

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Author C.J. Cherryh- January 2018

Award-winning author C. J. Cherryh writes fantasy and science fiction works that have entertained and inspired readers for five decades. Her stories pull the reader in with a passion and force that refuse to let go until the final page is turned. The amazing universes she has created leave the reader longing for more, desiring to return once again to their rich expanses.

CJ's tales are so inspiring that she has her very own asteroid named after her, 77185 Cherryh—look for it in a sky near you. Her trophy case gives evidence of her wonderful ability by proudly displaying many awards, including three Hugos, a Locus, a Skylark, and the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award.

Thomas Watson: (Where to begin? I've been reading her work since Gate of Ivrel came out!) Of the books you've written, which book (or books) would you say challenged you most as a writer?

C.J. Cherryh: Downbelow Station: a precessing timeclock, and a pre-computer electric system that saved the novel in 4-line bursts. Plus a bulletin board tracking system with push pins for who was where when. It's the novel that drove me to get a real computer. And I wrote it because I tried to write Merchanter's Luck and found I needed to build the world first.

Jeanne Tucker: Do you think the current political climate will be good fodder for future books?

C.J. Cherryh: We were just discussing that: it seems ripe for an opera.

Drew Hubbard: Have you ever been approached by Hollywood for film/television adaptations?

C.J. Cherryh: Many times; a lot of options taken, but none ever brought to fruition.

Rich Titus: Or graphic novel/anime adaptations?

C.J. Cherryh: Jane Fancher did a graphic novel of Gate of Ivrel. I even helped draw some of the scum and villainy.

SFBC Member: Is there any chance of seeing Downbelow Station or The Faded Sun trilogy adapted?

C.J. Cherryh: There's always a chance, but so far no luck.

Johnna Ferguson: Ilisidi is my favorite Grande Dame ever, with the power and position to claim authority on what constitutes tradition to achieve her goals and break any rule, except be Aiji. Are there characters or actual women who have been inspirations or waymarks in creating this remarkable ambiguous person? Do you think as a culture we're getting wider ideas of who post-childrearing women characters could be?

C.J. Cherryh: two grandmothers and a great-grandmother. I only 'met' the great-grandmother fairly late in life, but she birthed 11 kids and ran cattle for a living, constantly avoiding places where statehood was

about to break out. I also think of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Hatshepsut, both amazing in their periods of influence---not mentioning the gaining of it.

Martin Healey: Any chance we can get Audiobooks of early stuff like Brothers of Earth and Fortresses series?

C.J. Cherryh: It's certainly not impossible if Audible wanted to do it, but I'm not sure those books are on their radar. If customers requested them, perhaps they'd think about it

Kenya Jewell: Are you planning any new series?

C.J. Cherryh: I'm partnering with Jane Fancher on a new branch of the Merchanter books, set in space, before the events of Downbelow Station.

Adam J. Meek: Why did you add the "h" to her pen name. Where do you get your ideas?

C.J. Cherryh: I added it because my publisher insisted I might be mis-shelved with the romance. I was reluctant to do it, and tried using one of the family names, but decided to just change the spelling to look different. As for ideas---they're easy: I create people and drop them into an environment; or sometimes I create an environment and drop people into it. They arrive with attitudes and necessities and past experiences that I don't know about until I 'run' them a bit and see what they do. Sounds like a facetious answer, but it isn't. Characters sort of 'talk' to you once you begin to know what they look like and who they associate with.

SFBC Member: When are you coming to Australia?

C.J. Cherryh: I have been to Australia, and absolutely love it. I have visited Perth and Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane, all memories I cherish. Australians were very kind to me.

Jim McClanahan: I very much enjoyed the spare and economical prose of early works (The Faded Sun is my favorite example). Later works tend to be more dense and involved. Although some, such as the Gene Wars duo are pretty straightforward. Is your more recent style a conscious choice or an evolutionary phenomenon?

C.J. Cherryh: We used to be able to write 80,000 word novels. Now the market wants more words, because shipping and distribution cost so much and people seem reluctant to pay it for skinny books. That was one big change. What writers get out of a book is 10% of cover. So it's more an economic thing. I've been tempted to write some 80,000 worders for our own publishing (e-books) but have been so busy that I haven't had time to do it. I like both styles. The pacing is definitely different.

John Grayshaw: CJ. Don Wells and Alex Cruz discovered a main belt asteroid in 2001 and named it after you. They said you challenged them to be worthy of the stars. Some have described the relationship between science fiction and science as symbiotic. Science inspires fiction which inspires science. How do you view this relationship between science fiction and science?

C.J. Cherryh: The job of science fiction, besides that of telling a good story, is to enable people who are scientists to think about side effects, future effects, and people effects; and to enable people who aren't scientists to understand technology and new discoveries in the same terms. One of the side effects is

freeing people and literature from the history that did happen and teaching them to think what-if and why-not. I absolutely love my asteroid and hope it stays well-behaved!

I was so tremendously grateful to Don Wells and Alex Cruz...who gave me a most extraordinary honor. I have a burning curiosity about the universe that might have made me a scientist, but I haven't the patience. I just wait to see what the science folk turn up. It's an unending delight and mind-expansion...so thank you, science folk: we are a most happy symbiosis.

John Grayshaw: World building is discussed and debated at conventions, on blogs, and in books. Many point towards your works as examples of masterful world building. How did you go about constructing the Alliance-Union universe, and what aspects of it still remain hidden in your mind that have not yet found a published page?

C.J. Cherryh: Along with the star map—I am delighted to find galactic mapping has become a strong focus of modern astronomy: if I could have found such maps at the time, I would have turned handsprings—I have a five thousand year future history in a notebook that shows me the parallel between certain stories, when and where they're taking place. And that sometimes suggests what might be going on in a third place. I know events in that timeline that rather cry out for a story.

John Grayshaw: At 2013 WorldCon there was a panel on combat writing. The panelists were Elizabeth Moon, Elizabeth Bear, Martha Wells, Jean Johnson, and Lois McMaster Bujold. When the discussion turned to space combat, the entire panel listed your writing as the benchmark. Please tell us how you masterfully construct such memorable combat scenes.

C.J. Cherryh: I don't try to reconstruct sea battles. I imagine a combination of radar and artificial predictive intelligence and an actively maintained 3-d computer map as something called 'longscan—I imagine ships that could get from here to Mars in minutes engaged in 3-d conflict—and inside those ships, officers making decisions backed by a team of multiple communications people, multiple longscan operators, with intermediate officers computer-aided in sifting what gets to the chief officers in a pace of information and happening at speeds too great for the human mind to handle. I envision weapons that don't need explosives. Accelerate a piece of rock to an appreciable fraction of lightspeed and let fly. There are what are called 'inerts', which are pieces of metal like a telephone pole launched at a velocity that could create Arizona's meteor crater if a planet happened to get hit. It's a combination of technology we don't have yet, with people-stories that we do see happen in war.

John Grayshaw: Of all the space combat scenes you've written, which of your novels has your favorite?

C.J. Cherryh: Probably my favorite is the pitch battle between the surviving Fleet and the Union in *Downbelow Station*.

John Grayshaw: You have been publishing now for five decades. How have the science fiction and publishing industries changed during that time?

C.J. Cherryh: Total sea-change. I now have to run an e-publishing company (with two other writers) to handle our backlist, because physical book sellers aren't interested in maintaining it in inventory. The distribution system priced itself out of the market and the Thor Tool Decision (taxing items in

warehouses) made warehousing sanely sized print runs impossible. What's printed has to sell off the shelf in days and then be reprinted. It's insane.

John Grayshaw: What authors or editors have inspired you the most?

C.J. Cherryh: Publius Vergilius Maro, Julius Caesar, Aristotle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Jack Williamson.

John Grayshaw: We have all been saddened by the death of Ursula K. Le Guin this week. What was your relationship to her work and to her personally?

C.J. Cherryh: I didn't know Ursula. We were in different regions during the time she attended conventions, so we never met, alas. I'd like to have...

John Grayshaw: Where did you first come across science fiction, and what about it made you stick with reading it?

C.J. Cherryh: My dad gave me a copy of *Tarzan and the City of Gold*—when I was about 7. Before that it was comics. I graduated to Conan at about 9-10. Read every 'lost world' I could find and was a fanatic listener to Tom Corbett on radio. When I found books of the same ilk, I read them. Age 9-10 family got a telly and I got addicted to Flash Gordon. Beyond that, I wrote my own.

John Grayshaw: Where do you get the inspiration for your settings and characters?

C.J. Cherryh: I just go to that same daydream-spot inside my head that I'm pretty sure all of us have. I don't know if people who don't write for a living actually meet strangers there, but I do, on a regular basis, and I absolutely insist they arrive with a good problem and tell me about it. There are particularly good spots for productive encounters: there's a beach I imagine and if I sit long enough and stare down the length of it, I'm sure someone will come walking down it, and most of them are interesting when they arrive. Sometimes I don't write all I meet, but most of the ones I meet do have interesting backgrounds. And sometimes I find I'm not on that beach at all, but in some space station corridor or in some castle hallway.

Once these strangers tell me a little about their worlds I can make up the rest, out of smidges of geology, geography, history, archaeology, and snippets of whole cloth, and once I know their history and their quirks, I can most often figure out the rest of the story.

Translation: thinking up new ideas and characters isn't hard. Writing day and night for months...that's hard.

John Grayshaw: What would be your recommendations to aspiring "young" authors?

C.J. Cherryh: Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. And be curious about everything. Writing is a profession you can practice while upside down and experiencing total blackout in a cave. You just use the mental recorder instead of pen and paper...or portable...and hope you find a use for the experience.

John Grayshaw: How do you clear a writers “block”?

C.J. Cherryh: Take better care of the writer. Get some rest. Go take a shower, sit in a cave, walk on a beach, or lie on your stomach and watch some ants. I’ve never met a writer’s block, but I’ve gotten myself too tired, too loaded with frivolous responsibility to write. It always clears up when I remember what’s important.

I’ll tell you what someone once told me: if anything *can* keep you from writing, it will. Identify those things that can, and decide what’s important. For me, writing is more important than a whole array of things that could take up my time if I let them.

John Grayshaw: C.J. Cherryh, thank you so much for taking the time to answer our questions.

C.J. Cherryh: And thank you all. A pleasant spot in the week.