

Interview

You are one of the best known of all British science fiction writers - tell me what is it about sf literature that inspires you to write it?

Partly it's the freedom. In principal, you can go anywhere and do anything - including change the laws of physics - when you write science fiction; anything that's a constant in mainstream can become a variable in sf. The comparison I use is that writing mainstream is like playing on a piano: it's one of the most expressive instruments ever invented, and perfect, arguably unimprovable, for conveying certain emotions, whereas sf is like having a gigantic cathedral organ at your disposal - whole ranks and levels of keyboards, another keyboard for your feet, and more stops - all there to be pulled out - than you can shake a stick at. A piano may be able to move your soul, but only an organ pipe the diameter of a dustbin can rattle your teeth.

What was the first science fiction novel you read - what was your reaction to it?

Can't remember; too long ago. I think also, at the time, that I didn't differentiate too much. Stories set in boarding schools, or on a pirate island, or during the Second World War seemed no less outlandish and unlikely than stories set in space. It was all just fiction.

Which is your favourite science fiction novel - why is it so special?

I have a long list of favourites I don't like to break up, but, with a gun to my head I'd probably go for Tiger, Tiger by Alfred Bester, because of its wild energy.

Science Fiction - what's it all about?

It's about the effects of technological change on people and society, and as such it is potentially the most important genre of all.

How would you define a science fiction novel? Or What does science fiction literature do?

I refer my honourable friend to the answer given above.

Science fiction literature can allow you to suspend the everyday and to explore some pretty big issues. How do you, as a writer, exploit that possibility?

Gleefully.

Your SF characters are often sinister - what is it about the dark side of humans that interests you.

Frankly I think it's their plot potential. The narrative arts tend to require conflict to work properly, and there's nothing like a bunch of thoroughly evil/sadly misguided/totally mad bastards for giving the good guys something to fight against.

Our own lives are becoming themselves like science fiction - with space travel and VR what does this mean for science fiction literature ? Will it have to change? What new markets are there?

Could be the End. On the other hand there should still be things we don't know for a while longer yet, and as long as there are, sf writers will want to speculate. Ultimately SF may come to resemble fantasy though, with (say) faster-than-light travel as patently absurd as dragons. Come to think of it, with a judicious bit of genetic engineering we might be able to make real flying, fire-breathing dragons one day, while at the same time FTL travel could well remain intrinsically impossible, and provably so, even post a Theory Of Everything which supercedes relativity and quantum theory and so on.

...Golly that would be annoying.

Do you think that science fiction literature has shaped our lives today?

Yes. Actually I think sf images from film and TV have done the vast majority of the shaping, but SF literature stands behind that first-order set of influences.

Your novels have been described in the press as 'space operatic' - can you tell me what that means?

It usually means that you are making maximum use of the variety of settings and possibilities offered by sf, and all within the one story. At the very least it might mean that there's lots of dramatic stuff happening, lots of characters, lots of incidents and action. The comparison with opera is telling: again, mainstream might be like a Chekhov play, while Space Opera - especially the kind Brian Aldiss referred to as Wide Screen Baroque - is more like Wagner. Wagner with a big production budget. And a slightly mad producer.

Your culture novels - Consider Phlebas, The Player of Games, Use of Weapons and Excession - explore a far future - tell me a bit about the themes and why you find them interesting to write about?

Sorry, I don't do themes. Well not knowingly, anyway. I just write the damn stories. If there are themes in there then I rely on other people to point them out to me. There may be a hint of didactic purpose in the Culture novels regarding the idea that the future might be fun, providing we rid ourselves of things like money and the urge to coerce and can become comfortable with the idea that quite possibly we'll create machines that are not just smarter than us, but wiser... but I'm not sure that counts as a theme. Oh, and - technically - it's not the far future; Consider Phlebas takes place in the year 1331 AD.

What is the Culture?

Fun. That's what it is. Lots and lots of fun. It's a galaxy-wide post-scarcity society based almost entirely on vast constructed habitats and Very Large Ships Indeed (plus a scattering of ancient hollowed out asteroids and a few planets). It's mainly run by humungously powerful AIs called Minds, though who it's run for depends on who you are. From where the humans are standing it looks like it's all run for them, and to them that's pretty well all that matters. The only value attached to most things is sentimental value, there are no laws but lots of (good) manners, you don't have to do anything to justify your pampered existence, you live for at least four hundred years, the sex is great, the drugs are free and harmless and, if you really can't stand so many opportunities for happiness, then you're free to leave at any time with the equivalent of a golden handshake. Basically it's a Utopia. I only write about the nasty stuff at the edges because it's more interesting.

Your latest book *Inversions* has been published recently (without giving the plot away) can you tell me what it's about and why you wrote it?

It's a sword and sorcery novel without the sorcery. And not many swords, either. Oh, all right, there's one bit of sorcery towards the end. But it's Arthur C. Clarke-type sorcery. Did I mention it's a historical novel, but not set in our history? So, it's sf, then. I hope that's clear.

How do you go about writing sf?

Same as I go about writing mainstream: realise it's getting to that time of the year again, search around for ideas, try to think of some new ones, frighten my wife, my agent and my publisher when I airily assure them that despite the fact it's August and I've got no idea what the next book's going to be about I'm still sure it'll be finished by Xmas... theThen have an idea, kick it around for a bit, write the book in my head and try to make any strategic mistakes there rather than on the hard disk, then sit down at the appropriate time and start writing. Easy, really.

You're quoted in interviews as saying you don't do a lot of research - why is that? or How accurate do you have to be?

I don't enjoy it and I'm not very good at it. I have this theory that the best sort of research is the stuff you've done without realising you've done it. So I read New Scientist every week but I don't take notes.

When you are starting a book - do you have a shopping list of essential qualities in mind?

Nope. Probably should have, but... well, unless you count it being readable, interesting and basically what I'd like to read if I was looking for a book to buy or borrow or whatever. At any rate, it doesn't feel like I have a shopping or check-list, but maybe I do, subconsciously.

Where do you get your ideas from?

Class A drugs of course. Next question, please. Aw, gee, but seriously, folks. I get my ideas from the same place as everybody else; the interaction of reality and imagination. Everybody has ideas. Everybody has sexual fantasies or a list of things they'd do if they won the lottery, everybody has embellished a true story when they re-tell it or thought that a soap opera or a film could have been better if it had ended differently, or if this rather than that had happened... Writers do exactly the same, except we do it more consistently. And we jot.

Can you describe a typical day when you're writing?

Get up, go for a walk, make the tea, read the post, start writing, have lunch, write some more, have dinner, maybe write, or watch TV, or read, or meet my pal Ken for a pint; go to bed. Sometimes I get up at 4am and write until 8 or 9, then go back to bed. Of course if it's a nice day I might go for a ride on my motor bike for an hour or two, and if it's a really nice day my wife and I might just jump in the car and head for the Highlands and the hell with all this writing nonsense.
