Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Robert Silverberg (October 2019)

Robert Silverberg is a many-time winner of the Hugo and Nebula awards, was named to the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 1999, and in 2004 was designated as a Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writers of America. His books and stories have been translated into forty languages. Among his best known titles are Nightwings, Dying Inside, the Book of Skulls, and the three volumes of the Majipoor Cycle: Lord Valentine's Castle, Majipoor Chronicles, and Valentine Pontifex.

Andrew ten Broek: Do you read stories through another eye when you're in the role of the editor, than when you would when you go through your own story or that of a befriended author?

As an editor, I looked for stories that I wish I had written myself. Those were easy choices. Even easier to buy were stories that I wish I COULD have written, but probably wasn't capable of doing.

Mike Garber: A few brief comments on Tower of Glass, please.

I don't have anything specific to say. I wrote that novel about fifty years ago and what I remember is mainly that I liked it while I was doing it.

Alan Ziebarth: When did you start reading science fiction? And who were your favorite science fiction authors when you began reading science fiction?

I first encountered science fiction about 1946, with TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA and THE TIME MACHINE. I discovered the s-f magazines in 1948. My early favorite writers were Henry Kuttner (especially under his Lewis Padgett pseudonym), A.E. van Vogt, Rog Phillips, Robert A. Heinlein, and L. Sprague de Camp. I outgrew Rog Phillips pretty fast but I still admire the work of the others.

Patrick Manion: Why are there two different books called "The Collected Stories of Robert Silverberg, Volume One"? (One is subtitled "Secret Sharers" and is stories mostly from the 80's; the other is "To Be Continued" and has stories from the 50's)

The introduction to TO BE CONTINUED explains it. I made several attempts at doing a Collected Stories series, but the Bantam one was discontinued by the publisher after two volumes, and the British one, which ran to six volumes, published the stories all out of order. Finally I got everything straight with the nine-volume Subterranean set, which is the definitive one.

Lee Russell: Which theme means the most to you in your writing, and which of your books do you think shows that most clearly?

I think what matters most to me is communication between human beings, and I would suggest DYING INSIDE and A TIME OF CHANGES as the most typical of my books examining that subject, with a far-out nomination for SON OF MAN as well.

Clement Dulongpre: Of all your work, what do you consider your best novel?

That's like asking a parent to name his favorite child. I have various favorites, but they change from time to time.

Wing Fu Fing: Love your stuff Robert, my question: who are your favourite current SF authors?

I read hardly any current s-f authors and know very little about what's going on in the field today. I have been impressed by some stories by Ted Chiang, but beyond that there's nothing I can say.

Daniel Aldridge: As you have witnessed several eras and types of science fiction, what is your current view of science fiction when compared to the past, and what new developments do you envision in science fiction as well as for your future writings?

There won't be any future writings. I got tired of writing fiction eight or ten years ago, after a very long and busy career, and have retired from the field. I have no opinions on future developments in science fiction, since I will not be a part of that future.

Richard Whyte: 'Science Fiction 101' is probably my most-recommended SF anthology, not just for its selections (I discovered several of my favourites there), but also for the love and insight in your accompanying pieces. Your autobiographical sketch in 'Hell's Cartographers' mentions how much you enjoyed editing your SF anthologies; which one of them would you say is your favourite?

I think SF 101 is my favorite anthology, because the stories are all so good and I had what I regard as some useful things to say about story construction in my introductory essays.

Edward Clayton Rowe: Did you learn any juggling for Lord Valentine's Castle? If yes, do you keep it up as a form of meditation?

I did try to learn juggling while I was planning LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE, some forty years ago, but I was never very good at it. My idea of meditation now involves pulling weeds in my garden.

SFBC Member: I was born after the '60s but as an artist I'm fascinated with the art, music and consciousness expansion aspect of it. I've read a few accounts and watched documentaries about it, but the closest I've felt to what it must have been like was reading the Cosmos group performance scene in The World Inside. I love your description of how the band strives to affect the audience and blow their minds, the audio and visual elements, the instruments syncing up to each other to maintain a precarious balance and descriptions of synaesthesia experiences - it's all incredible! After I read your book, I even found a report you wrote in 1974: "Drug themes in Science Fiction." Could you recommend any non-fiction books about what this aspect of the '60s was like? Also, was there a concert you attended that might have influenced that scene?

I often went to concerts at a venue called the Electric Circus, which flourished in New York's East Village between 1967 and 1971. The concert I remember best was of electronic music by Morton Subotnick, but there were plenty of others. It was quite an era. I'm glad I was there for it.

Eva Sable: We're nearly always asking authors who their influences were ... I thought it might be interesting to turn that around and ask if any newer authors approach you and describe you as their influence, and if so, what that experience has been like?

I hear that all the time. You will not be surprised to hear that I find it a very pleasing experience. Better to be influential than forgotten, right?

John Grayshaw: Why have you made it a point to always attend the Worldcon?

It's like a family reunion for me. I have no siblings or children, but at the Worldcon I get together with people I've known forty or fifty or in a few cases sixty years, and it's always a high point of the year for me.

John Grayshaw: What are some amusing stories from conventions?

I've been going to conventions for 66 years. There are too many stories for me to pick out just a couple to tell.

John Grayshaw: Any movies or TV shows of your stories in the works?

My story NEEDLE IN A TIMESTACK was filmed last year but I haven't yet heard about a release date for it. PASSENGERS is in the process of development for a mini-series. A Canadian group is planning to film HAWKSBILL STATION. At the moment that's all that's cooking.

John Grayshaw: What was it about Majipoor that kept you returning to it?

A gigantic world, every sort of environment and culture – for a writer, an inexhaustible subject.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your friendship and collaborations with Randall Garrett?

We were not really compatible personally – I am a sober and steady guy, and he was quite the opposite – but we worked well together all the same, each of us contributing something of our own to the collaborations (his scientific background as a former chemist, my literary background), and we sold everything we wrote, quite a lot. I got married in 1956 to a woman who didn't like him at all, and after that collaborating was logistically impossible and we went our separate ways.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your friendship and collaborations with Isaac Asimov?

I knew him from the mid-50s until his death in 1992. We had a lot in common, two Jewish boys from Brooklyn who went to college at Columbia (though he was fifteen years ahead of me), and prolific writers who loved science fiction but wrote a lot of non-fiction besides. The collaborations came about late in his life when his health did not permit much novel-writing and he called me in to help.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers you are friends with? What are some amusing stories about those relationships?

I've known just about every science-fiction writer of the last sixty years except L. Ron Hubbard, whose path I never crossed, and so I could tell stories about them all day long. But since I don't know where to start, I won't try to start.

John Grayshaw: Algis Budrys reported in 1965 that you wrote and sold at least 50,000 words weekly. Is this true? I did the NaNoWriMo challenge one year and I could barely write 50,000 words in a month!

I doubt that I ever wrote 50,000 words a week, but in the late 1950s and early 1960s I routinely wrote 30-35,000 words a week, and my ledger for 1957 shows two million words, which averages out to better than 40,000 words a week, considering that I took a few weeks off for a vacation that year. Busy boy.

John Grayshaw: Since you are a very prolific author, how do you manage to write so much and so quickly?

Use the past tense here. I don't write at all now, and in my final decade or so as a writer I was content to produce six or seven pages a day, 1500 words or so, knocking off by noon at the latest. But in the big productive years I started after breakfast, worked until midday, took an hour off for lunch, and went back for another two or three hours, making five or six hours a day, steady typing. I wrote one word at a time but I always knew what the next word was going to be.

John Grayshaw: You're written in many genres other than science fiction. Did you enjoy writing in them or was it more of a work for hire sort of thing?

"Work for hire" has negative connotations. I never did work for hire. But I found many of my non-fiction books on archaeological themes to be exciting projects, and some of the things I did in other genres were pleasant enough exercises. I always thought of myself as a science-fiction writer who occasionally dabbled in other fields, though.

John Grayshaw: What are your hobbies other than writing?

I have a garden of strange and exotic plants, and work in it to the limit of my (steadily diminishing) stamina. I travel widely, going to Europe a couple of times a year. My wife and I collect all sorts of antiquities and other odds and ends. And I have always been a collector of books, building a vast library over the years.

John Grayshaw: Did you have a writing routine that you stuck to?

Five days a week, religiously, hardly ever missing a day. I talk about the working hours above.

John Grayshaw: Have you gotten the bug to start writing again? Or are you still enjoying retirement?

I don't miss writing at all and I never think about going back to it.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel is your legacy?

Shelf after shelf of books that I hope left some imprint on the history of science fiction.

--Robert Silverberg, Oct 2019