

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with Neal Stephenson June 2019

*Neal Stephenson's work explores subjects such as mathematics, cryptography, linguistics, philosophy, currency, and the history of science.*

*His works includes: "Snow Crash," "The Diamond Age," "Cryptonomicon," "The Baroque Cycle," "Anathem," "Reamde," "Seveneves," and "Fall; or, Dodge in Hell."*

**Melvin Dickover: I once heard that he writes with a fountain pen, not a word processor. Is that true?**

Yes, everything from the Baroque Cycle onwards has been written and edited using a fountain pen. Subsequently I transcribe it into emacs which is a text editing program, and format it using TeX.

**Seth A. Milman: Do you have a book that you enjoyed writing more than the others? Or a book that was just a drag to write compared to the others? If so, which one and why?**

No, if I were having a miserable time writing a book I would take that as evidence that I had made a wrong decision as to which book I should write next, and I would drop the project.

**SFBC Member/Monty Tabor: Have you ever thought of a sequel to Snow Crash? I think fans would love it.**

I've considered sequels to almost all of my books, but in general my policy is to create a new book whenever I have an idea for one. So far it seems to be working out okay, but a byproduct is a general lack of sequels!

**SFBC Member/Sarah Megan Wins/ Alex Williams/Marc XaOs Anton/ Bryce Touchstone: Who do YOU read for pleasure? And are there any young writers you are excited about? And what non-fiction works have informed your world view?**

Mostly I read history. Fiction I've enjoyed recently includes Delta V by Daniel Suarez, Crooked by Austin Grossman, and Lovecraft Country by Matt Ruff. The last big history books I read were Chernow's biography of U.S. Grant and Isaacson's bio of Leonardo.

**Richard Erickson: Why do you write Science Fiction as opposed to another genre?**

I'm not one for introspection about these things. Genre classifications are imposed from the outside by booksellers, and to some extent by fans. I just write what I write and people apply labels to it.

**François Peneaud: When you wrote Seveneves, did you start from the idea of an all-female survival group, from the destroyed moon image, or from anything else?**

A key starting point was the idea of alien races as it appears almost universally in science fiction (Vulcans, Klingons) and fantasy (elves, dwarves, etc.). I got to wondering where all of these quasi-human

racers came from and decided to write a story about that. This led to the all-female survival group and so on.

**Wing Fu Fing/Farrouk Sirker/Clement Dulongpre: Do you support the idea of any of your books being made into a film (or long-form TV), and if so which one(s)? Will Seveneves or Diamond Age have a Movie/TV Series adaptation?**

Nearly all of my books have been considered for screen adaptation at one point or another. I have nothing against it in principle. Right now the most active projects are around Seveneves and Snow Crash, but if you ask me a year from now I might have a different answer. Nothing has been greenlit yet and so this is all far in the future.

**Rory Galloway: Which of your books (or technologies) do you think are most likely to come reflect the reality of the future?**

I'm pretty sure that augmented reality is going to be with us in some form or other.

**Molly Greenspring: What science fiction writers have had the most influence on your writing?**

Heinlein has stuck with me more than any of the others because of his knack for characterization and for moments/situations that resonate.

**Brenda Cox Giguere: Any more collaborations planned, a la DODO?**

I have nothing against it in principle but nothing is currently planned. Nicole Galland is working on a sequel to DODO and I am trying to be helpful.

**Eva Sable: Since my first reading of The Baroque Cycle, I have regarded it as a cyberpunk novel, regardless of the 17th and 18th century setting. Did you have the links to Cryptonomicon in mind when you began writing, or did they arise later in the writing process, and which idea came first, Cryptonomicon or The Baroque Cycle? I enjoyed the character development, particularly the Shaftoe and Waterhouse families. I do love a clever scoundrel!**

Thanks. The idea for the Baroque Cycle came to me very late in the writing of Cryptonomicon. I was just barely able to work a few hooks into Cryptonomicon before it went to press.

**SFBC Member: Have you considered writing more books dealing with biotechnology?**

Not really, since I don't know that much about the topic.

**Anastasia Hilvers: What type of science research do you do to prep for your books? How do you determine whose research to search out?**

I have nothing special or unusual to say in this area. I look for journal publications that match up with my interests and then I follow the references that appear in the footnotes. I used to put in a lot of time at libraries but now almost everything is available online.

**Jeff Minor/SFBC Member: Do you think the teaching technology (the Primer), describe in The Diamond Age is feasible today? What would you say are the primary cultural and structural barriers to such a personalized learning revolution?**

The Primer is a basket of several hardware and software technologies. Various people have worked on developing personalized educational curricula that are reminiscent of, or directly inspired by, the Primer. I'm guessing that the primary barrier is lack of demand. If people were clamoring for this stuff, it would come into existence more quickly. I don't know enough about the ins and outs of the education industry to be a good judge of this, but I'm guessing that many school systems feel burned by previous encounters with educational tech that didn't work out. Students who are smart and motivated find their own paths to educational media that work for them personally, such as YouTube videos, etc. and so this reduces the need for one big centralized system.

**James Mosteller: A recent article is naming you the inventor of Bitcoin ... Do you agree with that credit? <https://reason.com/2019/06/05/if-we-told-you-neal-stephenson-invented-bitcoin-would-you-be-surprised>**

This is written by someone who is just having a little fun advancing a hypothesis that he doesn't even believe in himself. I'm flattered that some people think I have the command of mathematics needed to do something like this, but obviously I don't. I have one bitcoin, which was given to me years and years ago by a fan who felt I should have it. The article is sort of fun to read but I don't need people thinking that I'm sitting on that much money. My lifestyle would indicate otherwise.

**John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies other than writing?**

I like making things with the usual makerish tools such as CAD programs, 3D printers, Arduinos, etc.

**John Grayshaw: Do you still play D+D or other tabletop role playing games?**

No, it's been a while since I did that.

**Sandeep Kumar Nair/John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick with? What are the most pages (or most words) you've written in a single sitting?**

I get up in the morning and write for a couple of hours and then spend the rest of the day pursuing unrelated work. I think the most I ever wrote longhand in one sitting was 20+ pages. More typically it is between 5 and 10 pages.

**John Grayshaw: What books are you working on writing at the moment?**

None, because I am doing this 😊

**John Grayshaw: What is your legacy?**

That is for others to decide! I just keep my head down and write.