

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson, May 2019

Kim Stanley Robinson has published nineteen novels and numerous short stories but is best known for his Mars trilogy. Many of his novels and stories have ecological, cultural, and political themes running through them and feature scientists as heroes. Robinson has won numerous awards, including the Hugo Award and Nebula Award for Best Novel.

Paul Schulz: Your fiction is basically optimistic, even in your more dystopian works. Do you find it difficult to hold that viewpoint in these times?

Yes I do. Civilization is on a bad trajectory, and it will take a lot of imagination, skill and hard work to avoid a mass extinction event, by creating a truly sustainable civilization. Whether we're up to the task, I don't know. But since it is still possible, physically, to do it, I think staying optimistic is a political and moral necessity, an act of will power to keep us working for the good. Sometimes I've called this "angry optimism" to indicate it's an attitude that needs to be wielded like a club sometimes. Also, I imagine giving up on optimism or pessimism, and just doing the needed work. In other words, optimism as a choice rather than just a feeling one has inherently.

François Peneaud: Do you consider your Mars trilogy to be a realistic view of a possible terraformation of Mars?

Not quite realistic, and less so now than when I wrote it, because since then the robotic rovers have discovered perchlorates poisonous to humans are common in Martian sand. Also there seems to be less nitrogen than needed, and maybe even not enough water. But the main thing that was always unrealistic in my book was its timeline. I had the terraforming happening in about 300 years when it might take more like 3,000.

However, even with all that said, nothing in those books is physically impossible. Even the timeline could work, maybe, if we went at it full bore. So it's pretty realistic, and compared to a lot of science fiction, very realistic. But a strict realism was never my goal.

Jim Dean: Given current day tech, would you modify the timeline of your books?

My books don't have a coherent timeline. Each novel postulates a different future for humanity and then describes that. There are some similarities between books, and even borrowings of characters from book to book, but not a coherent future history. I never wanted to do that, because I wanted each book to be free to become its own thing, and to suggest a different future history.

Also, in each book, the date given is always a kind of compromise between how fast things might happen and how much I want to discuss things going on right now. Say science fiction is like the 3-D glasses you put on to see 3-D movies—one lens is about the present, the other is about the future. Reading sf then becomes an exercise in letting the two images flow into one, with the new sense of depth having to do with time and history. The book's supposed date of events will be just one part of

that dual vision. Take New York 2140 for an example—it probably would take longer to get a 50 foot sea-level rise, but also the book is discussing a political situation very reminiscent of right now. 2140 therefore represents a compromise date, a kind of literary game or artifact—it's wrong in two different ways, but right as a method, so that's okay.

I used to think near-future science fiction shouldn't have dates at all, as in my GREEN EARTH. But even that is variable, depending on what effect I want to create.

François Peneaud: What is for you the value of telling alternate history tales, as you did with The Years of Rice and Salt?

It mainly serves to show that history is not pre-determined, but is what we make it. It could have gone differently in the past, and so it could be any kind of a thing in the future, which means what we do now matters.

The other big value of alternative history is simply the creation of new stories.

I think the mainstream of science fiction, which sets stories in the future and says “this could happen!” is more powerful rhetorically than alternative history, which says “this didn't happen, but if it did, it would have been really interesting!”

Erik Wilkenfeldt: In your book "Aurora" you wrote a pretty bleak story about Space travel. Is there a message there? would you like to see mankind working towards the betterment of earth first, before we attempt far reaching space travel?

I would like to see us bettering Earth, yes. But the message of AURORA is even bleaker than that—it's saying that humanity will never be able to “go to the stars”—that this is a fantasy we tell ourselves, partly for the fun of that big new story space, partly, perhaps, as a replacement for heaven and immortality. The story tries to illustrate that the combination of all the problems involved add up to more difficulties than can be overcome with any realistically achievable technology.

People have argued against AURORA's case, but mainly by invoking various magical solutions—we'll freeze ourselves, we'll download our brains, we'll send frozen embryos, we'll evolve into different creatures, we'll go faster than light, we'll develop perfectly sealed unbreaking machines to live in, etc. For the most part, these arguments are obviously weak. I think the book's case is not refutable. The best one can say is that after a few thousand years of success here on Earth, and after we've inhabited the solar system successfully too, we might develop a tech good enough to get us to the very closest stars, maybe by living inside spinning asteroids going very fast with little worlds enclosed in them. But I don't think that's likely to happen.

Francois Leblanc: Thoughts on Robert Zubrin?

Zubrin's plan for getting to Mars quickly and cheaply is a good one and should be pursued. Also, many elements of his plan have been internalized by all the subsequent plans, as being excellent ideas for

solving the specific problems of getting to Mars and setting up a base there. It's been a real contribution to the Mars project.

Francois Leblanc: Astronauts haven't ventured beyond Earth orbit for nearly fifty years. Though momentum for a Mars mission has been building in popular culture and some important progress has been made in commercial space ventures, public opinion still seems deeply divided on this issue and political will for a realistic goal (and the necessary budget toward such efforts) remains lacking.

What single thing do you believe some space-faring nation or company can and should do right now that would most help break humans out of the low orbit trap and back outward? And do you favour a commercially-led initiative or a government-led series of missions? Should we head back to the moon first or would you rather see us shoot straight for Mars?

I prefer government-led missions. Space has always been a public/private combined effort, and when the public is involved, the public is more interested. The privatization of space is like the enclosure of the commons, but luckily it does not pay in the way that enclosure paid in Europe. So space will stay a commons, and that's good. Space should be of the people, by the people, and for the people.

What I think should happen first is a return of humans to the moon. That's starting now on multiple fronts, both public and private. Doing that successfully will create expertise and interest for a later humans-to-Mars mission. Landing on Mars is extremely difficult, so we will need to be more sure than we are about that technology before we try it with people on board. But I think if it's done as part of a sequence of increasingly sophisticated efforts, it will be tried and will succeed. There is no rush to get this done, however, and it should be done right.

Meanwhile, I like the robotic explorers of the solar system we've been sending out there.

Wing Fu Fing: Huge fan, and I recommend your work often to not just SF fans but literary friends as well. You don't disappoint. I was intrigued when I read you did your, I believe thesis on Philip K. Dick. Very different writer than you and would be very interested to read your thoughts on him. Is there any plan to publish the writing? A hard-SF writer of very realistic novels pondering the twists and turns of Dick's paranoid writings, I think, would be an interesting read.

Thanks for your comments, glad you enjoy the books.

My doctoral dissertation on PKD's novels was published in 1984 by UMI Press, as THE NOVELS OF PHILIP K. DICK. It was a small print run, and I don't think it makes sense to republish it. It's just a dissertation, and while it does an okay job of introducing PKD's novels, and suggesting a kind of shape to his literary career, it's not an in-depth analysis like some that have appeared, and I think now that it's a little too simplistic about the context of 1940s and 1950s science fiction. So I prefer to keep the focus on my novels.

Robyn Vyner-smith: I love the Capital trilogy but in recently it's started to feel like the climate events in the books are all too plausible. When you wrote them, did you anticipate real world climate / weather events would escalate in the future, or did you think of it as a good storyline but an unlikely

reality? What contributed to the solutions your characters found? (The science solutions, not the political will!)

Thanks. The climate events depicted in that novel were already beginning to happen when I wrote the books. Weather has always had a crazy edge to it, and now, with more energy in the system, these extreme events have increased in number and intensity. I just moved the events right to Washington D.C., and to San Diego and the North Atlantic. All of the events had already happened elsewhere.

As for solutions, some of them came out of the scientific literature, or even from earlier science fiction—Jules Verne wrote about pumping sea water in the dry lake basins of the Sahara, for instance. Other solutions in there were my own ideas, like trying to re-salt the North Atlantic to restart the Gulf Stream after a stall. But it's always best to regard my solutions with a grain of salt! I am an English major and often get things wrong. Some of my ideas for terraforming Mars are notorious now for their ineffectuality. But luckily there are a lot of ideas out there from experts, and I find these and use them in my books. Sometimes I later discover that the experts' ideas also have fantasy elements in them, not pointed out until after I wrote them into my books. That's made me more cautious, and now when incorporating climate solutions, I run any idea by a number of experts to see if I can be alerted to fantasy elements before I use them.

Beth McCrea: Love your books! What are some reads that you've adored from other authors?

Thank you! Fun to talk about books I love. Recently, I loved Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet. Also Mike McCormack's SOLAR BONES. Before that, many novels have thrilled me—Dos Passos' USA, several by Garcia-Marquez, also Peter Matthiessen, Cecelia Holland, Virginia Woolf, Joyce Cary—on and on it could go. I keep a bookcase of special favorites, just for fun—one shelf for mainstream novels, one for science fiction, one for poetry, one for non-fiction. I adjust these shelves from time to time, as a game to remind myself of these books and how much I've enjoyed them.

Beth McCrea: Also, what's your writing schedule like (e.g., do you set aside a certain number of pages or hours every day to write)?

When I'm writing, I try to write every day. How many hours or pages don't matter to me, it's more a matter of writing every day. Sometimes I've gone on long streaks, and kept them alive by doing a "Cal Ripken," meaning doing a paragraph before bed on a day when I haven't gotten any writing done. Using that method I've sometimes hit streaks of up to 250 days. That creates a certain momentum and flow. In general, I work far longer (like all day) when revising than I do when writing first draft (which is more like two hours).

Gary Denton: Red Mars was the first time I read a science fiction novel and felt it was world class great literature. But also I felt many of my friends wouldn't like it because it was more literature and not an adventure tale. I haven't noticed it but do you write some of your books trying for different audiences, like some more serious and sounding an alarm and some this is more of a fun read?

Mainly I try to write the best book I can, given my sense of what kind of book it is. The one time that the idea shoved me toward a fun read (although I think any kind of goodness is fun) was ESCAPE FROM KATHMANDU. My wife and I laughed a lot in Nepal, and I wanted to convey that pleasure.

I'm not interested in sounding alarms. Every future is alarming, also exciting, full of potential, etc. So alarming or not isn't a good definition of seriousness. The main thing about being serious is trying to make the best book possible. Some ideas are weird, so I go with that—as with A SHORT SHARP SHOCK or THE MEMORY OF WHITENESS. Time travel is so unreal it required a mood and tone like a Renaissance fantasia, especially if Galileo is your time traveler—thus GALILEO'S DREAM. On the other hand, near future science fiction is just like ordinary realism, but with trap doors in it that drop readers into new places. And so on.

Thomas Watson: There are many outlets for creativity. How did writing happen to become yours?

I always loved to read. It was so important to me that I began writing, just to try to join the fun. I still love it the most of all art forms, even though I dearly love music of all kinds. Recently I read the novelist David Markson in an interview saying that he could list 300 favorite novels before he came to the first movie he loved as much. I don't know if I'd go that far, but maybe I would. Literature is what I love.

Randall Luttenberg: It's always a challenge to write about a near-future that may soon be overtaken by actual events. In the 15 years since you kicked off your Washington DC climate change trilogy with "40 Signs of Rain", would you revisit the science or politics as portrayed in those books or do you see things unfolding largely the way you imagined? (As someone who lives near Rock Creek the whole tale seems very close to home. My wife and I enjoyed the series very much, I'm a longtime fan but they were the first of your books she'd read).

Those books (and now I've compressed them into a single novel called GREEN EARTH, which is the version I prefer) have turned into a weird mix of historical fiction, alternative history, alternative realism, and near future science fiction. I think that combination might be either distracting or interesting. Looking at it from now, I'd leave that novel as it is, but then write more books to add new insights—like NEW YORK 2140, or the one I'm working on now. Again, these aren't sequels, nor in the same timeline, just reconsiderations of the same issues from where we are now.

When I compressed the DC trilogy into GREEN EARTH, I did add three new things. Two were phrases for events I had described in the books, but didn't have these new names for at that time—atmospheric river, and polar vortex. The third addition was this: more fund-raising. More money in politics. That was an omission in my first version of the book, I mainly just forgot it, but it shouldn't be forgotten. Our political representatives have to fund-raise all the time, and as a result their votes and their laws are not for us, but for their funders. So I added a little about that.

Alexandra Brown: One thing I loved about the Red Mars trilogy was that it made me want to go out and study every field of science you discussed. Thank you for such realistic thought provoking stories.

I personally love the books that continue space exploration such as 2312 and Aurora. Do you have plans on more books along that line? Perhaps expanded stories on some of the colonies referenced in 2312? Or even a far future after Earth has become uninhabitable?

Thanks for that.

I won't do a novel about a far future in which Earth has become uninhabitable. I don't think humans would survive that.

AURORA was my way of saying we can't get to the stars.

That leaves the solar system, which I've loved writing about since the beginning of my career. I think of it as our neighborhood, and a beautiful neighborhood it is.

However, now I've written about every planet and its moons in some detail, and I don't want to repeat myself. RED MOON was partly about me tagging the last place in the solar system I hadn't written about. I suppose I could do the same for Neptune, which I've never visited in my fiction. But Delany's TRITON kind of does it for that place, and I can't think of any story on Neptune that would be significantly different than the places I wrote about in 2312 and the Mars books and THE MEMORY OF WHITENESS and ICEHENGE. So I have no plans for Neptune.

That leaves me mulling my options. I'll find out more later.

Lee Russell: There is a wonderfully engaging relationship between character, plot and setting in your Mars trilogy. Your world building is extensive and believable, which really helps to drive the story along. How did you go about building such a realistic setting for these stories, and was there a single character who you really enjoyed writing about?

Thanks for that. I was very lucky to write those books right after a huge new load of information about Mars had come in, with Mariner and Viking missions and later studies through the 1980s. Other writers used that same information, but I tried to use all of it, based on the first detailed maps and satellite photos that gave us Mars's surface in such wonderful detail. Then also, the same scientific community that was investigating the new Mars data came up with the idea of terraforming it—Carl Sagan was important there, and the people in the "Mars Underground," and many others. All that information could still be gathered onto a single bookshelf and comprehended by a non-scientist reader. It was an amazing opportunity.

I enjoyed all the characters in the Mars books. Maybe Maya and Sax were particular favorites when writing their chapters, but really it was all of them—a group of people I still find surprisingly real in my head.

Andrzej Wieckowski: Which scientific possibility are you most disappointed hasn't come true yet, and which do you believe may be just around the corner?

I wish human longevity treatments would get cracking! I could use them sooner rather than later.

Around the corner, I think we may see quantum computers pretty soon, although it's a question how useful these will be. Most of the more advance AI stuff looks like fund-raising fantasy to me. I do think people will be back on the Moon soon.

Molly Greenspring: Mars has been a theme in science fiction for a long time. With the theme and nature of writing changing over time from writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs and others. How do you feel the nature of writing has changed since you wrote The Mars Trilogy? What do you think the future of science fiction and Mars may be?

I don't think writing has changed much since I finished BLUE MARS. There's more fantasy, but that's content, not writing. There's more second person point of view—a party trick for the most part, a fad, like present tense. I've done both, but their use is specialized and usually a weakness, especially second person. “You go down to the store;” no.

Basically, writing as such is pretty stable. That's why we can read Defoe's novels and Shakespeare's plays. All the modern writing tricks are in TRISTRAM SHANDY, or in Jane Austen's novels. That stability is one of the joys of literature.

Future of Mars? I think we'll get humans there and set up little scientific stations like McMurdo or South Pole in Antarctica, and we'll staff those bases, and it will be like that for a very long time. Interesting, but not crucial to humanity.

Future of science fiction? There will always be a future, and people will therefore always set stories in the future. What kind of stories about what kind of futures, that remains to be seen.

Molly Greenspring: Often themes of politics and nature of the world come up in many of your books. Is this an effect on your part and if so why?

Yes. It's mainly because I'm interested to write about nature, because I love being outdoors, especially in the mountains. But the novel as a form is more about characters and plot, and characters are imagined people, in a plot interacting with other imagined people, and with their societies (always also imagined, even if here and now) and lastly their planet. So that means politics gets into it. This is sometimes good (lots of plots) sometimes bad (lots of meetings).

John Grayshaw: What was it like to visit Antarctica? How has it influenced your work? Was it like being on another planet?

Antarctica was definitely like being on another planet! Ice Planet, and amazing. I really loved my visits there. The first one lasted two months and was one adventure after another. Then recently I returned to McMurdo for 11 days, to research a story for Smithsonian magazine about the Winter Journey part of the Scott expedition of 1910-12. That too was wonderful.

So, these visits gave me a novel, an historical essay, and a desire to return there. And I'm sure Antarctica has influenced me more broadly, by showing me scientists at work in the field, and showing

me that Earth is a planet, big but not infinite. It made me more of a nature writer than ever. That's a big part of my character as a writer.

John Grayshaw: It must be a lot of work to get the science right in your works. How do you do it?

I read a lot, I e-mail or call scientists to ask questions, I get SCIENCE NEWS and read it cover to cover every two weeks, something I've done for 35 years now. I recommend that last part to everyone, and the other parts would be good too.

Also, I'm married to a scientist, and have worked next to her, and socialized with her colleagues, for my whole adult life.

So, all in all I feel pretty scientifically literate. And with each novel I write, the research for it gets a little bit easier, as a kind of add-on to what I already know. It's been a cumulative process.

I should add that I make scientific mistakes all the time, and sometimes I get to correct them in later editions of my books. This was particularly true for my Mars books. Later editions are therefore more accurate than the earliest editions. I'm grateful to my editors at Bantam for allowing me to make the fixes I've made.

John Grayshaw: You've written about colonizing all sorts of different planets, moons and asteroids. Which is your favorite? Mars, Mercury, someplace else?

Mars is my favorite, it has been such a big part of my life. I can imagine what it looks like, and am oriented on its map.

I also like Mercury for its names, but I don't have that same sense of familiarity with it.

I also like the moons of Jupiter, and really the whole Jupiter system, and the Saturn system. Such beautiful places!

John Grayshaw: You talked in an interview about falling in love with NYC while visiting it for research for New York 2140. Did you tell people giving you tours the book's plot? I'm picturing you looking down from the Cloisters going "Yeah, that's all underwater!"

I have an old friend who grew up in New York and still lives there, and she drove me around and showed me places she thought I needed to see, or places I told her I needed to see, that were off the subway lines—like the Cloisters, yes, also Coney Island, Astoria, distant parts of Queens, and so on. I told her about the book's basic situation, meaning the sea level rise, but she was not particularly interested. I think when you have New York, you don't really need fiction.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers that have influenced your work?

We've recently lost two of my favorite writers and role models—Gene Wolfe and Ursula Le Guin. I loved them both. I think when you say "influences," that word is the right one—their writing, and they themselves, had a big influence on my ideas.

There were others from that generation, all doing great work right as I was getting into reading science fiction, in the early 70s. Russ and Disch, Delany, the Strugatskis, Lem, Zelazny, and really the whole New Wave as a gestalt or a period—that's the science fiction that formed my ideas of what sf could be. I don't think it's ever been as good since as it was then, as a genre.

Then, outside science fiction, I read with huge pleasure novelists whom I think helped me form my ideas about novels—Peter Dickinson, Cecelia Holland, Joyce Cary, Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, Virginia Woolf, Patrick O'Brian—my list of favorites could be extended a long long way, but these are the names that always come back to me as representing my own best reading experiences, and writers I've followed from book to book.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers you have been friends with? How have these relationships influenced your writing?

I read my writer friends' work with great pleasure. Actually, almost the only science fiction I read these days is work by my friends.

That's partly because these days I don't really want to know too much what the rest of the field is doing, so that I can follow my own path without getting too freaked out by how strange my books might be getting. If they are, I like that. I want that. So the less I know of the current field, the better. This is one difference that comes from getting older.

I don't think I want to list my friends in the field here, as I may forget one, or just in general seem to be setting up some kind of club of friends or whatever. There's a lot of them, and yet it isn't an enormous list either. They're among my best friends in the world, and it's nice to have some friends who are writers, and therefore know what it's like. Probably they add up to less than half of my friends all told, but we have writing in common, and that's fun.

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

I have many favorites among my books. Some because of how the books worked out, some for how they helped my career by being popular—if both, that makes them special favorites. Then I have favorites for personal reasons, or for how much of a mess they are, or because they seem a bit overlooked, or a bit crazy.

So, given all these various ways of liking my books, most of them get included. There are a couple I feel just didn't work like I hoped they would. But mostly I like them all.

John Grayshaw: What are your hobbies other than writing?

I go backpacking in California's Sierra Nevada as much as I can. That's more than a hobby, it's like a religion. At home I like gardening and walking, working with stone, and playing softball and frisbee golf. I used to run a fair bit, less now, and I used to swim a lot, and may get back into that as I get creakier, and also have more time. I like housework, but is that a hobby? Hobby is not the right word, that's an

antique word from a previous time, I think. But I know what you mean, and these are some of my other activities.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

I'm working on another utopian novel set in the near future. Yikes! It's hard.

John Grayshaw: What are your goals for the future?

I hope to stay healthy, travel with my wife, enjoy my kids and friends, backpack in the Sierra, and write some more books.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel is your legacy?

Legacy is another odd word from a previous time. If there is such a thing, my books are my legacy, simple as that. Especially after I'm gone, and everyone who knew me is also gone. If my books are still read then, that would be nice. I hope they will give pleasure.