

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Hugh Howey April, 2019

Hugh Howey is a self-described “bum,” who for the past twenty years has bounced from job to job— computer repair, roofing, yacht captain, bookstore clerk. In his spare time he wrote science fiction, and after growing impatient with the long waits and uncertain rewards of traditional publishing, he began self-publishing his work on Amazon.com. Just a few years later, his post-apocalyptic novel Wool, typed out in a storage room during his lunch breaks at the bookstore, was earning him over \$100,000 a month on Amazon, had secured him a six-figure book deal from Simon & Schuster, and had been optioned for film by Ridley Scott, director of Blade Runner and Alien.

John Grayshaw: Where are you answering these questions from? On the high seas? Set the scene for us.

Hugh Howey: I’m currently on my sailboat in Brisbane, Australia. I’m not often in big cities like this, but you caught me in a brief hiatus of civilization before pushing back off toward New Caledonia and the Pacific Islands.

Andrzej Wieckowski: Once you had found success self- publishing your work how did you find dealing with traditional print publishers and what were the challenges? Had you had experience in the industry before?

Hugh Howey: Until I started writing, my experience with publishers was as a bookseller and a critic. Both jobs gave me invaluable insight into the industry, like knowing how slim my odds of success would be, and how briefly my books would be on a store shelf. Seeing the reality of 99% of the books that got published made self-publishing much more attractive. I wanted to have more control over my works.

Once I had success as a self-published author, money was no longer a real concern, and then I could start pushing publishers for the kinds of deals and contracts that I think more authors deserve. Basically, I had the power to say “no” to all the normal clauses and deals. I found the process of working with publishers to be very rewarding. There are so many great people in the major publishing houses. Most of them also want authors to have more autonomy and pay. Many of the bad things about major publishers are institutional.

Mel Todd: As an indie author - is there anything you wish you'd known back then? And what did you think was the best part of going traditional?

Hugh Howey: That’s a great question. I think at the time I started publishing, everything was in such flux that nobody knew what was going on. The entire industry was in turmoil. Major bookstore chains were shuttering; Amazon was having disputes with major publishers; there was all kinds of consolidation and job loss; it was almost apocalyptic.

At the same time, it was the best time imaginable to be a reader. There were suddenly more options, more ways of reading with audiobooks and ebooks on the rise, and more of the underserved genres that readers love were suddenly inundated with new reads from authors free to publish several times a year.

Had I known more, I would've made more mistakes. One of my advantages was that I didn't have all this calcified old knowledge gumming up the works. I briefly dipped into forums full of old-school writers as I sought out advice, and 100% of everything I heard was dead wrong. Had I listened to any of it, I wouldn't be sitting on my sailboat right now having sailed around most of the world for four years.

So what do I wish I knew back then? To trust my gut even more. To listen to the naysayers even less. I made so many correct decisions, and a lot of it was dumb luck or just making what felt like the logical choice. I got incredibly lucky, and I'd be terrified of going about it any other way.

John Grayshaw: What advice do you have for writers who are just starting out and trying to “make it”?

Hugh Howey: Finish your art. Write that rough draft to the last chapter. Write interesting stories clearly. Don't try too hard. Instead, create a world you want to live in, and spend every spare hour in that world pushing your story forward. When you get done, do it again. Plan on writing ten novels before you even ask yourself if you have a chance. Yes, ten novels.

This is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't get caught up in writing sequels. Instead, bounce around and tell lots of types of stories. Connect with other writers; join a writing group or start one up. Read, read, read. This is a profession, like becoming a professional athlete. If you totally commit and work harder than any of your peers, you can make a living at this.

Suzanne Fricke: Tell me what you were reading when you were writing Wool and what are some of your favorite books?

Hugh Howey: I mostly read non-fiction. When I was younger I read a lot of sci-fi and fantasy, but from college onwards, it's been maybe one work of fiction for every fifty works of non-fiction. At the time I wrote WOOL I was reading a lot of economic works. This was right after the Great Recession, so I was reading TOO BIG TO FAIL and THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT.

Some of my favorite recent reads have been SAPIENS and HOMO DEUS. I'm a junkie for learning new things. I love books like Bill Bryson's A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEARLY EVERYTHING where it feels like I'm learning something new on every page. Carl Sagan's COSMOS was another of those. And anything by Stephen Pinker, Judith Rich Harris, Malcolm Gladwell and Michael Lewis.

John Grayshaw: Why do you think Wool was so successful?

Hugh Howey: Dumb luck, price, timing, and word-of-mouth. WOOL started off as a short story priced at 99 cents, so it was a very low barrier of entry. You could read it in twenty minutes and not risk a lot of money. Once people tried it, they were hooked, and they wrote a lot of reviews and told a lot of friends. It went viral.

But how does anything go viral? I've written ten thousand Tweets and none of them have taken off. Some of them have been quite clever. Meanwhile, lots of other people have had Tweets that took off. Why? Nobody knows. It's quite chaotic, human nature. Especially when you get a lot of us interacting.

I think artists can drive themselves nuts wondering why some things succeed while others fail. You have to enjoy the process, and create the art for its own sake rather than for some reward, and you need to learn how to be happy for those who get lucky and not blame yourself when it doesn't happen to you. That's the only way to stay sane.

Darcy Baggett Miller: I read that you wrote the book Wool in a matter of weeks. Was it the success of that book that inspired you to write the next 2 in the series, Shift and Dust or did you already have those books on your mind? If you hadn't already planned on writing them, what was your thought process for tying the 3 books together so well?

Hugh Howey: I didn't really want to write a sequel to WOOL. I loved the book too much to cheapen it by turning it into a series. I really wanted to put that story in a frame and leave it as-is.

But the demand for more in that world was so intense that I couldn't refuse. I also felt so grateful to the readers who changed my life – who allowed me to quit my day job and write full-time – that I wanted to give them more of what they were clamoring for.

One way I worked to balance these desires was to take a time and perspective change into the sequel, SHIFT. Even the title was a direct reference to this desire. I wanted to leave the characters in WOOL right where they were for another book and tell a different story. It was a huge risk, but I love the way it all came together. It allows WOOL to work as a single tale, or as the start of something bigger. And then DUST pulls the two books and all the characters together in a more traditional bit of closure.

Of course, by the time SHIFT was underway, I had a lot of pressure from publishers all over the world. The book has been released in over 40 countries in more languages than I knew existed. There's a bit of an obligation to all these readers around the world to continue the story. I have had to force myself not to revisit these characters and draw them out into something that never ends or gets repetitive or dull. As a reader I've seen that happen far too many times. Finding the right balance was critical for me.

Adrienne Clark: Looking back, would you have changed anything in the Wool series?

Hugh Howey: It's difficult to regret anything about a book that has changed my life in such profound and amazing ways. One thing I didn't consider while writing WOOL was that many readers would only read this series of mine. I have other works that focus more on immigration, race, sexuality, religion, and politics. Writing novels has been a way for me to explore my personal philosophy in an entertaining manner, and I was able to write a lot of books to dabble in everything that keeps my brain humming.

But now I hear from readers only familiar with WOOL who ask why I don't include more LGBTQ characters, or why I don't explore religion more, and I have to point to other works where these are the central themes. So I guess I didn't expect that I'd need to put bits of all my philosophies into each of my books. I was too busy writing for myself most of the time.

Rachel Fike: I had a chance to read Wool when it was offered almost free through kindle/Amazon. I loved the book and couldn't put it down. It was gritty, dark, and complex. Would you want to see this made into a TV series or movie?

Hugh Howey: TV series for sure. It's currently in development at AMC, largely because of my love of their past works like BREAKING BAD and THE WALKING DEAD. With a series, we're going to be able to show parts of the story that the novel skipped over, rather than cutting things out and upsetting fans with a movie adaptation.

John Grayshaw: Has there been any movement on a Wool movie or TV show or is it still just "optioned"?

Hugh Howey: There's been a lot of movement recently. A pilot script is floating around and getting a bit of polish right now. I wouldn't be surprised if this moves to a writer's room in the next few months. But these things are so fragile. My hopes of a show actually airing remain very small.

Eva Sable: What is the experience of having other authors writing in your world like? Fan fiction is no longer confined to USENET groups ... And, particularly, how do you feel about these works being sold? Do you have any control, creative or otherwise, in that process?

Hugh Howey: I encouraged the fan fiction from the start. As far as I know, I was the first author to allow fan fiction to be sold and for other authors to profit from those sales without me making a penny. It's just always made sense to me to share this world with other writers.

John Grayshaw: What Wool fanfiction do you recommend?

Hugh Howey: Patrice Fitzgerald and Jason Gurley both wrote amazing stories in the world of WOOL. I highly recommend their works outside of the WOOL stories as well.

Darcy Baggett Miller: What direction are you going with your book Sand? Are you still planning a sequel? And is there plans for a TV show or movie based on this book?

Hugh Howey: I have a sequel in the works, but I don't feel like rushing it. SAND was optioned by Amazon for a TV series, but there hasn't been much movement forward. I tend to not even think about these things to be honest. You can drive yourself mad, and you have almost no control over the process. Best to ignore it and be shocked if something does happen.

John Grayshaw: Why did you drop out of college?

Hugh Howey: I was living on a small sailboat at the time. I realized I would be happier sailing down to the Bahamas than getting trapped in a career. I have very simple needs. I could fish for food and catch rain water. I could drop an anchor in a small cove and live off nature.

I think my sailing lifestyle and my writing career have both greatly benefited from my complete immunity to peer pressure. I've never felt like I need to live a life for someone else's esteem. It's kept

me from being hemmed in by expectations and tradition. Why do we need to work a long career? To afford a big home? A fancy car? Expensive meals out? For what?

There are no rules for what makes a satisfying life, as long as we aren't harming others. We have to figure that out for ourselves.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the authors who influenced you?

Hugh Howey: Orson Scott Card, Carl Sagan, John D. MacDonald, Richard Dawkins, just to name a few. When I look at the authors who influenced me the most, it's sad to see how dominated the list is by white dudes. I hope that's a product of the times in which I grew up. I think publishing is becoming a lot more diverse and inclusive these days, but we still have a long way to go.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers you are friends with? What are some amusing stories about those relationships?

Hugh Howey: Oh boy, don't get me started. I've been very lucky to get to know some of my favorite authors. Stuart Brand and Kevin Kelly have become two of my dearest friends, and I love their works and them as people so damn much. I guess it's a little strange to be incredibly moved by their books over the years, and to have found myself on separate occasions with each of them naked in a hot bath of some sort. Never thought that would be in my future.

Getting into Ernie Cline's DeLorean to go eat tacos was pretty surreal. And just two days ago Peter Cawdron had me convinced he was a Liberal in a game of Secret Hitler, but he was Hitler all along, and he conned me so hard in front of his family that I don't think I'll ever trust another human being for as long as I live.

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of your works? And why?

Hugh Howey: I, ZOMBIE is one of my favorites, because it explores my lack of belief in free will. I try to steer people away from that book, but it's probably my most literary and my deepest work. I also love MACHINE LEARNING, because all my favorite short pieces are collected in one beautiful edition. But maybe the best thing I've ever written is BEACON 23. I don't think I'd change a thing about that novel.

John Grayshaw: Are you a sailor that writes? Or a writer that sails?

Hugh Howey: I'm a sailor that writes. I've been a sailor for a lot longer than I've been a writer. I think all writers need to be something "other" first and foremost. Otherwise, you've got nothing interesting to write about.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies? (Other than sailing and writing).

Hugh Howey: Photography, board games, paddle boarding, scuba, kite surfing, cooking, and watching TV/films. :)

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick with?

Hugh Howey: Not anymore. I used to write from the moment I woke up until lunch, but now it's in dribs and drabs. I'm concentrating more on enjoying this once-in-a-lifetime journey around the world.

John Grayshaw: Do you sometimes feel like people ask you more about your success as a writer rather than asking about the actual stories?

Hugh Howey: Totally, but I'm cool with that. I think stories should be up to the reader's interpretation. I don't want to color the reading process too much.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

Hugh Howey: Another trilogy of anthologies with John Joseph Adams (I'm writing a short story for each book and editing the rest of the stories). Also giving notes on a few TV adaptations underway.

John Grayshaw: What are your goals for the future?

Hugh Howey: I don't really have any, and I feel that absence. Right now I'm just sailing onwards. But I need to start planning another long term goal soon. It's good to have something in the distance to focus on.