

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Dr. Christopher S. Kovacs and Warren Lapine September 2018

Dr. Christopher S. Kovacs is University Research Professor, and Professor of Medicine (Endocrinology and Metabolism), Obstetrics & Gynecology, and BioMedical Sciences, at Memorial University of Newfoundland. His clinical practice involves osteoporosis and general endocrinology.

*He is a longtime fan of the novels and short stories of Roger Zelazny. He spent several years compiling and annotating all of his stories and poems, and writing a literary biography, for the six-volume *The Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny*. He has also written a half-dozen essays on Zelazny's works for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and compiled a bibliography, *The Ides of October*.*

Warren Lapine spent the late eighties playing in a number of hair bands. In the early nineties he developed Carpel Tunnel Syndrome and moved from playing in a band to publishing magazines.

*He has spent the last twenty-six years in the publishing industry. Fifteen of those years running DNA Publications, Inc. (*Absolute Magnitude, Weird Tales, Dreams of Decadence, Fantastic Stories, SF Chronicle, KISS Quarterly* (which was a joint venture with Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons' company *KISS Ltd.*) and several others. During that time he was nominated for a Chesley Award, a Hugo Award, and a World Fantasy Award.*

*He is now the publisher of Wilder Publications. Wilder Publications' books cover the entire publishing spectrum. Wilder currently has more than 6,000 books in print. They have published three Zelazny books to date: *Hymn to the Sun, Manna From Heaven, and Shadows & Reflections a Roger Zelazny Tribute Anthology*. In late September or early October Wilder Publications will be publishing *The Magic: (October 1961–October 1967), Ten Tales by Roger Zelazny Edited by Samuel R. Delany with contributions from Darrell Schweitzer, and Christopher S. Kovacs**

D'Arcy Ward: Did Roger consider himself to be a writer of SF or Fantasy, or both? Or did he not want to be categorized?

Warren Lapine: Zelazny thought of himself as a genre writer. He enjoyed blurring the lines between fantasy and science fiction. That's probably what he's best known for. Many of his most famous books can be read either as fantasy or as science fiction, he wanted readers of both sub-genres to be able to enjoy his books. He did say that writing Fantasy was easier because you didn't have to explain and justify everything the way you did in science fiction.

Dr. Christopher S. Kovacs: He considered himself a writer of both SF and fantasy, and he wrote *Lord of Light*, for example, so that it could be taken as either. In one letter he wrote, "I intentionally set out to destroy whatever distinction may exist between science fiction and fantasy. I have never come across a really satisfactory definition of that distinction – and if I were to, I would attempt to violate it in my very next story."

For many of these questions, I can say that a far more complete answer will be obtainable from the literary biography that I wrote, *"...And Call Me Roger": The Literary Life of Roger Zelazny*. It was published in six parts, one per volume of *The Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny*. I researched and cited many quotes from Zelazny for that, so it's largely based on his own words. Also there are a half-dozen essays of mine published in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* in which I focused on aspects of the Amber novels, *Eye of Cat*, "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," etc.

Ra Luca: I've only read Lord of Light and I was wondering what made him use the Hindus pantheon in this book instead of Christianity, Roman, Greek or Norse mythology?

WL: On that subject Zelazny stated that "not much had been done in U.S. sf and fantasy with respect to Hindu culture." So he decided to work with it, since reincarnation played such a large part in the plot it makes a lot of sense that he chose this religion to work with.

CSK: At the time, he felt that those mythologies had been heavily mined, whereas little had been done with the Hindu pantheon.

Jim Dean: I love the world, characters and plot - have read the series several times Why is "Amber" so special to him (pendant and the series)?

WL: This is a subject that I actually discussed with Roger. He was quite surprised by Amber's enduring success. His first reaction in an interview I did with him was, "this was just supposed to be a straight forward adventure story, nothing more." He struck that before the interview went to press and said instead that the reaction from fans was gratifying. That said, I got mixed signals from Zelazny on Amber. In some respects he seemed to downplay its importance in his career and in other ways it was clear it was quite important to him. He singled Amber out as his and his alone, that he would be fine with people playing in his other universes, but not in Amber. So obviously it meant something to him that none of his other works did. While I don't know for sure if that was just because of how successful it was or if it held some other place in his heart my gut feeling is that it was very close to his heart.

CSK: That's difficult to answer. On the one hand it was clear from the beginning that he loved his creations of Corwin and the Amber universe. He'd conceived a series of books (initially a trilogy) from the start. Then he got tired of it and wrote *The Courts of Chaos* to get out of a contract with Doubleday. But on the other hand, the fact that the fans loved the books led to publishers offering a big financial incentive for him to return to the series with the Merlin stories. And so it was special both as a first love of the universe and the characters, and then as the major work that made him financially secure.

Jim Dean: How involved are you (or other RZ experts) in the production of the CofA TV series? How many of the 10 stories are likely to be represented?

WL: As far as I know, no one who has been involved with Roger Zelazny's books, or who is considered an expert on Amber has been contacted by anyone about the upcoming Television series. I do know that Trent Zelazny is very excited as he is a big fan of the producer's work and he has had at least some contact with them. I've heard rumours that they would be doing all five Corwin books in one go, but at

this point I would not call those rumours at all reliable.

CSK: I don't know what's happening with TV series beyond the few announcements that have been made. The producers likely don't have any interest in consulting with so-called Zelazny experts.

Martin Dudley: Did he have a favourite work?

WL: If you mean of his own works he told me he considered *Lord of Light*, *Eye of Cat*, and *Night in the Lonesome October* to be his best works.

CSK: What Roger considered to be his favorite work changed with time. In an interview shortly before he died, he said "*Lord of Light*, *This Immortal*, *Doorways in the Sand*, *Eye of Cat*, and this recent one, *A Night in the Lonesome October*, are my five favorite books. They have very little in common with each other, and I liked them for different reasons." Note that none of the Amber books are on that list. His favorite novels weren't the ones that made the most money for him.

SFBC Member: Anyone know why LORD OF LIGHT is not available on Kindle?

WL: I'm not certain on this particular title. With some of Zelazny's works the contracts are unclear as to who owns the rights. With others it's just that the people who do own those rights have not gotten around to converting the books to the correct format. I recently converted *The Courts of Chaos* for the estate so that the entire Corwin cycle could be available as e-books. I'm currently going through the first four Amber novels, which my company did not have a hand in creating, to clean them up. After that I'm hoping to tackle some of the other books that are unavailable, but that will depend on the rights.

CSK: The Zelazny Estate has been slow to embrace e-books. Warren has been editing some of them, lately the Amber books. And so he may be better able to answer when/if *Lord of Light* might become available in digital format. It is available as an audiobook.

Gdja Vrag: Which authors (sf&f especially but in general, as well) influenced him the most?

WL: Hart Crane, Stanley Weinbaum, and Henry Kuttner.

CSK: Zelazny didn't like that question. But over the years he acknowledged Hemingway, Elizabethan and Jacobean theater; poets Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, George Seferis and Rainier Maria Rilke; and the writers Saint-Exupéry, Thomas Wolfe, Malcolm Lowry, John Updike, and Thomas Mann. He also acknowledged comic books, radio and TV, including *Pogo*, *L'il Abner*, *Popeye* and *Price Val to Captain Midnight*, *The Green Hornet*, *Sam Spade* and *The Shadow*, and also *Tarzan*, *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*. Among SF authors, he acknowledged Weinbaum, Heinlein, Sturgeon, Bradbury, Dick, Delany, Farmer, Kuttner, Vance, and de Camp. *Faust*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Golden Bough* were specific important works that influenced him.

Michael Rowe: What inspired him to write "A Night in Lonesome October"? Why did he choose those animals?

WL: The story started with the premise that anyone would look good if their story were told from the

point of view of their dog, even Jack the Ripper. As for the animals he chose as familiars most were the companions of famous characters from horror literature and were therefore chosen for him and were essentially literary allusions.

CSK: Zelazny explained, ““I didn’t know what it was going to be; I just thought it would be neat to write something about Jack the Ripper’s dog, and ask Gahan Wilson to illustrate it, partly because of the fact that a dog is such an unusual person. No matter who owns a dog, if that person is nice to the animal, the dog is going to love him. I thought at the time, if you take a really despicable person, a serial killer or someone like that, and tell a story from his dog’s point of view it would make him look pretty good. I just suggested that much to Gahan Wilson. I said I’d like to do something involving Jack the Ripper’s dog.” There’s a lot more to say about this, and it’s in the biography.

Also, check out this essay in *Lovecraft eZine*, available free on-line, updated from the original version that I wrote for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*:

<https://lovecraftzine.com/magazine/issues/2012-2/issue-18-october-2012/fallen-books-and-other-subtle-clues-in-zelaznys-a-night-in-the-lonesome-october-by-dr-christopher-s-kovacs>

Mark McCormick: Why was Zelazny captured by the experience of immortality?

WL: It always seemed to me that Zelazny used immortal characters for perspective. Using characters who have lived a long time allows the author a lot of freedom in that their characters don’t have to be rooted in the here and now of the story and can express a lot of attitudes that would otherwise make no sense in relationship to when or where the story is taking place. Immortal characters make it considerably easier for a writer to communicate their central message without compromising the character, the plot, or the setting.

CSK: It would take pages to answer this one...I did address it in the biography...it began with Zelazny as a teenager thinking he would live forever and being fascinated by the Greek and Roman myths. He also pondered what would happen with immortals as time passed and everyone around them grew old and died.

Mark McCormick: What modern authors and works most follow in the spirit of Zelazny (River of Gods by Ian MacDonald comes to mind)?

WL: Kelly McCollough’s *Webmage* series was defiantly inspired by Zelazny. While I don’t think Gaiman’s writing owes all that much to Zelazny stylistically I do think it owes a great debt to Zelazny thematically. And of course *Games of Thrones* is clearly influenced by the *Chronicles of Amber*.

CSK: Neil Gaiman, Elizabeth Bear, and Charles Stross in certain of their works, and in turn they have acknowledged his influence.

Mark McCormick: How was Zelazny influenced by the culture in Sante Fe?

WL: He was greatly impressed by the area and the way that three cultures melted into something unique that couldn’t be found elsewhere. He did a great deal of research into the area which he

ultimately used in *Eye of Cat*.

CSK: He talked about this somewhat. The novel *Eye of Cat* is the main result of this influence, after he'd absorbed so much of the native American culture from years of living there, studying the people, and reading their history. The constant view of the surrounding mountains inspired "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai."

John Grayshaw: What was Zelazny's relationship with Andre Norton? Was she a mentor to him? A friend?

WL: Zelazny admired her work and considered her a friend. He enjoyed her company when their schedules landed them at the same conventions, they occasionally corresponded.

CSK: They were both from the Cleveland area, and became friends and corresponded with each other. My impression is that they didn't have a lot of interaction after Zelazny moved to Santa Fe. She did provide him with a number of books that he used as reference for Hindu and Buddhist religions while writing *Lord of Light*. She also wrote a complimentary essay about his work.

John Grayshaw: What was Zelazny's contribution to the "New Wave" of Science Fiction?

WL: I don't really think Zelazny made any contributions to the New Wave. The fact that he was an incredibly literate writer, I think, got him lumped in with the New Wave, but I don't think their aesthetic scorched earth policy was his. And in fact by the time *Lord of Light* came out the New Wave was disavowing him and *New Worlds* published a brutal negative review of *Lord of Light*.

CSK: The flippant answer is that Zelazny disavowed any involvement in the New Wave or even its existence. But among those whom we recognize as authors in the New Wave movement, Zelazny brought mythology, the sarcastic, dastardly protagonist, certain experimental forms of storytelling, a poetic voice and rhythm to his prose, and a remarkable economy of style. One need only think of *Nine Princes in Amber*, or one of his powerful short stories, and wonder how many volumes it would take some authors today to convey the scope or the depth of background to the characters and setting. Zelazny was able to do so much in so few carefully crafted phrases.

John Grayshaw: How is Zelazny's collaborative work different than his solo work and how is it similar? And which of his collaborations are must reads?

WL: With Philip K. Dick and Gerald Hausman each writer wrote alternating chapters. With Saberhagen Zelazny was given a very detailed (90 plus page) outline which he turned into finished copy. With Robert Sheckley Zelazny also took an outline and wrote the finished copy. However when Zelazny showed it to Sheckley Sheckley rewrote Zelazny's finished prose to, in Zelazny's opinion, it's detriment. He was not as happy with the final product as he was with his finished version. As far as I know that version no longer exists, though I would surely love to get my hands on it if it did. I never got a clear understanding from Zelazny just how his work with Thomas T. Thomas went, but I suspect there was a lot less Zelazny in those books than in his other collaborations. For my money *Wilderness* and the books he wrote Saberhagen are the must reads.

CSK: The novels most similar to Zelazny's own work are probably two that Jane Lindskold finished posthumously, and *The Mask of Loki*, which Thomas T. Thomas wrote from Zelazny's outline. All of the collaborations are unsatisfying to me compared to Zelazny's solo works, because they contain only aspects of his style. With *Deus Irae*, he was trying to emulate Philip K. Dick's style, and the story wasn't so interesting to me.

I think the most successful of the collaborations is the short story "Come To Me Not in Winter's White," co-written with Harlan Ellison. But it suffers from the potential to seem dated, misogynistic, or intolerant, with a conclusion that is not so shocking today. I like *Coils*, written with Fred Saberhagen, which began with an extensive outline from Zelazny. Their other collaboration, *The Black Throne*, started with Saberhagen's idea and wasn't so interesting to me.

John Grayshaw: Did Zelazny have a particular writing routine he stuck with?

WL: Not that I am aware of.

CSK: He described this on many occasions. He'd write several times a day, after procrastinating over such things as the day's mail or newspaper. He'd try to write three or four times per day, a few hundred words at a time, aiming for about 2,000 words per day. And he'd often write late at night. The most peculiar aspect is that because of his fear of developing varicose veins (which he saw most older writers had), he wrote reclining in a lazy chair, with a portable typewriter on his lap. Varicose veins are worsened from prolonged standing or upright posture, and so there was a reasonable rationale behind this.

John Grayshaw: Chris Kovacs you annotated Zelazny's works, but do you still find references and allusions you missed?

CSK: Oh yes. And others use email to point them out to me. The six-volume short story collection is a work in progress, revised every few years when it is time for a new printing of any one of the volumes. I add or revise annotations and acknowledge all who have helped. If anyone wants to point out something that I missed, or an alternative interpretation of something I did annotate, then I'd be eager to hear it.

John Grayshaw: I've heard that Zelazny enjoyed playing role playing games. Are any of these games documented in some way?

WL: If they were I have not heard about them.

CSK: I suggest reading the biography. Some of the characters from *Donnerjack* and *Lord Demon* began as characters he invented for role-playing games with George R. R. Martin and others.

John Grayshaw: Can you tell us about the inspiration for Eileen Shallot from "He Who Shapes"?

WL: The inspiration for Eileen Shallot came from Zelazny's work with the Social Security Administration in Baltimore. One of his cases involved a woman who seemed perfectly normal to him when they spoke

on the phone but as it turned out she was blind. At this point Zelazny had started work on “He Who Shapes” but had not yet come up with the character of Eileen Shallot. Zelazny said, “After I hung up, I thought: That’s it. The character of Eileen has to be blind!”

CSK: I won’t answer this one fully here. It’s an opportunity to plug not only the six-volume collection again, but the new collection that Warren Lapine has put together with Samuel R. Delany. It turns out that Delany liked my annotations and wanted them included, and so you can read annotations to all ten of the stories in there. Let me just say that Eileen, like any good shallot or onion, has many layers. Especially from several Arthurian sources.

John Grayshaw: Theodore Sturgeon said about Zelazny, created “memorable characters, living ones who change, as all living things change, not only during the reading but in the memory as the reader himself lives and changes and becomes capable of bringing more of himself to that which the writer had brought him.” How has your experience of Zelazny’s work changed over the years?

WL: Zelazny wrote on so many different levels it’s possible to find something new in his work every time you approach it. It was always his intent to make sure you could enjoy one of his stories even if you only understood the surface of it and didn’t get any of his allusions or understand the underlying theme. So as we develop as readers Zelazny changes. I know he was my favourite writer at thirteen and I only barely understood what he was doing. Now as someone who works professionally in the same field that he did I’m even more amazed by what he accomplished than I was when I first discovered him.

CSK: One thing that hasn’t changed is that whenever I start to re-read one of his books, I experience a comfortable inward sigh of contentment because there’s something about his style and voice that I know I enjoy. I feel I’m back in comfortable hands and that my reading experience will be pleasurable. How it has changed is that doing the annotations has made me much more aware of the layers of meaning in many of his works, and that causes me to make new connections or gain new insights with every re-read.

John Grayshaw: What were Zelazny’s interests other than writing?

WL: He was an avid reader often reading more than a book a day, he was a martial artist having obtained a black belt in aikido, and he enjoyed skiing.

CSK: His children. The dessert menu before the appetizers and main course options were contemplated, because he wanted to see what lay ahead and was worth saving room for. Always reading, always learning. Religions and myths. Immortality. Roleplaying. Comics. Practical jokes. Assembling complex cat’s cradles with a loop of string. Poetry.

John Grayshaw: When Zelazny put himself in the Chronicles of Amber as a guard in the Royal Dungeon he said “I am writing a philosophical romance shot through with elements of horror and morbidity. I work on those parts down here.” Is this how Zelazny saw his work?

WL: I don’t think so. I think he was just having some fun.

CSK: He inserted himself for fun in what he called a Hitchcockian moment. But by romance he did not mean what you'd find in the romance novel section today. To best answer this, I'll quote from an essay I wrote for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, which I may also send to you to share with the group:

But Roger the guard did mean *Nine Princes in Amber* and its sequels because Zelazny was using the classical definition of romance. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were far fewer categories of prose. The novel was realistic, while the romance used an historical or imaginary setting to depict heroic or marvelous deeds, pageantry, romantic exploits, reversals of fortune, chance happenings, turns upon wonders, etc. Romance characters were not necessarily lifelike but instead filled stereotypes of noble heroes and heroines, and they usually achieved a happy ending. And quite clearly *The Chronicles of Amber* is a romance in that classical definition, and it is certainly "shot through with elements of horror and morbidity," including Corwin's blinding in the first novel. Zelazny as Roger the guard is writing the book that Corwin is living and we are reading. In a similar way the character of Destiny, popularized in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, reads a book that contains a detailed account of everything that was, is, and will be, for all characters and readers.

John Grayshaw: The Chronicles of Amber novels, what is their significance to the genre?

WL: The Chronicles of Amber will always be what Zelazny is best known for. In some way they seem to hurt his reputation among the more "serious" critics as they tend to think of the Chronicles of Amber as slight. That perception has always puzzled me as there is an absolutely amazing amount of literary allusion happening here as well as the use of some very sophisticated narrative devices. But I've always felt that the more "serious" science fiction critics tend to be a bit too pretentious and not as well read as they seem to think they are. I think Amber will stand the test of time and future critics will look on it much more kindly than do today's critics who are rooted in the same time and are concerned with how their own contemporaries view their criticism.

CSK: They had a huge impact for many years with conventions devoted to the universe of Amber. But with no new works, its impact seems to be fading. If the Amber TV series or movie sees the light of day, I hope this leads to a resurgence in interest in his work.

John Grayshaw: What was Zelazny working on when he died? Have all his unfinished works/shelved works been published?

WL: As far as I am aware Jane Lindskold finished up the two books that Zelazny was working on at his death.

CSK: He was working on *Donnerjack* – which was intended as a trilogy of novels (*Donnerjack*, *The Gods of Virtù*, and *Virtù, Virtù*) – and *Lord Demon*. Jane Lindskold compressed the storyline of *Donnerjack* into one novel. He was planning another set of Amber novels after he finished some more short stories, but evidently none of that was ever written down. *The Dead Man's Brother* had been written in the early 1970s and rejected by many publishers before being shelved for decades and then rediscovered. The only unpublished work is his autobiography *Aikido Black*. Jane Lindskold published some excerpts of it in

her book of literary criticism *Roger Zelazny*, but she told me she has no plans to publish it. I think she has the only copy of the manuscript. I'd like to read that.

John Grayshaw: What is Zelazny's legacy?

WL: Zelazny's biggest legacy will be that he made people want to write. There is something about his prose that awakens writers. Neil Gaiman and Steven Brust have both mentioned this; and I know it was reading his work that set me off on my life path.

CSK: The use of myths in science fiction. Poetic turns of phrase, such that many called Zelazny a prose poet. The sarcastic, dastardly immortal. Economy of style with large vistas or scopes of character evoked with few words. Innovative writing styles.