

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB  
Interview with Samuel R Delany,  
April 2018

*Samuel R. Delany is the author of such science fiction novels as Babel-17, The Einstein Intersection (winners of the Nebula Award for 1966 and 1967 respectively), Nova and Dhalgren. He has won four Nebula awards and two Hugo awards. He was inducted by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame in 2002. The Science Fiction Writers of America named him its 30th SFWA Grand Master in 2013.*

[1] D'Arcy Ward—My favorite novel of yours is *Nova*. What are your favorites that you've written?

SRD: *Nova* is among the SF novels of mine I like the most. But the truth is I've worked on all the novels, science fiction and otherwise,

I've published as hard as I possibly could. Thus, choosing a favorite among them is as hard as choosing a favorite child, once you raised them to where they can talk and walk and think for themselves. They're all incredibly different, and you love them for the different tasks they appear to excel at.

*Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*—my 2012 science fiction novel, and my longest novel next to *Dhalgren*—is probably most likely to appeal to gay male readers, or possibly to women, but those who finish it of whatever persuasion are usually pretty satisfied. But it asks a lot of the reader, especially the first third of the book—which is, by the way, the most carefully structured.

I liked *Nova*. I felt completely at sea while I was writing *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, and by the time I'd figured out away to wrap up what I had done and write what might have been sequel or a second part that would have been structured more or less the same way, I was tired of it and—frankly—hated it.

At that point, a relationship that had provided a lot of ideas for it broke up and we were two years into the Age of AIDS which made many of the things I had done in what I'd already written of the STARS look very different

anyway, so that, if I really wanted to make STARS work, I'd have had to reconceive the whole first half that was now slated to be published by itself, and throw out all the notes I'd made on the second half.

For some years, I went around telling people that I disliked STARS, and I did, because it was certainly the novel of mine with which I had suffered the most frustration, both in the writing, and in my life that was feeding into the writing.

(The only thing that had been at all pleasurable, had been mining my family history in order to find things to use—but even that soon seemed to be more fantasizing than systematic creation.) I thought the best thing to do would be to forget. But what I discovered is that one person after another began to tell me that Stars was their favorite SF novel of mine. The work I had put in seemed to have paid off with some of my readers, however unsatisfactory the whole thing experience had felt to me.

[2] Francois Peneaud—Do you think *Dhalgren* has had a legacy in the science fiction field, regarding its literary specificities as opposed to its science-fictional ideas and concepts?

SRD: What the legacy is of any book of mine, I'm afraid, is something I would have little way of knowing. At the least, you'd have to ask a bunch of other writers to get some reasonable sense of what the book had given them, if anything—and, indeed, readers to know what it had given *them*. I think that's the only way you can find out what the legacy of a work is—unless I simply have different notion of what a legacy is from the one you have.

[3] Adrienne Clark—If you had to live inside one of your stories, which story would it be and which character would you be?

SRD: On the one hand, I have never written about anyone who was me, except in my non-fiction—and on the other, when you say “one of your stories,” I can’t tell just from the written question, if you mean “one of your plots” or “one of your narrative events,” from all of your novels and shorter fictions and essays—or if you mean one of the narrative events from the works collected in *Aye, and Gomorrah . . . and Other Stories*, or the novelette and short story length work in the Tales of Neveryon series.

If had to live inside one of them, I would of course choose one about a gay man, because I happen to be gay.

[4] Katie Polley—Whose work among those currently writing in the genre do you find most interesting and why?

SRD: Very little of my reading today is in the genre. I don’t have time, and it becomes harder and harder for me to read fiction or any sort—and reading non-fiction is not much easier. Jo Walton, Maria Dahvana Headley, Michael Swanwick, Sam Miller, Gardner Dozois, Nisi Shawl, Bill Campbell, these are some names and writers that have encountered recently—and I know they are all interesting. So are Ted Chiang, Kelly Link, China Miéville, and Catherine Clamente. And the only thing that determines how widely they are known among my readers is how much those readers have to do with the SF community.

[5] Jim Harris--When will more books of yours come out on audio? I especially want to hear your short stories and novellas.

SRD: I’ve only had three audio books come out—*Babel-17*, *Nova*, and

*Dhalgren*. Both my agent and I predate the phenomenon of audio books by decades. It's just not the first thing either one of us thinks of when we think of a new book. Skyboat, my audio publisher, has never yet said no when we approached him about doing one.

Stefan Rudnicki who produces and reads for Skyboat is a conscientious reader and producer.

The accurate answer to your question is probably "When I can listen to one all the way through myself." I never have, and that includes any of the three books of my own that Skyboat has released. Listening to audio doesn't do it for me, any more than listening to a reading.

[6] William West--I'm an aspiring science fiction author. What is one of your most memorable learning experiences pertaining to the craft of writing?

SRD: *One* of the most . . . ? Easily I can tell you most memorable. An extremely good writer, Gene Wolfe, writes both SF novels, fantasies, and non F&SF novels as I do. He was older than I was by a few years, and he started a few years after me. The Clarion SF Writers Conference started some years before either of us entered the field. At that time, it was held at the home of Damon Knight and his wife Kate Wilson.

A few years later, I was at a Clarion where Gene taught for the first time and sat around with his kids in a circle, and the discussion went round with everybody talking. When it got to Gene, he said no more than anybody else and acted very much as though he were an ordinary reader giving his opinion on the tale. It bothered everyone. They expected him to take over and be the leader, but I realized what he was trying to do. As a critic, he was no more a leader than they were and was trying to show that he was equal to them and that they had to do this sort of thing for themselves.

Many years later, when I came to Temple after having been for 11 years in the comparative literature department at the University of

Massachusetts, where I wasn't even teaching creative writing, I took on teaching at a graduate level and tried to set it up a similar way: If you have something you want to discuss, bring it in; otherwise work on your story as much as you want and come in when you think you need the class.

Again, they balked and even went so far as to threaten to report me to the school.

The most important thing that young writers have to do is learn how to live their own lives, get the criticism they need, make the time for them to write, and decide what to do with it—not have someone else tell them. And that's the one thing they don't want to do. It's why, once they leave a writing workshop situation, in three, four, six years, so many of them have stopped writing. Again, to repeat myself, writing has to be fostered the way you would an addiction, but it is a very easy addiction to break.

I've carried a notebook since I was fourteen, so I'll always be prepared if an idea comes to me, but all too frequently you just become addicted to carrying a notebook around rather than writing in it.

[7] John Grayshaw—How has your work influenced other SF writers? For instance, some have called *Nova* a precursor of cyberpunk.

SRD: Sadly, that's a question I can't answer. The only people who might be able to tell you that are other SF writers or, indeed, SF readers. You're asking what the book has given people. What it's given the writer is least important thing about any given book, and the least knowable, so that I'm the last person who could give an objective or unbiased answer to that.

I once recall reading that someone had said that Gardner Dozois had told him that, in one of the anthology that he'd put together early in his career, all the stories in it had been influenced by me one way or the other. But again, I don't even know the name of the anthology in question nor have I any idea

how the stories in it might have been influenced by me or any anyone else. At the very least you'd have to ask Gardner

[8] John Grayshaw—What originally drew you to writing science fiction in the first place?

SRD: As I've said, repeatedly, back in 1961, Marilyn Hacker, at the time my wife, got a job editing for Ace Books, in New York, and used to come home complaining about the SF novels they were producing. So I wrote a book for her—which turned into my first published science fantasy novel. And that lead to an sf trilogy, *The Fall of the Towers*, and that eventually lead to more.

[9] John Grayshaw—What question has an interviewer never asked you but should have?

SRD: Well, certainly not this one! On the one hand, I highly complimented by this attention, but when that question asked me, I always feel it's because the interviewer has not been able to think of one on his or her own. I try not to feel insulted by it—it could mean that all my work is so lucid and without rough edges that there is no reason to question. But I often have the suspicion that it's just lack of enthusiasm for the writing—which is possibly my own fault.

[10] John Grayshaw--What can you tell us about your upcoming projects?

SRD: Right now, most of my energy is going into getting ready a new essay collection, in two volumes, for Wesleyan University Press. There's really not too much more to say about it, until it appears in a couple of years.

[11] Jim Harris--"What do you think of old science fiction fans who love your early work but never moved on to your newer work?"

SRD: Any writer who isn't so eccentric that he or she doesn't want to field questions at all is grateful for any readers like something they've written, early or late. And that's not too far away from the way I feel.

Nevertheless, history has changed what many writers have written about. Last night I did a reading with a young writer, Sam Miller, who is married to another young man who writes young adult novels--about gay topics. This is not what you would have found at most readings between 1995 (when same-sex marriage became legal) and 2000. With *Dhalgren* in 1974, I began to write novels about male characters who had a notable amount of sex with other men. Last night, Mr. Miller's new book, *Black Fish City*, carries a motto from *Dhalgren*. To me he looks like a writer in his middle thirties, and it's as hard to find any reference to his birthday on line as it might have been with a "woman of a certain age" in the early twentieth century. I wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't been born when *Dhalgren* appeared—it's still my most popular novel with both straight and gay readers.

*Nova* is a kind of retelling of *Moby-Dick* in science-fictional terms, the way Bester's *Tyger! Tyger!* is a science-fictional retelling of *The Count of Monte-Christo*.

I'm delighted that many people like--

But there are a number of later novels that talk about gay relations in a way that was not likely to happen at all, when I wrote my first half dozen novels, even before Stonewall, that included *Nova*. Readers who get to the end of my last overtly SF science fiction novel, *Thought the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012), often find it very satisfactory, though many give up, because the book is about two gay men who come together and stay together for the rest of their lives in an open relationship, not unlike my relationship of

the last 28 years with my own partner, Dennis, and live into the future, and the world actually goes on in a way that, between 2005 and 2012 when the book came out seemed reasonable to predict if certain developments took place, very possibly in terms of the years between 2012 and the next decade, are not looking very likely—such as a the development of a birth control system that both men and women take once, and then take a pill to counter act in order to have children: the turning of human reproduction from a systems-on system, to a systems-off system (such as the missile and atomic energy system, where an accident militates against the system going off instead for its going on), might even solve the population problem and many others besides. This is an "invention" I've used in two SF novels, *Trouble of Triton*, and *Nest of Spiders* both. I think it's important, and I think it's strange, if not downright weird, that no one writing about either book ever mentions it—even as I have been chosen the 31st Grand Master of Science Fiction.

Entire countries in Africa and Asia have outlawed the use of plastic bags, which I think it a truly utopian development. But without this kind of progress in simple, heterosexual birth control, it's not going to mean much. And that I think is really a bizarre lack of development.

Something you might want to think about, as we sign off. The old science fiction fans don't bother me; it's rather the new ones, who do like what I'm doing, who don't seem to see what I been holding out to them, since *Trouble of Triton*, in 1976, that might actually be of use.

--April 12, 2018,  
*Philadelphia*