome and provides some rationale for it. Another example is John Brunner's great SF novel **Stand on Zanzibar**, which can't provide an escape from the peril of overpopulation but at the end finds a way to live with it for a few more years.

This isn't to say there haven't been other great SF novels, just that there have been many

If a writer has to explain a book, he/she hasn't done a good job writing it...

bad reviews. But the novel kept getting reprinted, and David Drake once told me it turned him on to SF writing and tried to get

more (and substantially many more) great SF novelettes. The short forms have been neglected in the victory of the novel, which has the reader attraction of a more substantial, lived-in world and more fully developed characters and the opportunity to develop a fan following, as well as greater financial rewards to the author. The book won out over the magazine in the 1960s and since, but maybe the short form will make a resurgence on the Internet, where the shorter attention-span may discourage the reading of novels.

Do you think the printed book is ultimately destined for extinction?

I'm of two minds about the future of the printed book: I recognize the technological forces toward digitizing all information but I also cherish the feel and smell and look of a printed text. Somehow I don't

think that change occurs in a total way. As I remarked about the interpenetration of science fiction and the mainstream, I think we will have both - digital access and print - for the foreseeable future.

When you first began to read SF, was there any stigma attached?

When I began reading SF I didn't know any other SF readers and I didn't meet anybody until I went to my first science-fiction convention in 1952 (the Worldcon in Chicago). I don't remember talking about SF to anybody. I'm sure I discussed the hero pulp stories with my father and brother, who were reading *Doc Savage* and *The Shadow* and all the rest, but not the SF. I listened to my Uncle John and Uncle Harold talking about the great poets (mostly Byron, Keats, and Shelley) and I probably knew they wouldn't have anything to say about SF except maybe to express ignorance (even though some of them, or my father, had bought the *Tarzan* books I found in

...SF is speculative, religion is contemplative.

my grandmother's back closet). By the time I got to college, I knew SF wasn't considered legitimate literature. My graduate advisor was broad-minded enough to allow me to write my thesis about SF (and I got the first 20,000 words - 'The Philosophy of Science Fiction' - published in a pulp SF magazine), but another member of the faculty told me that SF was "at best sub-literary." Nevertheless that stigma, which persisted elsewhere, was not in evidence here when I returned to full-time teaching in 1970. In fact, as I have recounted already, the chair of the English Department said that "Some of the younger members of the Department hope you will teach a course in science fiction." The Department also supported whatever teaching of SF I wanted to do and asked me to teach a couple of seminars, whenever I was eligible I got a sabbatical leave to work on a

science-fiction writing project, and the Board of Regents approved the creation of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction.

In your entry on 'Religion' in the New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, you state that science fiction's relationship with religion has always been uneasy. Why do you think so many SF writers have been seen as openly hostile to organized religion?

As you will note from my introduction to volume one of *The Road to Science Fiction*, religion answers the questions that science fiction wants to ask: where did we come from, why are we here, and how is it going to end? If all those questions are settled, there is nothing much left for SF to consider. Moreover, SF is speculative, religion is contemplative. And SF is open and religion is closed. That's why SF written from the perspective

of an established religion (as opposed, say, to a spiritual sense) tends to be apologetics or a restatement of religious doctrine, like C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* trilogy. And, possibly, there is some psychological reaction to parental control. In the case of some authors, there may be some active dislike for the restrictions they think religion places on independent thought and its conservative disapproval of change. And yet there are some SF authors who include their religious upbringing in their fiction.

Do you think there's any truth to the notion that science has replaced religion, or actually become a religion for some?

Some people may exhibit the same

kind of faith in science that others place in religion, and some may exhibit the same kind of commitment to the creed of science and the possibility it holds out for a better world. But most of its 'believers' also recognize the falsifiability of science's hypotheses, which is the essential difference. I have suggested to some of my writing students that they write a story based on a person who has the same kind of selling ability for science that evangelistic preachers have for religion.

Are you tempted to try that story yourself? Have the students produced anything interesting?

I did make a one-page beginning but got involved in my current novel-in-progress and haven't followed it up. One of my mature workshopppers did a remarkably good story after working at it for two years and now is revising after some summer feedback.

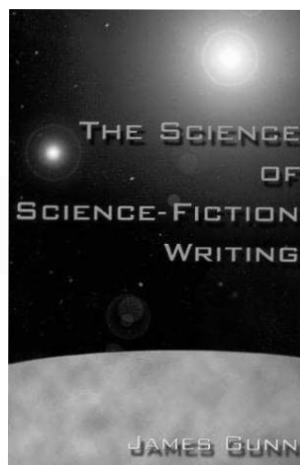
Where do you see organized religions heading in the future?

I don't see any signs that religion is fading away, at least here in the US. But I think I'd

like to see the religious impulse, if there is one, evolve into something more general, more generous, more forgiving, and more accepting of change.

What events or experiences in your life do you feel have had the most influence on anything you've subsequently written?

I've always written a lot about personal experiences and familiar locales, but the novel that came mostly out of events was *Kampus*, which reflected my experiences as a director of university relations during the campus unrest of the late 1960s.



Tell us more about that.

I was in the middle of the campus unrest, as the person in charge of public relations for the University of Kansas, and my older son and his best friend were students here then. I had a lot of exposure to student protesters, so when I began to use my vacation time once more, toward the end of the '60s, and got back to writing, one of the novels I was inspired to write was about the students and the world they wanted to live in. **Kampus** captured that and drew on my knowledge of the campus, the students, and the issues, as well as my own reactions to it. In some ways it is modelled after **Candide**, but it also has elements from other literature sources as well as contemporary commentary. And my son and his friend kept me from falsifying anything about student attitudes.

Do you put much of yourself in your characters?

A writer can't write anything, including characters, that don't come out of himself/herself. I'm probably more subject to that than many writers. Every character is a version of me. That may be why there are no villains in my stories, only characters who want what everybody else wants but are willing to do more to get it than other people. Like Isaac Asimov, I find the great sin is behaving irrationally.

Tell us about what you're working on now.

I've been working for several years on a novel inspired, in part, by Alexei and Cory Panshin's **The World Beyond the Hill**, in which they suggest that the major theme of science fiction (particularly during the Golden Age) is transcendence, and I began to wonder what would happen if there were a way to achieve transcendence technologically - that is, a transcendental machine. I combined that with the notion of writing a novel about a long spaceship voyage during which the passengers would entertain themselves by telling stories to each other - similar to the **Canterbury Tales**. Around those two ideas grew the novel (about 230 pages so far) I call **Transcendental**. I had the optimistic thought that I could get a contract for it on the basis of an opening and closing chapter, but so far no editor has been enthusiastic about it - in part, perhaps, because of the changing market for SF (one editor commented that 'intelligent SF' has difficulty finding an audience). And maybe my age has something to do with it. So my agent and I will try again when I have a completed manuscript (and hold out the prospect of a trilogy - I've never done one before, but this imagined future has room for one that would allow me to dramatize some ideas about evolution, society, and culture, and

how aliens can get along!).

Do you feel people treat you differently due to your age, and if so, in a negative or positive manner?

I think that's a good question, but I don't have the answer. I think publishers prefer working with younger writers because they can visualize building a career, and if the first novel or two doesn't sell well, they may build an audience for later work. On the other hand, an older writer has a body of work that a current novel might make worth reprinting and gaining new readers, as well as appealing to a career worth of fans. Certainly that worked for Heinlein and Asimov and Clarke, but we don't all have that kind of reputation. Most of the responses I've had to **Transcendental** have regretfully refused on the basis of "we can't sell this kind of serious, intelligent fiction any more" or "we could have published this ten years ago, but not today." But maybe there is also the fact that they were looking at (if they read it!) an incomplete work. Maybe when it's done someone will see the possibilities. In the publishing business, it all boils down to an editor who visualizes how to publish the work - that is, how to print it in such a way that it reaches a substantial readership in some fashion that makes economic sense. }



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