

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Author David Brin- October 2017

Today we are joined by award-winning author David Brin. David shines as one of the brightest minds in an industry filled with brilliant authors. His scientific education, which includes a Ph.D. in physics, blends seamlessly with his ability to craft amazing stories that challenge, entertain, and inspire. David treads the pathways of discourse as a contrarian, though some label him an optimist. Evidence of his remarkable gift to touch readers both intellectually and emotionally can be found in his long list of awards. David has won three Hugos, a Nebula, three Locus, a Campbell, and the Freedom of Speech Award.

His vivid understanding of the past and present coupled with his vision of the future elicits great respect from all levels of society. David frequently speaks on the future and science, adding a touch of humor to his inspirational viewpoint. He has been invited to lecture by organizations such as NASA, Microsoft, the American Astronomical Society, IBM, MIT, the CIA and the White House (OSTP). His novels have appeared on The New York Times Bestsellers list, and they should appear on every science fiction fan's reading list.

Beth McCrea- Omg I am so excited! I love him. I'd love to know which one of his books is his favorite?

David Brin- Which of your children is your favorite? It is like that! Glory season is my brave, indomitable daughter. The Postman is my courageous, civilization-saving son. Earth is the child who combined science and nature to become a planet. The uplift War... well, I never had a better character than Fiben the neo-Chimp!

Beth McCrea- What book (from another author) has he recently read which he loved?

David Brin-I gave Liu Cixin's The Three Body Problem one of its first English language blurbs – great stuff. Obscure but rising new authors include Sue Burke, author of Semiosis. I recommend Paolo Bacigalupi: The Windup Girl. Here's my web page devoted to recommendations!
<http://www.davidbrin.com/sfreeds.html>

Javier Ojst- In this day and age, how can we encourage more people to read SF?

David Brin- Stand outside a Junior High in a trenchcoat that you open to reveal rows of paperbacks, saying : "a little Heinlein, little girl? Some LeGuin? Pratchett? The first one is free!"

Har, sorry, no-no. Don't get arrested! But seriously, I have long preached that fan groups ought to seek out the hardest working champions of literacy – middle school English teachers – and adopt the ones that are friendly to science fiction. Donate age-appropriate books they can give to kids, hooking them on the good stuff. Get free passes for the teacher and a couple of favorite students to the local sci fi convention, that sort of thing.

Here's a web page with links to resources for teachers and parents:
<http://www.davidbrin.com/sfreads.html>

- [Science Fiction for Teaching and Inspiring](#)
- [Science Fiction that Teaches Science](#)
- [Using Science Fiction to Turn Kids On to Reading](#)
- [Science fiction films](#) that teach science

... and lots of other recommendations.

Kevin Kuhn- What do you think of NASA's latest discussion of building a space station that orbits the moon. Good next step, or not bold enough?

David Brin- The lunar orbital station is perfect. It lets us experiment with deep space methods while remaining just a few days from Earth. We can use it for either lunar or asteroidal paths. Moreover, such a station would let us sell hotel and logistics and landing services to all the dusty-footprint wannabes like China, Russia, India and so on. Asteroidal samples studied at the station can then add mass to a garage where we can stash defense assets in case anyone tries to destroy our space capabilities, as in the novel GHOST FLEET.

A lunar orbital base can help us to send robots to asteroids and bring back samples to verify the great riches we're pretty sure are there. Unlike the sterile and (for now) apparently useless moon. Let others salve their egos prancing around down there. We have bigger things to do.

Thomas Watson- An obvious question, but then, I haven't had nearly enough coffee yet this morning: what are the chances that there will be more Uplift novels?

David Brin-Yes, it is true. And I am trying. These other darned things keep coming up. Like the fact that I find it hard to turn down interviews.

SFBC Member- Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions Mr Brin. My question for you is: Humanity is currently split into two segments of belief regarding the origin of mankind, secular and non-secular, meaning evolution and creation. But do you think that it's possible that homo-sapiens is the result of genetic manipulation from an external extraterrestrial source?

David Brin-First off, we need to study why this gulf exists. See my "questionnaire on ideology" where I ask: Do you believe humans knew a natural idyllic condition at some point in the past, from which we fell because of bad, inappropriate or sinful choices, thus reducing our net wisdom? (The Look Back View.) Or do you consider such tales mythological. Wisdom is cumulative and anything resembling a human utopia can only be achieved in the future, through incremental improvements in knowledge or merit. (The Look Forward View.)

If you hold to the Look Back View, then whatever the details – Christian, Hindu, Von Daniken – you will resist having your tenets scrutinized and possibly refuted by evidence. Most of our ancestors had that view, which is one reason progress came slow, and was bloody.

Try the questionnaire! <http://www.davidbrin.com/nonfiction/questionnaire.html>

That doesn't mean I totally exclude the ancient meddling notion. I discuss it extensively in my Uplift Universe novels! But overall, the evidence is nonexistent and the impulse to want to believe it is generally, well, demeaning and nonsensical.

SFBC Member- Brin is a huge proponent of the didactic utility of sci-fi. My question, if he had to choose one scifi book or original series to use as a textbook for the human condition, what would it be?

David Brin- Other than my own? ;-) Well, Zelazny's LORD OF LIGHT portrays how difficult but necessary it is to rebel against hierarchy and move forward. Star Trek and Stargate were essentially optimistic that humanity can mature enough to let goodness and sense (mostly) prevail. Here's one of my postings about inspirational science fiction: <http://davidbrin.blogspot.com/2016/10/science-fiction-and-science-fact.html>

And another, much bigger compilation.

<http://www.scoop.it/t/speculations-on-science-fiction>

Jamie Smith- I'm curious as to which story David Brin most enjoyed writing, and what it was that made it so enjoyable

David Brin- See my third story collection INSISTENCE OF VISION. There are five tales there that I would call my favorite.

Jim Dean- What if anything would you have changed about Kevin Costner's characterization in the movie version of the Postman? (I really loved the book btw)

David Brin: People are surprised by how even-tempered I am toward Kevin Costner, despite his having been a rude jerk to me, personally. That's because he did the one thing that really mattered to me... his film's core heart did not betray the central meaning of my novel, which was an answer to all the Mad Max style, post apocalyptic tales we've seen. Orgies of violence in which survivors meekly accept the passing of everything good from the world.

I have always believed that, even after a horrid holocaust, most people would recall a better world. They would dream of it nightly. Yearn for it daily. Second only to feeding their children, they would have but one agenda in mind – to bring that world back. The gentle comforts, the trade and reciprocity and shared values and tolerance and peace... and dentistry. The Postman is about a wanderer in such a devastated world, who tells a lie in order to be fed. Only the lie takes on more power than he ever imagined, turning him into a symbol for all those yearnings. The focus of determination of a once-free people to become free, once again.

It is this matter of People... the citizens and neighbors who are routinely slandered in modern films and novels and yes, in sci fi as well, that I wanted to answer. Lazy directors and authors routinely portray our fellow citizens as sheep or fools or useless. But that's just wrong. It is a poisonous message that I confronted in a rather widely circulated essay about "the idiot plot." <http://www.davidbrin.com/idiotplot.html>

Anyway, Costner seemed to get this point. He conveyed it, amid some of the best cinematography ever. And because the film was both Big-Hearted and gorgeous, I was willing to forgive the fact that it was also dumb, having (especially in the last 20%) scooped out and tossed almost all of the novel's brains.

Gary Denton- You are also a futurist, how shocked are you about are currently political state? (Love your books.)

David Brin-Yipe! Well, the simplest way to put it is that we are in Phase 8 of the American Civil War. See:

<http://davidbrin.blogspot.com/2014/09/phases-of-american-civil-war.html>

We can't solve this by yelling incantations at each other. We must return to being a brilliantly *pragmatic* and sensible people who actually debate fairly, with facts, and negotiate. Yes, I believe facts and outcomes favor one party over another (crazy) one, these days. Do compare outcomes:

<http://davidbrin.blogspot.com/2014/06/so-do-outcomes-matter-more-than-rhetoric.html>

(Go ahead and subscribe to my blog! <http://davidbrin.blogspot.com/>)

But what's more important is to believe in ourselves.

SFBC Member- What sci-fi books or author have inspired you the most?

David Brin: Robert Sheckley for perfect stories. Poul Anderson for the gift of tribal, storytelling magic. Aldous Huxley, for showing me that speculation needn't abandon literary quality. John Brunner, for scaring every other science fiction author in the world half to death, for a dozen years. Alice Sheldon for her courage. Homer, for lighting a candle and all of those who kept lighting them across the dark, dark ages, till we learned how to maintain light.

And the many great scientists I have been privileged to know, ALL of whom had artistic hobbies, proving that we are many people. Each of us can be more than just one thing. A lesson that I took to heart when I wrote KILN PEOPLE.

Jim Harris- I'd like to see Brin say which SF books inspired his writing, and which of his books does he think most inspired other SF writers. Is science fiction a dialog by writers over time?

David Brin-Heck yes it's a dialogue! When I wrote Foundation's Triumph, it was to carry on the conversation that Isaac Asimov was having with us... and with himself ... for 5 decades!

See: <http://www.davidbrin.com/foundationstriumph.html>

John Grayshaw- Think you'll ever write a time-travel novel?

David Brin- Argh! A sore point. I have started five time travel stories. Great premises and characters! Can't finish em. The logical side of my brain won't cooperate!

John Grayshaw-Can you offer advice from your own experiences as to how a struggling writer can get his/her start to break into the industry?

David Brin: Write. Love writing. Love stories. Love a civilization that gives you plenty to read and the food and comfort to accompany it all. Be competitive. Seek and relish criticism. Have patience but never stop burning. Burn like a flame. An inferno.

Also, I recorded, offering all sorts of handy hints and advice: <https://www.scoop.it/topic/speculations-on-science-fiction>

John Grayshaw- You have been quoted (in an interview with Orbit) as saying: "I always recommend that aspiring novelists begin with a mystery, before moving on to their favorite genre. It trains you to play fair with the reader." Would you care to add to that advice?

David Brin: All other genres let you distract yourself and the reader from the story plot, itself. Romance writers throw in passion to cover up the failure of suspense. Sci Fi authors spice in some tech and fantasy writers some dues ex machina dragon-stuff. But in a murder mystery, there is no trickery. Either the whodunit makes sense, in just the right combination of surprise and "aha!"...

...or it doesn't. My first novel, SUNDIVER was a science fiction murder mystery. I kept at it and at it till the sucker worked.

See other advice for new writers: <http://www.davidbrin.com/advice.htm>

John Grayshaw- Looking ahead into our future, what scientific breakthroughs do you most eagerly anticipate?

David Brin: Brain boost. We humans are anomalously smart! So smart that we are actually capable of noticing patterns of our own self-destructiveness, enabling us to have had not nuclear war since 1945. And to preserve some of the planet. It is possible that no other species in the galaxy got this smart naturally, via evolution, possibly explaining the emptiness of voices in the sky.

But it's not enough! It is blatantly obvious that we truly need to be smarter, still. It may happen biochemically, or through education and biofeedback training in games! Perhaps external brain-linked augmentations. And dig it -- there will be lots of problems that accompany this! But given the complexity of civilization we must maintain and the dilemmas ahead of us, we had better hope.

John Grayshaw-Your novels and speeches and essays push a message of hope. You've also stated that humanity is 60% likely to survive the crisis. Why are dystopian novels so popular and plentiful? What is the biggest lesson that humanity still needs to learn if we are to cast aside the 40% and come out on top?

David Brin: The tsunami of dystopias and apocalypses has a poisonous effect upon people, contributing to the dour public mood, at a time when, in fact, many things are going very well. At no time in history has violence (per capita) been so low, or poverty or ignorance. We should be confidently exploring new possibilities instead of tearing at each other, in artificially stoked rage.

Ironically, much of the obsession on dystopias in fiction and film arises NOT because directors and authors actually believe it's coming, but out of simple storytelling laziness! Think -- your number one need is to hook the reader with characters who are kept in pulse pounding jeopardy for 90 minutes of screen time or 400 pages of a book.

But that is hard to do if they are members of a civilization that works! That pays skilled professionals to leap to the aid of citizens. In which some officials are corrupt, but others are honest. Some are incompetent, but others know what they are doing. That's the world you and I live in, but we almost never see it portrayed. Because honest, competent helpers are a buzz kill for drama.

For more on this, see <http://www.davidbrin.com/idiotplot.html>

John Grayshaw- Thank you for joining us today. We always appreciate the positive energy and insight you bring to every topic and discussion. Our horizons are expanded with each book you write. Before you go, is there anything else you would like to share with us?

David Brin- Stay Amazing. Stay Amazingly amazing! Do not listen to the playground bullies and sourpuss cynics who preach despair. You are heirs of the greatest heroes who ever lived, who rescued us from the beastly feudalism that dominated every other culture.

For all its faults, this civilization is more deserving of the name than any that came before. The first the teaches each generation of children to criticize their parents' stupid mistakes and assumptions! The one that might (if we don't lose heart; if we stay the course) bring something as nice and strong as Star Trek.

Tell the cynics to blow off. They are trying to make their forecast come true and that makes them traitors to tomorrow. We can do this. Read the good stuff. Proselytize it! Believe in tomorrow.