

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Connie Willis, June 2019

Connie Willis has won eleven Hugo Awards and seven Nebula Awards more major awards than any other writer—most recently the "Best Novel" Hugo and Nebula Awards for Blackout/All Clear (2010). She was inducted by the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2009 and the Science Fiction Writers of America named her its 28th SFWA Grand Master in 2011.

Wow! So many questions! I'm not sure I can answer all of them, but here goes.

1. Why writing?

I don't think any writer has a good answer for this. You don't pick it--it picks you. I've loved books since I first discovered them--the first one I remember began, "There's a cat in a hat in a ball in the hall," and I instantly knew, like Rudyard Kipling, that books held in them everything that would make me happy.

When I learned to read, I saw that this was true, and I gobbled up LITTLE WOMEN and Gene Stratton Porter's A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST and L. Frank Baum's WIZARD OF OZ books and everything else I could get my hands on, which mostly meant the books at the public library, though the girl across the street loaned me Frances Hodgson Burnett's A LITTLE PRINCESS and my great aunt left me Grace Livingston Hill's THE WHITE FLOWER and one of my mother's friends loaned me Valentine Davies' A MIRACLE ON THIRTY-FOURTH STREET.

Many of the books I read were had writers as characters--Jo March and Anne of Green Gables and Betsy of the BETSY, TACY, AND TIB books--and I wanted to be exactly like them, which to me meant not only writing books, but wearing long dresses, sitting in a garret

reading and eating russet apples, and tying my hand-written manuscripts up with red ribbons.

I didn't get a more realistic picture of a writer's life till I took senior high English from a teacher who had written several books (I'll always love you, Mrs. Jones!) She talked about what being a writer was really like and one Saturday afternoon took me to meet Lenora Mattingly Weber, the author of my favorite series of books, the BEANY MALONE stories. Mrs. Weber was very ordinary-looking, and was married and had children, and there wasn't a long dress or a red ribbon in sight. But she lived in Denver, and she was a real person, and suddenly my fantasies seemed actually possible, though it never occurred to me that I could actually make a living from my writing. (My role model was Zenna Henderson, who taught and wrote during spring breaks and summers.)

I've been very lucky. I've lived out far more of my fantasy than I ever dreamed possible. I've never had a garret, but I do hand-write my manuscripts. Best of all, I've been able to spend my life surrounded by books. What could be better than that?

2. It's clear from much of your writing that you love history. What developed first for you--a love of history or a love of creative writing? How did the earlier help shape the latter?

I always wanted to be a writer, but I read very little history as a kid (though I read lots of books that would qualify as historical novels, works like THE SECRET GARDEN and ROSE IN BLOOM; I just didn't think of them that way.) I didn't particularly like

history in school, mostly, I think because of the way it was taught--timelines and battles and dates. History needs to be taught as a particularly juicy form of gossip, with all those great details--Lord Nelson's affair with Emma Hamilton and his saying, "Kiss me, Hardy" as he lay dying, and his being sent back to England pickled in rum and the wretched way the British government treated Emma after they promised they'd take care of her. All the good stuff.

I started to become fascinated with history *per se* when my eighth-grade teacher read our class Rumer Godden's AN EPISODE OF SPARROWS, a novel set in post-war London, but I didn't really become totally hooked until I went to England to St. Paul's and saw the cathedral. I fell in love with it, and when I saw the view from the dome, with all its boxy 1950s-era buildings, and realized that everything around the cathedral had burned down, I couldn't understand how it had survived.

I tried to find out, and that was when I discovered the London Blitz in all its horror and glory and fascinating detail, and I have been obsessed with history ever since.

Actually, that's not true. I'm only obsessed with certain parts of history and certain events--World War II and ancient Egypt and the Black Death and the Victorians and the 1920s. Oh, and the Titanic. There are whole swaths of history I could care less about

But I'm also fascinated with the concept of history itself. That same trip I bought a copy of THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY by G.R. Elton, a book about how history works, and I realized that almost all

historical works deal with the raw material of history, the eras and governments and people, but very few deal with History itself--how it works, whether it has patterns and cycles, and whether there is something else going on in history besides what we can see.

Elton's book got me thinking about all that, and I've been obsessed with history and History ever since.

3. Growing up, did you read science fiction? If so, which authors were your favorite? And which authors do you feel influenced your writing? And why?

and

Are you a big fan of Ray Bradbury's?

Absolutely. He's one of my favorite writers. I especially love his short stories, "The Veldt" and "Homecoming" and "A Miracle of Rare Device," and his books, DANDELION WINE and SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES.

I also love Kit Reed ("The Wait" and "Songs of War") and James Patrick Kelly (especially "Itsy Bitsy Spider) and Theodore Sturgeon ("The Man Who Lost the Sea") and oh, gosh, Fredric Brown and Shirley Jackson and Philip K. Dick and Ward Moore and Walter M. Miller, Jr. and Daniel Keyes, and on and on.

But the person who influenced me most was definitely Robert A. Heinlein. I first discovered his books while I was shelving books at my junior high library. I picked up a book with a yellow cover (I'll never forget that moment) and the title, HAVE SPACE SUIT, WILL TRAVEL, which I thought was very funny. And I opened it and read, "You see,

I have this space suit," and was hooked, then and for always on Heinlein and science fiction.

That book had everything--humor, adventure, saving the world, a great little kid named PeeWee, a cute, smart high school boy named Kip, aliens, the Lesser Magellanic Clouds, Shakespeare, THREE MEN IN A BOAT, math, a mnemonic for remembering the planets, and a sense of wonder about the universe and all the things in it that I think is the very essence of science fiction.

Robert A. Heinlein introduced me to science fiction and to dozens of other wonderful writers, he taught me how to tell stories and do characters and write dialogue, and I will be grateful to him forever.

I've also been heavily influenced by Dorothy L. Sayers, P.G. Wodehouse, E.M. Forster, William Shakespeare, Rumer Godden, J.R.R. Tolkien, Mary Stewart, Charles Williams, Daphne DuMaurier, and Agatha Christie. And probably every other writer I've ever read.

4. Was it as fascinating researching "Fire Watch" and BLACKOUT and ALL CLEAR as it seems like it must have been?

Absolutely. I adore doing research. It's the fun part of writing. I would much rather be researching than writing, especially when you are reading about things you are fascinated with, which is the only kind of research I do.

You just find out so many things you never knew. For instance, in my research for my new UFO abduction book, THE ROAD TO ROSWELL, I

found out that they know EXACTLY what the Roswell crash was--and have from the very beginning. And yes, it was a crash, just not a crash of a UFO, and yes, it was a cover-up, but not a cover-up of aliens from outer space.

In 1948 when the crash happened, Roswell had a nearby Air Force base, and they were conducting secret research into what the Russians were doing, most particularly whether they were doing above-ground nuclear tests. So they devised a contraption out of a bunch of weather balloons, which were taped together in a bundle to form a flat top, with sonic listening and recording devices on top, to be floated at high altitudes over the USSR and report back on evidence of A-bomb tests.

One of them floated off-course and crashed (they even know which one, the number and everything), and it was discovered by a rancher, who notified the Air Force base. But the PR guy they sent out didn't know about the secret project, so he said, "No, it's not ours. I don't know what it is." Then he went back to the base and reported to his superiors, who said, "Oh, shit, it is ours and it's top secret. Get out there and collect the debris and shut this thing down." He did, which made everybody suspicious, and you know the rest. But there's never been any mystery about it, except maybe how people could have believed it was a UFO. Research is full of fascinating facts like that.

Then again, research can be a real bear. When I was writing DOOMSDAY BOOK, I wrote a scene in which Kivrin took the two little

girls into the woods in the winter and realized I had no idea whether people wore gloves or mittens. And if they were mittens, were they of cloth or fur, and what did they look like? Knitting wasn't invented till much later. (This was all before the internet, but I doubt very much you can go online and google mittens 1300s and find what you want.) Trying to find that one piece of information took me almost longer than all the rest of my research on the Middle Ages.

And speaking of the internet, when I was writing BLACKOUT/ALL CLEAR, I couldn't remember which floors had been damaged when Selfridges department store was hit during the Blitz. (I'd already looked it up, and it was in my notes somewhere, but I couldn't find it.) So I googled "Selfridges Blitz" and got articles about Selfridges Fantastic Summer Savings Blitz. So then I googled "Selfridge's London Blitz World War II" and "Selfridge's bomb damage" and about a thousand other combinations, looking for the "Open Sesame" phrase that would give me the information. After A NUMBER of wasted hours, I gave up and went back and looked it up in the book I thought it was in and found it.

Oh, and for those who are astonished that I still use books for research and say, "But the internet has everything," that's patently not true. It has virtually everything you might want about Taylor Swift or the latest Avenger movie, but not very much about anything else. And even though you can google, say, "London Blitz," and up pop 800,000 articles, when you actually look at most of them, they

are all derived from a handful of sources. A handful of very shallow sources.

At this point, books are still your best friend for research. And your best friend generally.

One more thing: Research isn't just the books you take notes on for a specific book. It's everything you read and watch on TV and at the movies. You never know where ideas are going to come from or what you're going to need later, and you collect words and ideas and odd bits of information like acorns. As the comedian Steve Martin says, artists end up using virtually everything.

You can't write without wanting to spend your life reading anything and everything. Reading is still my favorite thing after a lifetime of writing, and movies are a close second. Oh, and TV series like THE OFFICE and ROSWELL and my favorite of all time, PRIMEVAL.

5. Is there one of your stories/novels that is your favorite after many years? And are you ever surprised when someone comes up and tells you their favorite story is one you thought fell into obscurity? (My mother's favorite is "And Come from Miles Around" because of the young motherhood aspect.)

I'm so glad your mother liked that story. I had so much fun writing it, and it was all true--well, maybe except the aliens part. I wrote it in 1979 while we were in Lewistown, Montana, for the total eclipse (well, actually, I wrote it in the back seat on our way home) and it had one of my favorite themes--that discounted, overlooked people who are pushed to the side for one reason or another often see

things people smack in the center of things don't. Mothers of toddlers are one of those groups of people--they are always missing things because they're off taking their child to the bathroom--but there are lots of others, like the elderly and teenagers and immigrants who don't speak the language well. And science fiction writers. Agatha Christie knew this and always made marginalized people her heroes (Poirot is a Belgian refugee and Miss Marple is a "fluffy old biddy") which is probably why I love Agatha so.

I don't have a favorite story, though "Fire Watch" is very close to my heart since it's about St. Paul's. I think probably BLACKOUT and ALL CLEAR is my best book. It meant so much to me to tell the stories of all the shopgirls and spinsters and old men and debutantes and mothers and vicars and little kids who won the war and try to get it right for their sakes.

6. I know that you love classic screwball comedies. What are some of your favorites and why? And was Preston Sturges a time traveller because he seems so ahead of his time?

That's a great theory! When I'm watching his movies, I'm always thinking, "How did he get away with that?" Especially since he was doing movies in the middle of the Hayes Office days, when the censors didn't allow ANYTHING! He was definitely ahead of his time, and when it comes to screwball comedies, his are always at the top of my list. I adore THE LADY EVE, which has the best ending ever, and SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, especially the interchange between the director and the studio owner, where he says:

Sullivan: I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions--stark realism and the problems that confront the average man.

Studio exec: But with a little sex in it.

Sullivan: A little, but I don't want to stress it. I want this picture to be a document, I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity--a true canvas of the suffering of humanity."

Studio exec: But with a little sex in it.

Sullivan: (sighs) But with a little sex in it.

It's a conversation that captures all of Hollywood in it, and the beautiful irony is that SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS is exactly the movie he describes. With a little sex in it. And a lot of comedy.

My favorite Preston Sturges movie, though, has to be THE MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK, which is hilarious and touching and a masterpiece of plotting!

I of course love all the classic screwball comedies--HIS GIRL FRIDAY and MY FAVORITE WIFE and BRINGING UP BABY and MY MAN GODFREY and BALL OF FIRE and CHARADE and HOW TO STEAL A MILLION and WALK, DON'T RUN and OPERATION PETTICOAT--but I also love a lot of the modern ones--WIMBLEDON, THE DECOY BRIDE, NOTTING HILL, PRETTY WOMAN, LOVE ACTUALLY, FRENCH KISS, LOVE HAPPENS, MORNING GLORY, WORKING GIRL, SIX DAYS SEVEN NIGHTS, DOC HOLLYWOOD, GRABBERS, and SWEET HOME, ALABAMA.

There are a lot of terrible ones out there, though, and I have had to watch endless awful romantic comedies to come up with the good ones. Many Bothans died to bring you this list.

Romantic comedies are very hard to write, but they are my favorite genre, and I've done a bunch of them: "Blued Moon" and "Inside Job" and "Now Showing" and BELLWETHER and CROSSTALK and TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, to say nothing of the romantic subplots in many of my other stories.

This is not to be confused with romance. Romantic comedy has a completely different dynamic. It's less about wooing and being wooed or conquering and being conquered than it is about two people coming to terms with each other on an equal footing, becoming allies, and forming a mature relationship. With a little sex in it.

Romantic comedy is all about teamwork and learning to trust each other and seeing past appearances and through facades to the real person underneath, and, most importantly, about finding the similarities that lurk below the surface differences of people.

Hollywood frequently gets this wrong. They pick two people who are complete opposites--like, say, a struggling hooker and a rich tycoon or a buttoned-up schoolteacher and a thief--and then that's as far as it goes. They don't bother to get to the part where you realize the characters have a lot in common and are actually very much alike. As Kate (the buttoned-up schoolteacher who's desperately trying to get her straying fiance back) says to Luc (the thief), "So

you'd risk anything for this? Do anything to have it? Get down on your knees and beg? What makes you so different from me? Not much."

It's the things they have in common and the fact that they bring out the best in each other that are what matter in a romantic comedy, and what I love about them.

7. What are you working on now?

And

Do you plan on writing any more books or stories about time travel by the history students from the University of Oxford?

Yes, and yes. I am working hard right now on a new novel about alien abduction called THE ROAD TO ROSWELL. It's about a young woman who goes to Roswell to be the maid of honor for the wedding of her crazy college roommate, who is getting married at the UFO Museum during the height of the annual UFO Festival. When she goes to fetch something from the car for her friend, she's grabbed by an alien and taken on a wild ride all over the Southwest, along with a con man, UFO conspiracy theory nut, a sweet little old-lady casino-goer, and a senior citizen who's spending his retirement visiting Western movie sites.

It's of course a comedy--I mean, what else could it be with Roswell and aliens in it? It also has curio shops, car chases, rattlesnakes, FBI agents, cows, Monument Valley, and Area 51.

It's a ways from being done, but then I'm planning to start on a new novel about the Oxford historians, this one involving Tintern Abbey, the Romantic poets, ALICE IN WONDERLAND, World War II

codebreakers, and the Inklings. It's a comedy, too, in the vein of TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, and I can't wait to get started on it.

(Note: The book you're not currently working on is always infinitely more appealing than the one you're actually writing. The moment I start working on the time travel novel, I will hate it. It has something to do with Mark Twain's remark about how much fun something is being in direct proportion to the thing you're actually supposed to be doing. It's certainly true in my case. Making up stories is really fun. Actually writing them is something else again.)

8. Do you have a writing routine you stick with?

I do now, but that wasn't always the case. When I started, I was a mother with a small child, and I had to desperately snatch time for writing whenever and however I could. (Bless you, Sesame Street!) I wrote on the bleachers at sports events, in cars waiting for school to get out, while sitting in the orthodontist's office. I remember trying to write "Fire Watch," and eventually going out in the driveway and locking myself in the car so I could finish it.

Now, I go to Starbuck's (for pretty much the same reason that I locked myself in the car) and write for two hours (or more, if I can) in two separate sessions.

When I'm finishing a novel, all bets are off, but for me slow and steady seems to work better rather than doing all-night sessions. But I'll do whatever I have to to get those hours in.

People often ask me about my schedule (and about what pen I use, etc.), as if there was a magic formula for writing. There's not. Do whatever works. And understand that finding time for writing isn't a problem that you solve once and it stays solved. It's a process of carving time out of solid rock every single day.

9. Since you often write about Christmas time, what are some of your favorite Christmas season traditions?

The day after Thanksgiving, we start watching all our favorite Christmas movies, but it's not easy. We now have so many favorites we can hardly squeeze them into the allotted time: THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER and ELF and MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET (the Edmund Gwynn original) and CHRISTMAS IN CONNECTICUT and BACHELOR MOTHER and THE MUPPETS CHRISTMAS CAROL and MR. MAGOO'S CHRISTMAS CAROL and SCROOGED and our most recent addition, NATIVITY, with Martin Freeman.

On Christmas day we have a special breakfast (my mother's tradition) and then go to a Chinese restaurant for dinner (in honor of A CHRISTMAS STORY.) And we spread our Christmas out for days and days, exchanging gifts with friends and family all through December and well into January to make it last as long as possible. And there are lots and lots of gifts. No gift cards or drawings to give a present to just one person for us!

Oh, and we play Christmas music nonstop!

10. When you read that in your bio you've won "more major awards than any other writer," what do you think?

I think, "Fred Astaire never won an Oscar." And "The most famous author in Victorian times was not Charles Dickens or Anthony Trollope, but Charlotte Yonge." Who nobody remembers at all. Writers are best off when they think of one thing and one thing only: their writing.

11. What is your legacy?

Ditto.

I hope this answered some of your questions. Thanks for asking them.

Connie Willis