

Science Fiction Book Club
Larry Niven Q and A
March 2018

We are beyond honored to have the opportunity to speak with legendary science fiction author Larry Niven. He is the recipient of five Hugos, one Nebula, four Locus awards, and the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award. He has written and co-written such works as Ringworld, Mote in God's Eye, Lucifer's Hammer, Footfall, and so many more!

Erik Wilkenfeldt: I really enjoyed *Destiny's Road*. There was an easy going feel to the story and to the main protagonist, as he went through his trials. Was there a period of time in your life that influenced this story.....such as a long extended period of travel? I ask as this story reminds me of some of the travels I have taken, or have not and wish I had.

Larry Niven: There may have been travel. The book was delivered four years late. I flinched from writing a life story. Not my style.

Andrew ten Broek: Amazon announced a little while back that it would develop *Ringworld* into a TV show. What role will you be having on this project? (If any).

Larry Niven: None so far. They don't keep me in the loop.

Kevin Kuhn: Mr. Niven - big fan! I'm excited about the upcoming adaptation of *Ringworld* on Amazon. However, does this preclude the possibility of a full feature *Ringworld* film in the near future?

Larry Niven: Not my decision.

SFBC Member: Mr. Niven, I had the good fortune of getting to read one of your books for the first time just over a year ago. Your work was inspirational for me. I just loved it! Since then, I've increased my efforts in my own writing. I'm educated in writing, engineering, and math, but obviously new to the professional game. If you had to offer up advice for a new science fiction writer, what would it be? Is there something you wish someone had told you when you first started off? And don't worry, I know a good writer should first be a good reader. I can't wait to read more of your work. Thanks in advance!

Larry Niven: Start with short stories. They make you concise, and you can make your mistakes faster.

SFBC Member: Mr. Niven, you've influenced a lot of authors. Who were your influences? Were they mostly of the science fiction genre?

Larry Niven: All of the older generation, most now dead, shaped my mind.

Thomas Watson: It's been a while since I read *Ringworld*, but that example of world building has stuck with me ever since. How did the idea of such a structure come to you and evolve into the form it took in the book?

Larry Niven: I saw a way to build a Dyson-sphere-like structure cheaper.

Mel Powell: What comes first, the science, the plot or the characters? By the way, *The Mote in God's Eye* was the first SF novel I read as a teenager and I reread it every few years. It expanded my reading horizons and I've appreciated it ever since. Just wanted to say thanks.

Larry Niven: The idea comes first...and it's usually the background. That shapes the rest.

SFBC Member: Well Mr. Niven 'The Mote in the God's Eye' was perhaps the first time I read about the 'hyperspace' as a mode of superfast Space Travel (relying solely on my fading old memories). It was not a one page fleeting description either. It was explained in truly meticulous detail. Was it the first time someone thought of 'hyperspace'? Was it based on an existing unproven theory in the world of real astrophysics?

Larry Niven: 'Hyperspace' is a borrowed mathematical term, and we were not the first. The Alderson version was shape for us by Dan Alderson, JPL's Sane Genius, RIP.

SFBC Member: *Mote in God's Eye* went to extraordinary details of how the alien race's social structure was including a hidden warrior clan. What was the whole imagination/concept of it based on? How does one imagine such a fantastical world in such vividness considering there is no precedent? Does a sci-fi author dream of such stuff in sleep?

Larry Niven: We dreamed most of it up during one long night with brandy and coffee and notepaper. We started with an alien from a story I'd given up on.

Doll Aiello: Triple wow! You can tell by my question I don't go cons much. Here it is: How did you decide on the anatomy for your alien species, namely the Moties, and the invading species in *Footfall*?

Larry Niven: Moties: the shape was left over from half a story of mine. My thought: backbones aren't a great design. And: symmetry isn't always necessary.

The Fithp were shaped with great care. We made them easy to describe, not really alien enough to be plausible. We were looking for a mass market.

SFBC Member: So.. Ghost Ships? ;)

Larry Niven: Greatly changed, they're in the book I'm writing with Greg Benford, currently called "Glory".

Patrick Manion: The long lost third *Integral Trees/Smoke Ring* story?

Larry Niven: I tried to write it and gave up.

SFBC Member: Dear Mister Niven, could you describe to us your writing environment, and how it has changed between when you started and where you write now?

Larry Niven: No, that's a whole book's worth.

SFBC Member: Mr. Niven, Why did you start writing?

Larry Niven: Ran out of better options, and started daydreaming whole story ideas.

Marty Blood: Mr. Niven, an honor. Your thoughts on Peter Watts and Kim Stanley Robinson? Thank you

Larry Niven: Watts: haven't run across him. Robinson: excellent writer.

Tom Britz: Larry, how do you conceptualize a story? Do you begin with a character or an idea? How much research is usually involved?

Larry Niven: I usually do the research, reading for fun, before I get the story. The idea comes first.

Anastasia Hilvers: 1. Your "Known Space" has had many, many characters. Which were your favorites? Why? 2. You have co-written several books. Which co-author was especially fun to work with and why?

Larry Niven: Beowulf Shaeffer, Gil the ARM, Louis Wu. I've written the most books with Jerry Pournelle, and his friendship shaped my life.

Milt Lapsarian: Any chance of Mote or Footfall being brought to the big screen or TV?

Larry Niven: I'm ready. The Special Effects departments are ready. Make me an offer.

SFBC Member: Currently with the accelerated rate of technological advancements, how do you do predict or project this in your new developments?

Larry Niven: I'm losing ground.

Robert Hamelin: Any truth to the rumor that Nessus will be launching his own 'Private Label' Carrot Juice?

Larry Niven: General Products may have an interest.

Marcos Carvalho: Good morning, Mr. Larry Niven, what is necessary for "Ringworld" to have a Portuguese translation? Just like your other books?

Larry Niven: Check with my agent: Eleanor Wood @ Spectrum Literary Agency.

Michael Dryden-Cripton: Hello Mr Niven I was first introduced to your work through Lucifer's Hammer which remains one of my favorites. My question for you is with respect to Jerry Pournelle what is the writing process like collaborating with another author, and are there any authors that you have not worked with that you might like to? Thank you kindly for your time today.

Larry Niven: Collaborating is less lonely than working alone. It's more work, though. You do it to write a better book.

Jim Dean I've enjoyed promoting SciFi to newbies for many years - I often relate the "genesis" of Teela as an example of how a great writer builds a backstory. I've always wondered though - how many generations of birthright lottery winners preceded her?

Larry Niven: Might be three to six. I hadn't decided.

Eva Sable: How do you actually pronounce "Phssthpok"? This has bothered me for many years, and has been an element of debate amongst my friends. I love Known Space. It's my favorite series.

Larry Niven: The "pok" is a click done with the tongue.

James Mosteller: Mr. Niven were you aware of the Magic the Gathering Card named in your honor.

Larry Niven: I've signed many.

Jim Dean: Here's a fun one: were you actually there at the con way back when, as the MIT students ran around the hotel in the early morning hours chanting "The Ringworld is unstable"? Or is that story just made up?

Larry Niven: I was there. They were there.

Zia Akbar: 1) IMHO, in your works, you depict sexual activity and its ramifications with regard to relationships and their impact (e.g. Carlos Wu and Sharrol, etc), in more detail than most writers. Would you agree or disagree? i.e. would you describe this as part of your personal taste in your writing, or do you see it as something which would naturally interest most science-fiction writers even if they do not always deal with it in their works?

Larry Niven: Sex and sexual attitudes are part of world building. And character building.

Zia Akbar: 2) Keeping in mind that to the joy of all of us, you created the Kzinti: are you a cat lover?

Larry Niven: I am a cat lover. Our 20 year old Amelia is gone.

John Grayshaw: Has anyone from Paramount ever called you about using the Kintzi again? Are we going to see them in Star Trek Discovery season 2? ;)

Larry Niven: The Kzinti are active in a series of books, THE MAN-KZIN WARS. You won't see them on Star Trek, I think.

John Grayshaw: I read in an interview you did with OMNI that DC comics called you when they were writing the Darkest Night storyline because they couldn't remember what the Sun Eater did. Have you gotten any more calls from them lately?

Larry Niven: I think that was the last. It's been a long time since DC and I interacted. But John Byrne called me while he was reshaping Superman.

John Grayshaw: What comics did you read when you were growing up? Do you think that contributed to you becoming a writer at all?

Larry Niven: I read whatever comics fell into my hands. I remember Robotman as fun. Sure, they shaped my writing. A planet on fire shaped the end of WORLD OF PTAVVS.

Howard Allan: What prompted you to write "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex"?

Larry Niven: Party conversation with LASFS members. Then Bjo Trimble made me write it up for a fanzine.

John Grayshaw: "Man of Steel Women of Kleenex" How did it end up being published in a Men's Adult Magazine? Just that once did you feel a bit like Kilgore Trout from Kurt Vonnegut's novels who has all of his stories published in Adult magazines? How did you get the legendary Curt Swan to illustrate it?

Larry Niven: I was young, looking for variety. Harlan Ellison introduced me to editors of Knight. As for writing for the adult market, I've only been in Playboy twice, but they're an excellent market.

John Grayshaw: Your novels with Jerry Pournelle are some of my favorites. How did your collaboration work? Who did what? What strengths and weaknesses did you each bring to the partnership?

Larry Niven: We learned our strengths and weaknesses fast. I wrote better, he plotted better. He knew military and politics. I handled aliens and madness. We traded off on the writing, but he did more of it. But whatever specific action you remember, it's probably mine.

John Grayshaw: My favorite part of Footfall is the government talking to sci-fi writers when the aliens invade. Do you think you'd get a call from Washington if aliens invaded tomorrow?

Larry Niven: Yes. It's too obvious to ignore. No mundane readers had a problem believing in the Threat Team.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

Larry Niven: Work with Greg Benford, third in the BOWL OF HEAVEN series. Work with Matthew Harrington, a story I quit on fifty-five years ago. A short story with Steven Barnes. And I made a New Year resolution to write stuff by myself.

John Grayshaw: I had a questions about Teela Brown's luck in Ringworld. If I end up leaving the house for work late it might seem like bad luck, but if leaving late means I miss a 10 car pile-up on the highway, it would turn out to be good luck. Is there an outside force that guides Teela Brown's luck?

Larry Niven: Author control. But also, any chain of events can be twisted into 'the best of all possible worlds'. See CANDIDE.

John Grayshaw: When you wrote "All the Myriad Ways" did it freak you out too? The whole idea that there are infinite dimensions and that your actions don't matter really messed me up. I could hardly

go to work for a week because I figured there was an infinite number of other Johns going to work so what was the harm if I was one of the infinite number of Johns slacking off?

Larry Niven: Yes, it's a freaky picture. I don't like that aspect of quantum physics, even if I write about it.

John Grayshaw: "1984" is our Group Read discussion novel this month. Your novel "Oath of Fealty" featured a security force that watched everything, but it wasn't a dystopia. As technology increases how do people maintain their freedoms? Or is it impossible?

Larry Niven: "I don't necessarily want to live there," Jerry Pournelle said. I don't either. But I've thought that privacy may have been a passing fad, a few hundred years and poof.

John Grayshaw: What do you think about the state of America's space program?

Larry Niven: I love it. I also love the commercial spacecraft, and the car headed for Mars.

John Grayshaw: The Moties are a highly specialized race. What did Robert Heinlein think of them given his famous passage from "Time Enough for Love"? -"A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects."

Larry Niven: Robert did a full proofing of MOTE. He must have loved the Moties because he didn't try to reshape them...except that he didn't like the name for their icon, Crazy Eddie. I insisted on keeping it.

John Grayshaw: Thank you so much for doing this Q and A with us!

Larry Niven: A pleasure.