

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Andy Weir (Jan. 2020)

Andy Weir built a career as a software engineer until the success of his first published novel, "The Martian," allowed him to live out his dream of writing fulltime. He is a lifelong space nerd and a devoted hobbyist of subjects such as relativistic physics, orbital mechanics, and the history of manned spaceflight.

Thomas Watson: People who are inclined to express themselves creatively have no shortage of options for doing so. Some paint, some sing, others write. How did writing come to be your choice?

Well, I've always liked storytelling. And I'm a terrible artist. So that kind of leaves me with writing.

Kevin Kuhn Love your books, sir! How involved were you with the screenplay for "The Martian"? Did you have any issues with departures from your novel? Was there anything you enjoyed that was added?

Mostly my job was just to cash the check. Though they did send me the screenplay to get my opinion. They weren't required to listen to anything I had to say. They kept me updated on the production because they're cool. And in the end, the film is very true to the book, so I'm happy. Yeah, they made some changes. They had to pull things out, or the film would be 5 hours long. But overall it's a very faithful adaptation of the book and I'm thrilled with how it turned out.

Sara Sandy Gabai Zanger/Philip Cowan: As a child or teen, which writers - and which of their works - got you so excited about science fiction that you wanted to write in that genre?

I grew up reading my father's sci-fi book collection, so I'm one full generation off in what I read. Despite being a Gen-Xer, I grew up reading Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke. They're my "Holy Trinity" of sci-fi authors and they shaped my idea of what sci-fi should be.

James Peck: Who are your favorite authors now?

Living: Steven King, Ernie Cline, Blake Crouch

No longer with us: The aforementioned Holy Trinity, plus Terry Pratchett.

Sara Sandy Gabai Zanger: Artemis has been compared to Heinlein's writing. A combination of "Podkayne of Mars" and "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress." Do you feel you were influenced by Heinlein?

Absolutely! His books are kind of a blueprint for my writing style (until his later stuff when he gets all weird and sex-obsessed.)

Sara Sandy Gabai Zanger: How did you get into the head and soul of a young woman (Jazz in Artemis) and write such a believable character?

Thanks! It wasn't easy. I'm not a woman, but I really wanted Jazz to be the main character and for her to be a woman. Once a character presents themselves in my mind, it's pretty much impossible for me to change their gender. So I had to either write Jazz as a woman or invent a different lead for Artemis.

I had a few things going for me. First off, she grew up in a society I invented. So her social norms, beliefs, morals, etc. are all understood by the reader to be influenced by Artemesian culture. So I get a pass on all that from the reader automatically. Also working in my favor, there's no sex scenes or even a romance plot to speak of. My stories tend to focus on the intellect and cleverness of the lead character. And when it comes to matters of problem-solving and pure intellect, men and women are the same.

The biggest challenge was staying believable as a woman's "voice" and internal monologue. For that, I relied heavily on my female friends, family, and editors. Basically, I gave the draft to every woman I knew and asked for feedback on Jazz. I made changes accordingly.

Carla B. Keith **The style of *The Martian* seemed deceptively simple, but I found it to be riveting. Did you consciously set out to write in such detail? I read the book in one sitting, mesmerized by the details, and unable to put it down.**

Yes, I intended to have that level of detail right from the beginning. At the time, *The Martian* was a serial story I posted to my website. I had about 3,000 regular readers that I had accumulated over ten years of writing science-related stuff. So they were all science-minded folks who like things to be accurate. I wrote *The Martian* for them.

Joshua Carrasco **What is a book or novel that you read that you enjoyed more than you thought you would?**

"*The Handmaid's Tale*". I hate dystopia stories. I think they're overdone and whiny. And I hate fiction that has a heavy-handed political message. So, by all rights, I should absolutely despise *The Handmaid's Tale*. But I loved it. It's just such a fundamentally good book.

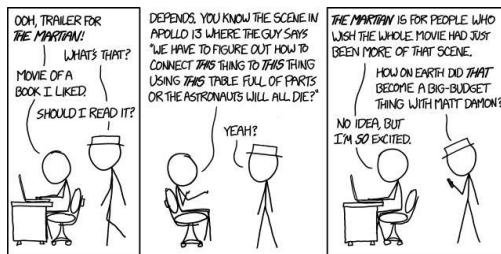
James Peck **What are you currently reading?**

Nothing. Thing is, when you spend all day writing, kicking back with a good book feels like a busman's holiday. I want some other part of my brain engaged when I'm not working, so I end up watching TV or doing woodworking (my hobby).

Bob Hasse/Rob Morganbesser: **Mr. Weir explain (to one not scientifically educated) how the Martian atmosphere could be thin enough that a tarp over the open nose cone of a rocket could protect an astronaut during launch, yet a sandstorm on the surface of Mars could be powerful enough to tear an antenna lose and skewer Watney?**

The answer is: it's not. The atmosphere of Mars is only about 1% the density of Earth's. It does get 150km/h windstorms, but the inertia from the thin atmosphere is so small it would feel like a gentle breeze. So there's just no way a storm could do that kind of damage. I knew this at the time I wrote it. I had an alternate beginning worked out where an MAV engine test causes an explosion that leads to all the problems, but it just wasn't as cool. *The Martian* is a man-vs-nature story and I wanted nature to get the first punch in.

Mike Saltzman I'd like to know if he's ever seen this XKCD comic and if so, what he thinks of it?



Yup, I've seen it. Loved it! :)

Eva Sable With as intense a story as The Martian, what made you decide to go outside the traditional publishing route to get that story to people? Particularly when that kind of first appearance doesn't usually lead to the kind of success you've experienced?

I didn't have a choice. At least, I didn't think I did. "The Martian" was the third full-length novel I wrote. I tried to get my previous two in front of agents and publishers but got nowhere. So I had long ago given up on making a go of professional writing. The Martian was just something I did for fun. I fell into success with it very unexpectedly.

Ryan Dash: How realistic do you think your vision of Luna is in Artemis?

It's as realistic as I could make it. People always seem to ignore the importance of economics in colonization – so I started with the economics and worked outward from there.

Molly Greenspring I saw your video with the Youtuber Joe Scott, do have any plans to work with other Youtubers? Does working with Youtubers require much planning?

Joe reached out to me and I was more than happy to sit with him. I'd been a subscriber to his channel for quite a while. Other YouTubers would be welcome to reach out as well.

Molly Greenspring How important is scientific realism in your books, is there ever a conflict between this and storyline?

Extremely important. I really want to be as realistic as possible. Real physics is very good at keeping internally consistent. You don't get plot holes when you stick to real science.

When there's a conflict between what I want and what science allows, I'll try to rework it so the science is accurate.

Molly Greenspring How do you plan your world building?

Lots of daydreaming, Excel spreadsheets, and research. Nothing unexpected. Just a lot of work. But worldbuilding is the fun part of any story. The hard part is all that pesky writing.

Sara Sandy Gabai Zanger At the latest meeting of the Tel Aviv Book Club of the Israeli Association for Science Fiction and Fantasy we discussed Artemis. We have a few Urban Planners / Civil Engineers in the group and they said that a city with only 2,000 people is not large enough to support the society that is

presented in the book. (guilds, industry, tourism and more.) Is this something you considered or researched? Or did it just work out this way in the story?

I disagree with them. Because I based Artemis off of resort towns in the Caribbean. They tend to be about that size and, like Artemis, have a thriving tourism industry. All of the other industries in Artemis are directly related to the functioning of the city itself. Remember, the tourism isn't a side effect of Artemis – it's the whole reason the city exists in the first place.

John Grayshaw: What do you really think of Disco? Do you hate it like Watney?

I love Disco. :) My friends give me a lot of flak because of it.

John Grayshaw: Do you get feedback about “the Martian” from all ages? My 7-year-old watched the movie and loved it.

Oh sure. I get kids and 90+ year olds emailing me. It's awesome.

John Grayshaw: After such a big hit with “The Martian” did you feel like it would be hard to live up to expectations with your second novel?

Of course it's stressful to follow up a success like The Martian, especially considering it was my first book. A success like The Martian comes once in a career for a writer, and I happened to get mine right out of the gate. It's extremely unlikely that any other book I write will be as popular. But if people read it and say “I liked The Martian better, but this was still pretty good” then I'll call that a win.

John Grayshaw: Do you plan on returning to Zhek? “I saw it described as “A more traditional sci-fi novel with aliens, telepathy, and faster-than-light-travel” and I thought it sounded like fun.

No, I had to put it on a shelf. The setting was really cool but the story was terrible. However, it had a lot of really cool concepts that I'm going to use for other stories.

John Grayshaw: Is there still an Artemis movie in the works?

Yes. It's early stages right now. They have a screenplay and are working on budgeting. They're not even to casting yet. And with Hollywood you never know if a project will go forward.

John Grayshaw: Who do you think should play Jazz? I vote for Rosario Dawson.

No idea. I just want her to look the part, ethnicity-wise.

John Grayshaw: What advice do you have for writers who are just starting out and trying to “make it”?

1) You have to actually write. Daydreaming about the book you're going to write someday isn't writing. It's daydreaming. Open your word processor and start writing.

2) Resist the urge to tell friends and family your story. I know it's hard because you want to talk about it and they're (sometimes) interested in hearing about it. But it satisfies your need for an audience, which

diminishes your motivation to actually write it. Make a rule: The only way for anyone to ever hear about your stories is to read them.

3) This is the best time in history to self-publish. There's no old-boy network between you and your readers. You can self-publish an ebook to major distributors (Amazon, Barnes and Noble, etc.) without any financial risk on your part.

John Grayshaw/James Peck: Were you surprised at the success and popularity of *The Martian*? Why do you think "*The Martian*" was so successful?

Yes, I was! I never thought 350 pages of algebra word problems would become so popular, but it did! In retrospect, I think it was popular because it's not like other contemporary sci-fi. It has an uplifting, positive message in an era of bleak, depressing, stories about teen-agers fighting against fascism in dystopian hellholes.

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

Ernie Cline, Blake Crouch, Hugh Howey, George R. R. Martin (he writes Sci-fi too!)... no really cool stories. We don't hang out that often.

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

My favorite is woodworking. I have the garage set up as a workshop. I like to make furniture. I'm still a beginner but I enjoy it. Though, like any woodworker, 90% of my projects are things for my woodworking shop. :)

John Grayshaw/Eva Sable: Do you have a writing routine or habits that you stick with?

I usually start the day answering emails. Both business related and fan mail (I answer all fan mail). I try to write 1,000 words per day when I'm working on my first draft. I do the bulk of my writing after lunch.

John Grayshaw/James Peck/Ryan Dash: What are you working on now?

Right this moment I have turned in the first draft of my next novel and I'm waiting for the editor to get back to me with his notes. I'm not talking about the story or plot of that one yet. :)

John Grayshaw: What are your goals for the future?

Same as the present. Writing books. I love it.