

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Lois McMaster Bujold June 2018

It's been over 30 years since the epic, bestselling Vorkosigan Saga launched with "Shards of Honor," and author Lois McMaster Bujold continues to mine new depths for the characters and settings in her rich science fiction universe. Set approximately 1,000 years in the future in a system of fictional planets (and occasionally on Earth), the series follows Miles Vorkosigan, a man as gifted in military tactics and interplanetary politics as he is at stumbling into trouble.

Beyond the Vorkosigan Saga, Bujold has written books in the Chalion series and The Sharing Knife series. Known for her wit, warmth, and operatic, action-packed plots, Bujold has won the Hugo Award for Best Novel four times, the Hugo Award for Best Novella, and three Nebula Awards.

Jo Zebedee: How integral are the short works to the Vorkosigan universe?

LMB: As integral as any of the novels, in my opinion. (Well, maybe excepting "Weatherman", which is an out-take from the novel *The Vor Game*, and thus double-dipping.) The reader may pick up three of the (currently) six in one package in the collection *Borders of Infinity*; the other two are still ala carte.

Michael Rowe: Did you have an expectation on how we would view the Cetaganda Nobles and the Vor? (One more agreeable one less so?)

LMB: The Vor are an ordinary sort of aristocracy, so that will depend on how one feels about aristocracies. The Cetagandans have a two-tier system, of which the upper level, the haut, turn out to be an ongoing genetics project aiming at creating post-humans. Their one saving grace may be that they don't imagine they have already succeeded. So that one will depend on how one feels about post-human genetic engineering. (Though of the two, I think the Cetagandans make for the scarier neighbors.)

Michael Rowe: What was the inspiration for the malice hunters in the Sharing Knife series?

LMB: Besides the "Ranger" trope in fantasy, they follow from the nature of the malices, as an ecosystem shapes a species. The notion of the sharing knives, the magical method by which Lakewalkers "share" their own deaths with the otherwise immortal malices, who will grow like a cancer consuming all around them if not checked, is also something of a metaphor for the personal sacrifices made by any culture's protectors: soldiers, police, emergency workers.

Adrienne Clark: My all-time favorite author! I found LMB when I was pregnant with my youngest (now 19) and had just been told that she was going to be born with dwarfism. LMB really helped me see that being short isn't the end of everything.

Question: Are there any of your books/stories that you wish you could go back and re-write? If so, which one and what would you change?

LMB: No, I don't want to go back and rewrite. That would be a rabbit hole with no bottom. I'd rather move forward and write something new with whatever I have learned, possibly including from my mistakes. (Opportunities to do fresh copy-edits with new editions are sorely tempting, however, and I've done a lot of those. Dear heavens they are a tedious chore.)

Michael Rowe: Is it hard to write the death of some characters more than others? Some come to a logical conclusion, some taken too quickly, that sort of thing.

LMB: Mm, I don't kill off a great many major characters, so it's pretty much a matter of what is right for the story I am telling. Aral's death, for example, was absolutely integral to the themes of *Cryoburn*, which was among other things an extended meditation upon death and technology, or death versus technology. Bothari had earned his death, in whatever sense one wants to take that. And Arhys dy Lutez, well. He was slotted into the role and fate of El Cid from the get-go. (Minor characters have to take their chances according to the needs of the plot *du jour*, as do villains.)

Michael Rowe: Who is her favorite spaceman/spaceperson (other than one of her own)?

This is how I found out about Miles. It is a game my partner and I play some times. I answered John Crichton [Farscape TV Series] (she said "Who?"), she said Miles Vorkosigan (I said "Who?"). Now she knows John and I know Miles. And we both still have the same answers, but the other is much higher in our lists :)

LMB: Well, there are the *actual* astronauts (and cosmonauts.) They're pretty cool. But if you want to fire up the Wayback Machine, Mr. Spock of TOS was always my favorite.

Molly Greenspring: I am sorry to say I have not read the Vorkosigan books yet. However, I am reading the GURPS Vorkosigan saga book. I am planning to read the novels because of that. Questions: How do you feel about the GURPS book of Vorkosigan book? Do you like the idea of the Vorkosigan books being an RPG and how do you think a RPG can change the nature of the novels? How was your experience of working with Steve Jackson games? Have you ever played table top roleplaying games?

LMB: I had good, if repeatedly delayed, experiences working with SJG. They really tried hard to get things right. I was quite pleased with Genevieve Cogman's text, and was happy to see her later original novels come out. (*The Invisible Library* series.) An RPG can't change the novels; they are already written. Anything after that is an after-market add-on for which the original manufacturer takes no responsibility (and may void the warranty, who knows.) I've not played table-top games, though I did sit in on a few sessions of a D&D game, once. It looked like fun, but I had no time.

Anastasia Hilvers: So much formulaic writing exists. To tell a multi-generational adventure story about a ruling family, the Vorkosigans, you (LMB) must have been tempted, or even pressured, to write characters and/or plot lines that were archetypal at best and cliché at worst. How did you avoid resorting to tropes and make the story – spanning several novels – seem so different from the usual?

LMB: I'm not sure I can say. I wrote the books one at a time, as they came to me. It occurred to me fairly early on that there are no genre police who will arrest one for coloring outside the lines, and my

Baen editors, though they made suggestions which I took or left as seemed best to me, soon realized that I was oblivious to pressure. (Also, there are plenty of tropes I quite relish, so I'm not sure one can dub the Vorkosigan saga a trope-free zone.)

So I pretty much wrote the books I wanted to, and luckily my editors and readers followed along.

Jim Dean: I would love to see the Saga serialized on TV. Would you be open to that? Who would play Miles? Elena? Bothari?

LMB: Media adaptations are a buyer's market, but I agree the series would lend itself better to the small screen than the large, with mini-series being the best shot at something resembling accuracy. Marketing and licensing of media rights is the business of my agent (actually, my agent's media agent), and tricky stuff, but we are open to a bona fide offer. ("Bona fide" in this case is a code term for a solvent production company with a track record of successfully launched prior works. These entities are rare.)

But I do think the VK series would be way harder to adapt than most readers realize, because so much of what's important takes place inside the characters' heads, where the camera cannot go. So while it might someday be adapted, I doubt what would end up on the screen would have much resemblance to the books.

I'm not well-versed enough in modern actors to play the casting game.

Jeanne Tucker: Do you envision expanding on *Falling Free*?

LMB: Nope. At one time I thought it might grow into a trilogy, but that spaceship has long since sailed. *Diplomatic Immunity* fulfilled the promissory note instead.

Michael Rowe: There are examples of extreme body alteration in Vorkosigan Space, how far have you thought about some folks going? Like folks in Jackson's Whole?

LMB: I picture the future history of the Vorkosiverse to be one of bioengineering, so that ten thousand years down the timeline, the galaxy will be filled with alien races all descended from us. This process is just getting started in Miles's time. So, pretty far.

Michael Rowe: How did you come up with the house face paint for the Ghem lords?

LMB: The original inspiration was Chinese Opera masks.

Michael Rowe: My partner and I discuss uterine replicators at length... often... why did you add them to your books? And make them such a prominent force in a number of them?

LMB: They began as almost a throw-away line in that scene in *Shards of Honor*, and then I got to thinking about all the ways – many ways, not just one – this technology might change society. There have been a million stories about guy-technology, but it seemed to me that what technology can do for women's lives was a very under-explored SF trope, just as women's work in the creation of new people

is taken for granted. I hate crowds, so I often proceed in a direction that seems to have more elbow room. That one had plenty.

Michael Rowe: I love that Elli Quinn remarks (or thinks – I'm fuzzy) that Miles's gift of a perfect face after her accident is a hindrance to her (spy) work. I think that's brilliant. Where did this come from?

LMB: A number of sources long forgotten, but among others watching a particularly striking co-worker getting hit on a lot.

Michael Rowe: In *Memory*, Illyan's incapacitation is so tangible. Does this piece of work draw from some experience (it is my partner's favorite book and she is touched by your portrayal)?

LMB: Yes, it draws partly upon my long-ago experiences working the neurology unit at a major hospital as a drug administration technician, and some more from watching my brother's mother-in-law (the "Trudie Sr." of the dedication) during her long and horrible decline into memory loss. There was one odd afternoon during a visit where my brother and his wife had gone out, and I stayed with her, and we had this conversation over the kitchen table, which was perfectly interesting as long as I realized it was going to be a sort of temporally disjointed stream-of-consciousness, and I needed to just go with the flow. Which I found I could keep going by asking questions that sprang off things just recounted. It was a curious effect to watch her *brighten* during the process. (Emotionally, not cognitively. Alas.)

Keep your living wills up to date, people...

Michael Rowe: Two of my favorite characters... okay, that's just a lie. I love them all. But, Ivan and By worked so well together in *Captain Vorpatril's Alliance*. Was that a late night milk and cookies idea or a subtle plan from way back?

LMB: I suppose the possibilities were laid down during *A Civil Campaign*, which was where By got his start as a character. A snarky character – which they both are, each in their own ways – is always a great addition to any cast. So as I poked at ideas for an Ivan book, which were mainly ideas for an Ivan romance, it seemed an excellent notion to throw in By somehow. And then see what happened.

Eva Sable: I have to admit it. I have never read any of your novels, although I may have hit a short story or two in anthologies or magazines. What one novel should I read to really get a flavor of your work, and possibly hook me into reading more?

LMB: If you do not break out in hives at a romance subplot, start the Vorkosigan books at the very beginning with *Shards of Honor*. (If you do, start instead with *The Warrior's Apprentice*.) Start the fantasies with *The Curse of Chalion* or, if you want a shorter sample, the novella "Penric's Demon."

And that's enough for starters.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/293438-the-vorkosigan-saga-reading-order-debate-the-chef-recommends?chapter=2> for people who want more guidance, but don't dip in till you've read at least one book, or you will be unnecessarily daunted with the overload.)

For your reassurance, there have been readers who have started with every possible book in the pack, and reported getting along fine. Eventually, anyway.

John Grayshaw: Are there any worlds in the Vorkosigan universe that you've thought about but haven't featured yet?

LMB: Not yet.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the stories you want to tell next in the Vorkosigan universe?

LMB: Nothing is in the works at this time.

John Grayshaw: How do you write such realistic characters?

LMB: No idea. I just write them as they come to me. "Realistic" may be an outside judgment. "Convincing" might be closer to the mark. I do draw, potentially, upon the whole of my life experience to inform them, but then I think most writers do.

John Grayshaw: What is the story with your books being free as e-books for a while? How did that happen and why was it stopped?

LMB: I believe you are referring to the CD of my backlist that was included as a freebie in the back of the first hardcover edition of *Cryoburn*. (Copies of which are still floating around, by the way. Go for it if you want one.)

That was intended as a premium gift for purchasers of the hardcover, not as something to be put up online and distributed infinitely and indefinitely. Jim Baen did give a general permission to do so in earlier versions of this ploy, for other writers' series, which was sort of the internet version of opening the barn door after the horses were long gone. (Because there is no way to control e-pirates, so why harass customers?) However, I construed that Baen's permission could only run as long as Baen held the e-licenses for the titles, and when their license ran out, so did the permission. At which point I asked that the online freebies be taken down, which was promptly and courteously done.

A second, separate problem was that the CD was never supposed to contain all of the titles, just a select few. But at the time the CD was put together, Baen e-matters were in some disarray due to their chief e-wrangler being deathly ill in the hospital, and the word of what was to be included (and not) never got passed along to the people actually doing so. By the time I caught up with the miscommunication, the books were printed, the CDs were bound in, and the print run was all on its way to bookstores. So I bit my tongue and reclassified it as a marketing experiment. Which it proved to be.

One of the then-extant books was missing from the CD, so I was able to use its subsequent sales reports as a check against the assertion that free e-books did not hurt sales: a kind of built-in, accidental control sample. In the event, its sales turned out quite significantly higher than those of the other titles. So.

Back at the turn of the millennium, Jim Baen originally conceived of e-books as a minor venture mainly worthwhile as advertising for his paperbacks, and in the early days this was quite true. Then came the

Kindle, the game-changer, and e-books shifted from pizza money to mortgage money. I was late to the party with my CD, and ended up wrong-side-to viz this market shift. Live, learn...

John Grayshaw: I think Ivan is a wonderful character because with a lesser author he would have been simply a "comic relief" character. But you manage to make him fun yet intelligent, effective, and even heroic. How did the character evolve over the years?

LMB: Page time, mainly. As he had more opportunities to appear, he had more chance to develop.

And people do grow up, or at least they do in my universe. (And yours.) I was not the same person at 18, at 23, at 35 (and onward even more so), so there's no reason my book-people should be either.

I've been particularly bemused by a few reader complaints that Cordelia was "not the same" in *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen* as when we last saw inside her head at the end of *Barrayar*. Of course she's not! The difference between 36 and 76 is forty years, another (very full) lifetime. The only way she could be "the same" is if she had one of those brain aberrations where long-term memories are prevented from forming, rolling amnesia. In which case her story would be very different.

John Grayshaw: When you wrote *Shards of Honor* did you know you'd write about Cordelia and Aral's son? When did you realize Miles would be the "main character"?

LMB: I had Miles in mind from the time I knew Aral and Cordelia were going to have a kid, so maybe halfway through the writing of that first book. And I knew he would be physically handicapped on military-mad Barrayar, but very bright and energetic, and that was all I knew. All my attention was focused on getting to the end of My First Novel, so further developments had to wait.

The first draft of *Shards*, back in 1983, actually continued through what is now about the first eight chapters of *Barrayar*, up through the soltoxin attack but not including start of the Pretender's War. So I knew that much more about Miles's start than appeared in *Shards* as eventually published in 1986. My first vision for *The Warrior's Apprentice* was actually the death of Bothari, rather different from the final version but still while protecting teen Miles somewhere far from home. The rest consisted of finding a beginning and writing my way back to that turning point.

My next book was *Falling Free*, a universe-prequel of sorts since it took place about 200 years earlier and was not related to Barrayar (which was still un-rediscovered at that point) so the shape of the potential series didn't start to emerge until I'd written *Brothers in Arms*, next.

John Grayshaw: Bel Thorne and Taura are both favorites of mine. Are there any interesting "insider" stories about either of them?

LMB: Not at this time.

John Grayshaw: How do you clear a "writer's block"?

LMB: There are two sorts: a very serious inability to write at all, which can have all sorts of cogent and non-negotiable life-reasons behind it (death, divorce, disaster), and being temporarily stalled out. The latter is more the sort to be susceptible to clearing.

For me, writing comes in two parts, making it up and writing it down. If I haven't done the first, the second part has nothing to work with. If I'm stalled for reasons other than external distractions (like, oh, writing email interviews...) it's usually because I need to stop and make more stuff up. Walks are helpful. The internet is very much not. My brain is like a narrow bridge; I can get things in, or get things out, but not at the same time. So there will be periods where I am taking in loads of new information, books, movies, travel, whatever, and a period of digestion, and then the material for the story will start to form up in my imagination, which I capture in penciled notes. But I have to stop constantly dumping more new stuff in on top for a while to permit that to occur. Boredom is my friend.

More focused problems, when writing stops due to events in one scene not coming right, or the plot not matching what a particular character would do, sometimes yield to actually thinking about in a logical manner. Lots of penciled-note-scratching. Sometimes the key lies not in changing the actions, but in changing the *reasons* for the actions. The boundary between normal process and blockage of the less serious sort can be rather fuzzy.

Pat Wrede's blog, referenced below, has a number of posts on this topic as well. Here's a recent one (well, three): <http://www.pcwrede.com/why-writers-get-stuck-part-1/>

...And, you know, if writing isn't fun, and isn't giving you any rewards material or otherwise, you are *allowed to stop*.

(Although if, as I sometimes posit, writing fiction is a dissociative disorder, or at least a dissociative defense, that may not be possible. But in that case one is not in a state of block anyway, so.)

John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite science fiction authors? What science fiction authors have inspired you?

LMB: My current faves run heavily to fantasy writers. (I'm also exploring manga, these days, which is a whole 'nother world.) Earlier SF influences include Poul Anderson, Cordwainer Smith, Randall Garrett, Anne McCaffrey, Zenna Henderson, Eric Frank Russell, L. Sprague de Camp, and many more of that era.

John Grayshaw: What would be your recommendations to aspiring authors?

Read Pat Wrede's blog on writing, <http://www.pcwrede.com/blog/> Go back to the beginning and just read forward; over time she covers a multitude of aspects of the craft and business. Or you can start with the compact version with her book *Wrede on Writing*. <https://www.amazon.com/Wrede-Writing-Tips-Hints-Opinions-ebook/dp/B00H23C876/>