

Science Fiction Book Club  
Interview with Author Neal Asher- November 2017

**John Grayshaw: For readers who aren't familiar with you, could you tell us a little about yourself?**

Neal Asher: My pleasure John. About myself? I'm a 56-year-old SF writer who came up the hard way. I wrote while working in all sorts of jobs – engineering, building, all sorts, I even delivered coal once. I didn't get published for a while, then got the odd short story published, then a novella, a collection, another novella (all for buggerall money) until finally I was taken on by Macmillan in 1999. Since then my total of published books is about 25. I divide my time between Essex in the UK and the island of Crete. I'm a practical man and not one of those effete writers who delights in being unable to work with his hands. Having recently gone through a bit of a hiatus (I lost my wife) I'm back at the keyboard. I'm hoping to at least get above 50 books before they nail me in a coffin.

**John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your next book "The Soldier"?**

The Soldier is the first book of the trilogy Rise of the Jain. At the end of my Cormac series (5 books) a character called Orlandine, who is a haiman (an amalgam of human and AI) is recruited by an alien entity called Dragon to do something 'numinous'. In those books the main threat arises from Jain technology which is designed to sequester and destroy civilizations. A great infestation of this exists in an accretion disc and, at the start of these books, Orlandine has built massive defenses against this technology. Needless to say things start to go wrong. Here's the blurb:

*A hidden corner of space is swarming with lethal alien technology, a danger to all sentient life. It's guarded by Orlandine, whose mission is to ensure it stays contained – at all costs. Living aboard a state-of-the-art weapons station, she watches over technology designed to destroy entire civilizations. However, she's hatching a plan to obliterate it, removing the threat forever. It was created by the Jain, a long-dead race, and forces are on the move who'll do anything to unleash their last secrets.*

*Meanwhile, humanity's galactic territories and the alien Prador Empire watch this sector of space with interest, as neither can allow the other to claim its power. However, things are about to change, the Jain might not be as dead as they seem and interstellar war is never far away.*

**Thomas Watson: I must confess to being entirely unfamiliar with your work, although it's been recommended to me numerous times. Out of curiosity, what would you suggest as a starting point?**

I've found that for those who enjoy these books a starting point is not necessary. People have picked up books in the middle of a series and gone on from there. But maybe start with some tasters in a short story collection like The Gabble, or start chronologically with Prador Moon, which is a short book, or in order of publication with Gridlinked. Outliers and stand-alone books can be a beginning, like Hilldiggers or Shadow of the Scorpion. Also, my books are not all set in

the same future. There's my lone time-travel book *Cowl* – shortlisted for the PKD Award – or there is the *Owner* series beginning with *The Departure*. Take your pick!

**Andrew ten Broek: Yep, I'm definitely a big fan of Asher's work! Not sure if the question has already been answered in one of his novels... I'm currently reading "Line War"... but will the destructive technology of the Jain ever use the option of U-Space? (because "Polity Agent" it was yet unclear why the AI's of the Jain left it unused)**

The Jain AIs were actually separate (sort of) from the technology, which is an unthinking mechanism/infestation rather like a virus. However, those who deploy Jain tech do use U-space travel, including the Jain themselves. I direct your attention towards *The Soldier* above!

**John Grayshaw: You've been described as a military science fiction writer, though your novels seem to be so much more. Are you comfortable with this label? What makes good military science fiction?**

Neal Asher: It's not a label I am comfortable with because it feels too narrow. I do like my battles, but I also like building ecologies, creating monsters of every stripe (including the human kind), exploring the consequences of technology like mind recording, taking a close look at what immortality might mean, and much other stuff besides.

I've read fiction that does fall squarely under that label and always felt there to be large elements missing from its depiction of the future. Often aspects of what the future might hold are neglected: how human society might have changed, the new weapons and their effect on tactics (often I've read fiction where the battles are just the past supplanted into the future and upgraded with lasers)—the thinking needs to be wider. Good military fiction would logically be the kind that does not neglect these.

**John Grayshaw: Your Polity universe is interesting for the way it spans the majority of your works. It reminds me a little of C.J. Cherryh's *Foreigner* books, or the sprawling "future history" of Asimov. What are the challenges in this kind of vast multi-book world building? Do you sometimes fantasize about ditching it all and writing in a totally different continuity?**

Neal Asher: The biggest challenge is avoiding continuity errors. The more I write in the Polity, the more I have to check in previous books, from simple things like the colour of prador blood, to the more difficult stuff like what technologies are extant, especially when my Polity stories span a thousand years. I haven't fantasized about writing novels set in a new continuity, but done so. The *Owner* trilogy is not set in the Polity, nor is my time-travel book *Cowl*. I wrote the former because if you write in one setting, no matter how wide, you can become stale. The danger, of course, is that when you step out of that setting, the fans can pillory you for it. But I'll never ditch the Polity because there's still a lot of fun to be had there.

**SFBC Member: Something that has been bugging me for awhile, maybe you've addressed it somewhere else, but in *The Skinner* when Sniper is battling the Prador drones above the Nort Sea, he mentions that 'Prador stole U-space tech from us.' But in *Prador Moon* they**

**already had U-space drives. Did he specifically mean the communications aspect of the technology? And if so why did they not already develop it themselves?**

**Graham Boardman: Will you ever return to The Owner series? Maybe not necessarily focusing on the Owner but just set in that Universe? The short stories teased a larger universe that could be great to explore!!**

To be frank that's a mistake. Should I go to Macmillan and see about correcting it? No – it's history. As for the Owner, I did start on a new book in that sequence but put it aside. Certainly I'll return to it. There are many stories to be told between his beginnings and the Owner I depicted in short stories to be found in my collection The Engineer.

**Mel Powell: I confess, I have not read this author either but I would ask: what are your influences? What authors do you read?**

Neal Asher: My influences are spread far and wide in the genre as I've read huge amounts of SF in my life. Go from A for Aldis to Z for Zelazny and you'll cover all bets. Right now my favourite writers are (defined as those whose books I'm prepared to buy new from Ottakars) Iain M Banks, Terry Pratchett, Sheri Tepper, C. J. Cherryh, Peter Hamilton, Minette Walters (hugely impressed with her stuff), and ... there are others, but I'll stop there. Other influences include film and television, my favourites presently being Blade Runner, Excalibur, Aliens, Babylon 5, Gladiator, Terminator ... you perhaps get the general theme.

I have to add that the list above is highly changeable.

**Kan Ly: How come travel to-and-fro between runcibles is instantaneous, but ships travelling through underspace still require time? I thought they used the exact same tech?**

They don't use the exact same tech. To draw an analogy: the runcible is the Channel Tunnel while the ships are ferries. But let's be perfectly honest here: everything in these books travels at the same speed, and that's the speed of plot.

**Jon Bergeron: Do you plan the series in advance? If not, is it all done by the seat of your pants?**

Neal Asher: I don't first imagine plots. I just write. I'm not one of these writers who plans everything out and has a board covered with post-it notes hanging over my desk like the Sword of Damocles. In fact I want to know what happens next as much as, I hope, the reader does. However the books do evolve. I am often going back to alter what I've written before to fit what I'm writing now. Sometimes I excise whole plot threads and sometimes I take out characters (often blending them with another to serve a purpose).

**Jon Bergeron: Will you ever do another book about The Prador War seen from ground troops perspective?**

Hell I don't know – it's possible. More likely I'll tell the later story of another character who was one of those troops, like Thorvald Spear. As above: I don't really plan.

**John Grayshaw: Which characters did you enjoy writing the most?**

As is often the case with me I enjoy writing the non-human characters the most. I cite the war drones Sniper and Amistad, and the Golem android Mr Crane. In the Transformation books I very much enjoyed writing about the black AI Penny Royal, but necessarily had to keep it enigmatic so was reserved about what I put down on paper. My favourite character in the first book has to be the snakelike assassin drone Riss. In later books my favourite was the swarm robot AI the Brockle.

**John Grayshaw: You've been writing since you were young. What's one of the first things you remember writing?**

Neal Asher: When I was about 13 an English teacher told us to write a short story. This was the first time this had ever happened in any English lesson. I'd been ODing on the E C Tubb Dumarest saga and wrote something derivative of that. I recollect someone having their brain removed and it being racked up in some computer system. The teacher was complimentary about it and I can point a finger of blame squarely at her for what has ensued.

**John Grayshaw: What is it with Science Fiction you find so fascinating?**

Neal Asher: It can be summed up with one word: sensawunda. No other fiction has that wow factor.

**SFBC Member: Will Neal ever try his hand at writing something other than science fiction? I think his style is very apt for contemporary, high-tech thrillers (maybe dealing in biotechnology or corporate espionage or some such) or perhaps crime fiction in the hardboiled style.**

I do have a contemporary novel in my files about Essex farmers growing GM cannabis, but I doubt I'll ever venture into that kind of stuff again. I feel the need for 'sensawunda' in my writing as in my reading and venturing into something contemporary now may well bore me.

**Jay Alan Babcock: How did the author come to use the name Jain for the alien threat? Jain Dharma (or Jainism) is an Indian religion whose practitioners profess non-violence as a fundamental part of their faith.**

Neal Asher I liked the disparity. What also amused me about it was a particular symbol that is important in Jainism and what it represents there and generally now. Another one of those disparities.

**John Grayshaw: I've read that you think your patronus would be a lobster, but what's your favorite dinosaur?**

Neal Asher: I was going to say velociraptor, because I like the name and the idea of something so vicious and fast, but the one that has stuck with me is the troodon. This is the dinosaur Dale Russell based his dinosauroid on, and it is also the basis of the dracomen, creatures in my Polity

books created by the interstellar entity Dragon as a taunt to humankind. The troodon also turns up in a story I did for *Asimov's* called "The Other Gun." There, it was an enjoyably lethal sidekick for the main character.

**John Grayshaw: Your books put people through a lot of crazy science fiction conflicts. Of all the things you've put your characters through, which one scares you the most?**

Neal Asher: None of them really scare me because most are unlikely in my lifetime. I guess the idea of immortality combined with endless torture is pretty grim, which is why it's the big stick wielded by religion. Closer to home is stuff in the Owner books: the technology to utterly control the populace in the hands of authoritarian government.

**John Grayshaw: What do you do when you're not writing, any hobbies?**

At present my hobbies include walking, swimming, kayaking, gardening and spending far too much time fooling about on social media. I was a smoker but am now heavily into e-cigarettes and that's a hobby in itself. I like the TV, but generally only SFF box sets I buy or Netflix, most of the current stuff including the news and the like has no interest to me. I did read a lot, but life events three years ago killed that and it is only just coming back.

**John Grayshaw: What advice do you have for the budding writer?**

Neal Asher: Alright: If you want to earn a fortune, become an estate agent or solicitor. But if you want to be a writer: buy books on English usage and constantly strive to get it right. If you're a writer, then write, don't agonize about your art. Join postal workshops, writer's circles, and accept valid criticism and learn by it, don't fall wounded on the pavement. When you've sent something off, don't sit with your thumb up your bottom, start work on something else. Keep a journal and write in it every day - be strict with yourself. If you feel that something you have written is not good enough, don't try to justify it, improve it. Please don't use writing for catharsis - unless in your journal - as there's nothing quite so boring and depressing: no one wants to read about the trauma of your recent divorce. Ask yourself who you are writing for - if yourself, then put it in the journal. Stick to the rules of submission - whatever they happen to be now. Never think you having nothing more to learn, never give up, and never become arrogant with success. And finally, what the hell are you doing reading this when you should be writing?

**John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?**

I'm now past the halfway mark on the third book of Rise of the Jain. In fact this interview is a bit of a warm up and now I'll get back to the book! Thanks!

**John Grayshaw: Thanks Neal!**