

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with James E. Gunn (November 2019)

*James Edwin Gunn is a science fiction writer, editor, scholar, and anthologist. He wrote such novels as “The Immortals,” “The Listeners,” and “The Joy Makers.” His work as an editor of anthologies includes the six-volume Road to Science Fiction series. His examination of Asimov’s works, “Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction” won a Hugo in 1983. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America made him its 24th Grand Master in 2007 and he was inducted by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame in 2015.*

*Gunn is a professor emeritus of English, and the founding director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction, both at the University of Kansas.*

**Andrew ten Broek: Do you have a favourite adaption from one of your stories by radio or television? If so, what did you particularly liked about its interpretation?**

My two TV film adaptations, “The Cave of Night” and “The Immortal(s) were exciting but disappointing in their changing some of the important aspects, particularly “The Immortal,” but I found the four adaptations of my stories on X MINUS ONE to be delightful and well done, particularly Ernest Kinoy’s adaptation of “Wherever You May Be” (“The Reluctant Witch”).

**Eva Sable: About being an anthologist ... especially given the scope of the Road to SF ... as a reader, choosing what you're not including seems harder than choosing what to include (leaving aside the complexity of negotiating the rights issues). Do you have anything to share about that process, and having done it, would you rather anthologize or write?**

Selecting the stories was always a pleasure, often conferring with the authors (still living) that I wanted to see represented. But I did have the difficult task of having to remove a few stories in volume 4 when the book ran too long, and that was painful. The worse part of putting together an anthology, though, was obtaining permissions, particularly when I had to deal with agents.

**Jim Harris: Has your insight into science fiction significantly changed since you wrote your master's thesis in 1951? The genre itself keeps reevaluating the SF in the 1940s. If you wrote your thesis today how differently would you summarize that decade and later ones?**

I'm sure it has, as I have learned more about the craft of writing and the appeals, although I was surprised to go back to my thesis and see how my judgments turned out to be reflected as well in *ALTERNATE WORLDS: THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION*, even though it was written fifteen years later.

**John Grayshaw: I understand you had a boyhood encounter with H.G. Wells. Could you tell us about that?**

My uncle John Gunn was raised in Girard, Kansas, and wrote for *THE APPEAL TO REASON* and then the Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books. In 1937 he was working as a proofreader in Kansas City and took me and my brother Richard to hear Wells speak at Municipal Auditorium. I don't remember much of what Wells said, but I do remember that he was short and sort of dumpy and spoke in a high voice, but the audience gave him a standing ovation as he left through an avenue through the crowd, and my brother and I pushed our way through the crowd to the front, where I stuck out my hand to touch the great man as he passed, but he brushed by without noticing. That didn't diminish my appreciation of his work, but I wasn't aware of his socialist ideas until much later.

**John Grayshaw: How did you first begin to write science fiction?**

I wrote a short story when I was 16, about which I have no memory. My first serious writing occurred after a couple of quarters in graduate studies at Northwestern University under the mistaken impression that I could be a playwright (my first play, "The Kingdom Come," was the product of a playwrighting class at K.U. and Allan Crafton, the grand old man of K.U. theater, decided to put it on as part of his theater offerings, though it was directed and acted by students. The only class I took at Northwestern was in radio writing, and I had the brainstorm of going back to K.C. and doing a series a radio plays about K.C. history. But when I took a prospectus and a sample radio dramatization to local

radio stations, they weren't interested, so I sat down in the third-floor rooms where I was living with my wife Jane and wrote a story called "Paradox." Astounding SF sent me a polite rejection, Amazing sent me a standard rejection, but Thrilling Wonder Stories sent me a letter one day that said "I like your story "Paradox," and I'll pay you \$80." Signed Sam Merwin, Jr. That was an event that changed my life.

**John Grayshaw: Which theme means the most to you in your writing? And which of your books do you think shows that most clearly?**

In my early writing I was dealing with ideas and trying to find characters and language that would serve them best. A little later, when I wrote "The Cave of Night" and "The Joy Makers," as well as THE IMMORTALS, I began to focus on characters, mostly about ordinary people being thrust into unusual situations and rising to meet their challenges, what I would consider the highest accomplishments humans can achieve. I was never interested in superheroes or failures. Much of my work since the late 1960s when I returned to writing after spending a good part of that decade dealing with various crises at the University. That included THE LISTENERS, KAMPUS, and THE DREAMERS but also in my TRANSCENDENTAL trilogy.

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

I became friends with many people in the field after I attended my first convention, the World Science Fiction Convention of 1952 in Chicago, which was just a short train ride from where I was working as junior editor of Dell Books in Racine, WI. I met Jack Williamson, who was standing behind me in the registration line, and we became lifelong friends and a collaborator on STAR BRIDGE, one of the books he was having trouble with, Fred Pohl, who was my agent at the time, although more later when he became a regular writer in residence in a summer course that I began offering in the summer of 1974, Cliff Simak, Robert Block, Mack Reynolds, and others. I lost the audience picture that was taken there, but finally found one reproduced on a fan page, had it enlarged, and it is hanging on my wall today. I got to know Ted Sturgeon after Horace Gold

wanted to acquire my novella “Breaking Point.” He telephoned me when I was finishing my graduate work at K.U., but he said he wanted it cut. I was willing to do it (it had started as a three-act play, full of dialogue), but he asked if he could have Ted Sturgeon do it. But that didn’t work out, but when I left Western Printing and Lithographing to return to full-time writing, I made a trip to New York to visit editors, and spent a day with Ted in his home on the Jersey side of the Hudson, and later he became the second weeklong visitor of my summer class (the third was Gordon Dickson, who in a meeting at the 1969 World Con in Saint Louis persuaded me to enter my name for the presidency of SFWA). I got to know a good number of other science-fiction people, particularly Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss.

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

I remember meeting Isaac at the World Con in Philadelphia in 1953, but we became closer friends when I accepted the offer of my then publisher Marty Greenberg, to join him and Isaac, and maybe another editor writer on a car trip from New York to Cleveland, where Isaac was to be guest of honor. Isaac was suffering from a kidney stone (which he passed during the convention) and we spent a good deal of time together. We corresponded for a year or two (he mainly with postcards) until I got feeling guilty about taking up the time of this busy man, so the longest time we spent together was when I attended a New York convention and got him alone long enough to interview him (on tape) for my Oxford University book about him.

**John Grayshaw: Your friendship with Theodore Sturgeon?**

I have mentioned the day we spent in New Jersey. He had the charismatic quality of focusing attention on the person he was talking to, and he spoke openly about his relationships and writing (he liked to remember how “Bianca’s Hands” had been rejected by everybody until it won a British cash prize), and he always seemed to enjoy staying at the University for a week each summer, although he never seemed to understand that the students were teachers and not writers. But I felt close to him, and enjoyed how he brought students to see him at the

workshop, one a former student at San Diego who did a film with him, and another a hospital administrator in Oklahoma who met Ted on an airplane.

### **John Grayshaw: Your friendship with Robert Heinlein?**

I can't say we were friends. He was a private person who didn't make friends easily, but I had a number of long telephone calls with him when I was an SFWA liaison with the 1976 world con in Kansas City and had to smooth over several misunderstandings with the young convention committee. The first of these, as I recall, was when the committee wanted to do a "roast" rather than the customary dinner honoring the guest of honor. Why do they want to insult me? Heinlein asked. It all went off okay, but I had a good introduction to Heinlein's system of honoring one's elders, although he very much wanted to stay in the presidential suite at the Muehlbach hotel (which had some context for him as a near Kansas City upbringing) but finally agreed to take a different suite so that he wouldn't create a problem for the elderly man from the scheduled prior convention who wanted to stay over.

### **John Grayshaw: Your friendship with Frederik Pohl?**

Fred was my agent, probably from the recommendation of Horace Gold after "Breaking Point" or maybe after he accepted my much shorter story "The Misogynist." I met Fred at various conventions after the 1952 convention, but I got to know him best when he became a summer University guest, came to K.U. to team teach a course in futurism that I was a part of, and joined me in a special program that I helped organize in Pueblo, CO, for a student who was one of my first in the Intensive Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction. I got Fred to join me (it was there he told me he was accepting KAMPUS), and it was a good experience. I thought of it as the first of a series, but we never did it again.

### **John Grayshaw: What about some stories about going to science fiction conventions?**

Fred used to say that conventions never closed, they just got suspended until they picked up again somewhere else. I attended the world convention for half a dozen years after my 1952 experience. It was always exhilarating, and I always

left with the feeling that I wanted to write something that would make me worthy of such exalted company. My convention going fell off during the period when I was in public relations (I didn't have time during those difficult days of student unrest) until I returned in 1968 in Oakland, CA, and renewed my interest. I never had occasion to attend conventions in foreign locations, but I did attend the conference that launched Harry Harrison's organization to promote translations of SF, in a suburb of Dublin, and while I was lecturing abroad for the U.S. I. A. I attended a Polish convention, where I gave a talk about SF that had to be translated.

**John Grayshaw: Who wrote what in "Star Bridge" your collaboration with Jack Williamson?**

Jack had written the first chapter and a couple of hundred pages of background material, but I wrote everything else and revised Jack's first chapter, but Jack made a lot of written comments and suggestions.

**John Grayshaw: How did you get involved with teaching science fiction and science fiction writing?**

I started teaching science fiction in 1969, when teaching SF was still in its infancy. It was a time when the University was offering students the chance to create their own courses, and my son Christopher and a friend got approval for a course in science fiction with me as its sponsor. I found that the students had little to say except that they liked or dislike this or that, so I spent a lot of time providing context (reflected in the film I made with Harlan Ellison leading the class on a visit, and we titled it "New Directions in Science Fiction." At the end of that year I left my position as head of public relations and became a full-time English teacher, offering my first regular class in the fall of 1970 to a student enrollment of 165, and the course every year in addition to the teaching of fiction writing.

**John Grayshaw: Which have you found more rewarding writing or teaching? And why?**

Each of them have their rewards and their challenges. I used to hear that writers shouldn't teach because they draw on the same sources of energy, but I found

them a relief from each other: you can only write alone, which makes writing a lonely business, and you can only teach in the company of others. Unlike some writers I found writing to be hard work. In fact, one of my remarks to students who told me how much they enjoyed writing was “You must be doing it wrong.” Teaching was fun. There were term papers to read, exams to give, and grades to assign, but aside from that it was fun to stand in front of a class and tell them about the thing I loved and see them respond. One slightly older student came up to me and said he had been reading science fiction for most of his life, but he had never read it like this.

**John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of your works? And why?**

I am fond of different books for different reason. THE IMMORTALS was important because it was my first major novel and became a TV movie and series and made the most money. KAMPUS was the most personal novel, because it came out of my experience. THE MILLENNIUM BLUES was my most artistic novel. I worked on it for twenty years thinking of it as a mainstream novel, but it ended up too close to the millennium itself, and it was published only in a collector’s edition and print on demand. And TRANSCENDENTAL was my tribute novel to the genre.

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

I grew up playing golf and bridge. I was only a so-so golfer (the low eighties on a good day), but a champion bridge player. My partner and I (a retired economics professor) won the first North American championship in which we played.

**John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick to?**

I try to write regularly. That’s what gets me up in the morning, but these days I have the energy and time to write maybe an hour or two a day. But it adds up. When I was working on the TRANSCENDENTAL trilogy, I would set down a page of notes about the upcoming chapter, what would happen and what the characters would do, and what each scene would accomplish, so I wouldn’t have to stop writing while I thought all that stuff out. But in this current series of novelettes, I have it worked out in my head and write only a few pages at a time, so I don’t have to go through that preparation. But I have written novels all sorts of ways,

writing the first chapter and going through to the end, writing the last chapter and then going back to the beginning, but mostly I end up writing in novellas or novelettes, getting them published in magazines, and then bringing them together into novels. In the special case of the “In Our Stars” novelettes, each one seemed to terminate the concept until I thought of a way to continue it.

**John Grayshaw: You published your first story in 1949. Having travelled with science fiction and publishing for 70 years, how have things changed? And what’s stayed the same?**

The most important aspect is the dynamics of publishing. When I started, the editor made all the decisions about what to publish. Today that decision must get past the accountants and the sales force. Marketing is the critical decision maker. That changes things.

**John Grayshaw: What are you working on now? And I read your short story in the current issue of Asimov’s called “Quantum Theory” and thought it was great.**

I’ve got a series of novelettes to appear in ASIMOV’S, and I just finished the final one. The first two occur in the near future, about twenty years from now, and deal with why things appear to happen out of human control. The third happens a couple of millennia later.

**John Grayshaw: What do you mean by “Let’s save the world through SF?”**

When I attended my first SF convention I was impressed by how thoughtful and considerate everyone was, and I never lost the feeling that science fiction attracted such people or created them. Much later I came up with the motto you ask about, based on the idea that we ought to increase the readership of science fiction as a way of “saving” the world. Later, at a conference we held, the conversation got around to the new techniques for measuring the way people’s minds get changed by their experiences, and it occurred to me that these techniques could be applied to reading science fiction (the way it has been said that London cab drivers brains get changed by learning the layout of London), and I enlisted a psychology professor to draw up a grant proposal for me.



Unfortunately, it got turned down, so I wrote it as a story, "Changing the World," that was published in ANALOG.

**John Grayshaw: What do you feel is your legacy?**

I'm not sure I'll have one, except as my former students and colleagues who now are continuing some of the programs I got started here, Chris McKitterick and Kij Johnson, and the teaching tree that started with me and continued with John Kessel and his students. But I have seen too many of my colleagues who seemed indispensable fade into obscurity after their deaths to think that anyone's legacy doesn't fade into obscurity. But I think I have brought a sense of meaning and value to the thinking about science fiction that may continue while I am forgotten. That's the way things are.