

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Author David Gerrold- April 2018

David Gerrold is the writer of the legendary Star Trek episode "The Trouble With Tribbles," and he was also involved in the early days of Star Trek the Next Generation (TNG). He created the Sleestak race on the TV series Land of the Lost, his novelette "The Martian Child", won both Hugo and Nebula awards. And he is the writer of "The War Against the Chtorr" series and "Star Wolf" series and such novels as "The Man Who Folded Himself," which was nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula.

John Grayshaw- What Science fiction stories do you remember reading when you were growing up?

Aside from a couple of children's books, the first real SF books I read were the Heinlein juveniles, Red Planet, Space Cadet, Between Planets — they felt so real that I wondered if Heinlein had actually lived those adventures.

The library turned me on to Eric Frank Russell, Isaac Asimov, Murray Leinster, A.E. Van Vogt, Hal Clement, Henry Kuttner, Fred Pohl, Cyril Kornbluth, and so many others. The Groff Conklin anthologies introduced me to the classic SF that had been published in the magazines.

Individual stories that still resonate with me include Microcosmic God (Theodore Sturgeon), The Black Destroyer (A.E. Van Vogt), all of the stories about "The People" (Zenna Henderson), and of course, All You Zombies by Heinlein.

John Grayshaw- What science fiction stories have most influenced your writing?

All of them, probably. A lot of Heinlein. A lot of Ellison. A lot of Delany. A lot of Ursula K. LeGuin. Starship Troopers, The Left Hand of Darkness, Nova, Repent Harlequin Said The TickTockMan.

But it was the movies that really had the greatest effect: Them!, War of the Worlds (1953), King Kong, Forbidden Planet, This Island Earth, Destination Moon, When Worlds Collide, Conquest of Space — almost all of the George Pal features.

Richard Whyte-When you were writing two of the first 3 non-fiction Star Trek books (thanks a million!) back in the ST wasteland of the early 1970s, did you imagine that Trek would become so huge, and that the franchise would continue for so long?

The night that "The Trouble With Tribbles" was aired, I had a party at my house. After it ended, one of my friends was so effusive with his enthusiastic praise that I had to stop him. I said, "It's only one episode of one TV show. In twenty years, nobody will remember it."

This was not the first time I had been wrong. And it has not been the last either. I grew up in a

time when SF was a fringe interest. I had no idea it would become the mainstream. That's both good and bad — we're seeing more brilliant books written today than any one person can keep up with. Even the level of mediocrity has risen — but there are so many books and stories being published that some of the best are being lost in the avalanche.

John Grayshaw- I heard that with TNG it was your idea to have one of the first officer's jobs to be leading the away missions and that the Captain should stay on the ship. I don't know if there's a question, it just made all the sense in the world to me...What other TNG elements like that were your idea?

I wrote "the bible," the writer/director's guide for the show. I suggested that the Captain be older, more mature, thoughtful hero — the first officer would be the action hero. I was one of the first to suggest a Klingon crew member. Gene vetoed it every time it was suggested, then wrote it in anyway.

I suggested Geordi Laforge be named after a specific fan with MS who had inspired us a few years before.

Things I argued against were the Holodeck, families, and Wesley Crusher.

John Grayshaw- By the second season Worf replaced Tasha Yar as the security chief and chief tactical officer and Geordi was the chief engineer, but in the first season of TNG Worf's position was...I'm not actually sure and Geordi's was...I'm not actually sure either. Was there a plan for the two characters when you were working on the show? And why wasn't there a chief engineer the first season?

Tasha was inspired by Vazquez in Aliens, and she was supposed to be in charge of Away Team Security. But when Gene wrote in Worf, things got muddy.

John Grayshaw- What was it that made TNG work better after a rough first two seasons? I saw in one interview that you said you didn't think it ever really captured the magic of TOS, but it was definitely a success in its own way. How was the TNG that immersed similar or different then where you saw the show going when you were working on it?

The problem was that Gene's health was deteriorating, both physically and mentally — and his lawyer had appointed himself "chief of staff," not only making decisions that were very bad for the show, but also rewriting scripts. When the Writers Guild found out, they let Paramount know that they were in breach of the Guild contracts. The lawyer was escorted off the lot by studio guards and not allowed back on. Gene was promoted to Executive Producer Emeritus and Rick Berman took over. At that point, the writing was no longer being compromised.

John Grayshaw- Can you explain how the Federation doesn't have money? It's never made sense to me. Picard has worked for Starfleet his whole life and I guess he doesn't get paid?

But when he retires do they like give him a house or something? Does he get a better house than a Starfleet washout would get? Or do they get the same house?

You'd have to ask Gene Roddenberry that one. When questions like this were raised, Gene would say, "Allow me the consistency of my inconsistencies." We did establish "credits" in "the Trouble With Tribbles."

John Grayshaw- The Ferengi were supposed to be like a serious villain, right? I mean they were responsible for the destruction of Picard's first command the Stargazer. How soon did everyone realize they weren't going to work as a serious threat, but worked as a comedic element?

The Ferengi were created by D.C. Fontana. Gene had made promises to her that were broken by the lawyer, so she wrote a memo about how the Ferengi were not only good businessmen, they kept their word. Gene was having trouble focusing by then, so he missed the subtext, but the lawyer understood what D.C. was saying and punished her for it, moving her office upstairs to the fourth floor. Then Gene wrote a memo about the Ferengi, half of which was about their genitals—that created some consternation among the staff, with people openly wondering what was going on in Gene's mind.

John Grayshaw- How do you feel about Star Trek Discovery? Specifically that it is a darker vision of Star Trek. Is there still a place for a more Utopian vision of the future?

I've only seen one episode, so it's not fair for me to comment on Discovery. But I am a firm believer that science fiction at its core is always about a more positive view of the future. Science fiction is a literature of possibilities. It says that the way things are is not the way they have to be. In that regard, SF is a subversive literature—it says we can do better. I think that, despite his flaws as a human being, that Gene Roddenberry deserves enormous credit for creating that as a positive vision of the future, that we will go boldly out there, to explore, to discover, and to learn what's so in this amazing universe.

John Grayshaw- Babylon 5. How involved were you with that show? Was that sort of a reaction to TNG? Did it feel like TNG 2.0?

Harlan Ellison was the Creative Consultant. He and Joe Straczynski wanted me to write the story of the parents who wouldn't let the doctor operate on their little boy. I was reluctant until I realized that we could do the one thing that no other show had ever done — we could let the boy die because of the arrogance of everyone involved. In the actual writing, I realized why they had wanted me to write it — I had just adopted the most marvelous little boy and I was hopelessly in love with the adventure of being his dad. So there's a lot of emotion in that script.

By the second season, however, Joe was doing most of the scripts, so it was totally his show.

Carole Borinstein wanted to tell you that she loved The Man Who Folded Himself.

I continue to be amazed at the staying power of that book.

John Grayshaw- The Man Who Folded Himself. Is traveling through time to have sex with yourself more narcissistic, homoerotic, or masturbatory...or a little of all three?

Well ... yes.

It was one of the things that time travel made possible, so I ... wrote it in. I was hesitant at first, until I realized that it was an important part of the story.

Wing Fu Fing- Sea of Grass series. Is there a book three planned and/or written? And will book two ever come out in paper? I'm old school and absolutely don't do ebooks.

Actually Book Two is the second half of Book One, and I never got to do the polish on it that I intended. I know what happens in Book Three, but haven't had time to write it yet.

Wing Fu Fing-13/14/15 O'clock was bloody brilliant and the most experimental thing I've read of yours - did you enjoy staying so far from a mainstream writing style and will you be doing more experimental fiction like that?

Thank you.

It started as a couple of paragraphs — a stylistic exercise in voice. I was just sitting and typing fragments. Then a few days later, I realized that this piece over here would fit that piece over there and after writing half of it and not knowing where it was going I realized that it wasn't Ellison, it wasn't Burroughs, it was Sturgeon — and that's how it resolved.

Milt Lapsarian-When will the Chtorr series be available on Kindle?

Eventually, yes. I'm doing some updating of the military technology first.

Eddie Steele-Really want to know when the next Chtorr book will be released.

When it's done. I'm working on the editing now. But ... there's a ... well, no, I can't talk about that.

SFBC Member-I just finished reading Star Wolf "In the Middle of Nowhere" and "Starhunt"...Are you planning on continuing that series?

I do have a couple of story ideas that I'd like to do. But I have other things to finish first.

Gary Denton- Are you optimistic about the United States and the future?

I am optimistic about the next generation. And because I am optimistic about the young people of America, I am optimistic about America. It will not be the America we predict—it will be the America that they choose to build.

John Grayshaw- You answered a question about the 2015 Hugo Awards ceremony in a 2016 interview you did with Fantasy and Science Fiction. So I'm not looking for you to revisit that, but rather reflecting on the Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies a couple years later, do you think we have seen the last of that kind of reactionary venom in sci-fi fandom? Or do you think we'll see their ilk again?

I think that this kerfuffle is pretty much over. I have no idea what the next kerfuffle will be.

Gary Denton-Were you surprised at the conservative Sad and Rabid Puppies movements in science fiction and the amount of online abuse you received in running the Hugo Awards ceremony?

I think I was more disappointed than surprised. But the overwhelming affection and support that I received from so many people more than made up for the nattering of the few.

John Grayshaw- Who/What are some of your favorite science fiction authors/stories now?

Kim Stanley Robinson, George R.R. Martin, John Varley, Connie Willis, Nora Jemison, Charlie Jane Anders, Matthew Hughes, and a whole bunch of newer writers who keep showing up in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. Too many to name. The magazines are a great place to discover new writers, they're a great way to keep up with the genre.

John Grayshaw- What advice would you give new writers?

Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair and type. Write. Keep writing. Then write some more. Keep writing. That's the only way to learn how to write. A million words, ten million words. Learn to recognize what works and what doesn't work. Challenge yourself. Create a new challenge every time you sit down. Never write the same story twice.

Gary Denton-Are there any movie or video projects you may become involved in?

Yes.

John Grayshaw- What are you working on now?

I'm collaborating on a disaster novel with Ctein. A large piece of it is in the May/June issue of Asimov's, called "Bubble And Squeak." The entire book, however, will be finished soon and I expect it will an effort we will both be very proud of.

John Grayshaw- Thank you so much for answering our questions!