

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Jack McDevitt (January 2020)

Jack McDevitt has won multiple awards including, a Nebula for "Seeker," a Campbell Award for "Omega," the International UPC Science Fiction award for "Ships in the Night," and the Robert Heinlein Lifetime Achievement Award. He has written over 20 novels.

Eva Sable: Thank you, Mr. McDevitt, for sharing your time and experience with us. Where would you suggest that someone new to your work start to get the best sense of who you are as a writer?

Easiest would be to start with one of the current books, either *The Long Sunset* in which Priscilla Hutchins discovers a race of friendly lowtech aliens who are only weeks away from being taken out by a black hole, or *Octavia Gone*. In which the futuristic antiquities dealer Alex Benedict tries to discover what happened to a space station that vanished. Another possibility: Ask any SF fan to name favorite pieces of fiction and they inevitably come up with short stories.

Anyone wanting to take that route could find "Searching for Oz," "Molly's Kids," and "The Last Dance" in *A Voice in the Night*. Or "Cryptic," "The Fort Moxie Branch," and "Nothing Ever Happens in Rock City" in *Cryptic*.

James Peck/Michael Ries: With a seemingly growing support of science fiction ("Consider Phlebas," "Foundation," "The Expanse," "Dune," etc.) in television and movies, has there been any interest of turning any of your books into a series or movie? And what can fans do to help push this?

Fans can't do much other than keep reading. Contacts from various producers have been made over the years. But nothing that seemed to be serious.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the science fiction writers who inspired you as you discovered the genre?

Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Murray Leinster, Henry Kuttner, John Campbell, Theodore Sturgeon, and a host of others. The ones who really caught my attention, though, were Alex Raymond, who created Flash Gordon, and Philip Francis Nowlan, who was responsible for Buck Rogers' first appearance, before he became a comic strip character. When I was about five years old, my father took me to the local movie theater on weekends, and I got to see the SF serials based on the two characters. I loved the rocket ships, and recall asking my father why, with that great transportation, Buck and Flash spent so much time fighting with guys who looked like our local barber.

John Grayshaw: How did your diverse careers working jobs such as naval officer, cab driver, English teacher, and custom's officer, affect your writing?

The only connection I'm aware of was a result of the management seminars I conducted while working for the Customs Service. We had a process to stress communication skills: We did virtual situations in which groups of five trainees would face a difficult situation and have to come up with intelligent

reactions. E.g., They are in a plane that crashes in the Arizona desert. They all survive, but the weather is blazing hot. The radio has been damaged. They passed over a small town about 50 miles back. Do they try for the town? Or stay with the plane? We got an interesting revelation from the exercises. The groups succeeded and failed much the same way regardless of their makeup, Agents, import specialists, inspectors, it didn't much matter, they all lived and died at the same rate. The only area in which we saw a difference was gender. Groups composed entirely of women usually made it through. And if you're thinking the all-men teams went under most often, that's not so. The mixed groups were the ones who almost always died. Why? Because the women were inclined, when guys were present, to back off and let them have their way. And the guys, under the same circumstances, usually took more chancy action than they normally would.

That was the reason when I started writing, I was more inclined to write about gutsy women than men. I have two series of novels going: One is the Academy series, starring Priscilla Hutchins, who's a starship pilot; the other is the Alex & Chase books. Chase is the narrator.

John Grayshaw: You wrote "The Cassandra Project" with Mike Resnick, who unfortunately passed away this past week. I understand that you were good friends with him. Can you tell us about your friendship with him?

Mike was one of a kind. Talented, amiable, funny. He lived in Cincinnati. I'm in South Georgia. I always regretted that we weren't close enough to do lunch together periodically. The only places where we were able to get together were usually SF conventions, where things were inevitably crowded. I have a good bit of his work in my library, so in a sense he'll always be with me.

John Grayshaw: Are there other science fiction writers that you are good friends with? What can you tell us about those relationships too?

Mike Bishop, Greg Benford, Ben Bova, Stanley Schmidt, Jane Lindskold, Bud Sparhawk, Michael Swanwick, Mary Soon Lee, Allen Steele, George Zebrowski, Pamela Sargent, Lyn McConchie, James Patrick Kelly, Les Johnson, Michael Bishop, Walter Cuirle, Catharine Asaro, Doug Beason. Rick Wilber, Fran Wilde. And a good many others. We get together when we can, but again most of the contacts are long distance.

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

A couple of my stories have become personal favorites. When I am scheduled to do a reading I usually pick something like "Henry James, This One's For You," or "Searching for Oz," or "The Candidate." They make people laugh out loud.

John Grayshaw/Michael Ries: Where did the idea for Alex Benedict, Chase and Priscilla Hutchins come from? Is Alex Benedict based on a real person?

See above for Priscilla. She emerged from the management seminars. I needed an antiquarian in the far future when people were trying to figure out why a historic war hero allowed himself to be destroyed (*A Talent for War*). I think I have that right. The book is a long time ago. I needed a woman to preoccupy

Alex, and that was Chase's sole purpose. I never expected that Alex would keep coming back, so far, seven more novels, nor that Chase would become the narrator of the books.

John Grayshaw: You have written some characters that keep readers coming back for more. What do you think makes for a good character?

I find a way to put the reader into the middle of the action. I don't want him to recall he's reading a book. When the protagonist's girlfriend tells him it's over, I want the reader to feel the emotional impact. In "A Christmas Carol," Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present watch the Cratchits at dinner. Scrooge, moved by Tiny Tim, asks the Ghost whether he will live. If Dickens had been someone else, the Ghost might simply have said 'No.' But Dickens wanted the reader to be there: The Ghost replies: "I see a vacant seat in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner." Dickens does not tell us what is coming, he *shows* us.

John Grayshaw: You've written multiple stories about Earth's first contact with aliens, but what do you think are the chances we'll ever find aliens out there?

We may intercept an artificial signal someday. But FTL travel is probably impossible. And we're just too far away from any other solar systems to attempt to travel to them. I have no doubt there are others out there. With billions of suns and planets, how could it be otherwise? But meeting any of them would be tricky for a number of reasons.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research do you do for your novels? How did you become interested in subjects like xenoarchaeology and xenobiology?

I don't do research. I contact scientists, explain what I'm looking for, and ask for their opinions. E.g., What would you see in the sun that would suggest to you it's not a natural object?

My experience has been that it's the kind of off-the-wall question professional scientists love. In forty years, I've descended without warning on a good many of them. Not one has ever told me to just go away.

John Grayshaw: Many of your novels feature strong historical themes that center on discovering or recovering the past. Where does your interest in history come from?

Not sure. Possibly from the fact that I was at a party at an aunt's house when we got word on the radio about a Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese. I was six years old. I had never heard of either Pearl Harbor or the Japanese. But I started reading more than comics in the newspapers after that.

John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in writing mysteries? Who are your favorites/influences from that genre?

I was a fan of a radio show called "I Love a Mystery." They didn't just do whodunits like almost everybody else. There were events that occurred that needed some serious explaining. Later I discovered Gilbert Keith Chesterton, when I was looking for a replacement after I'd finished the Sherlock

Holmes stories. I tried Father Brown. They were a serious improvement over the standard detective mystery. It wasn't just a matter of determining who committed the murder, it got much deeper. How had a man police knew to be threatened and whose house they were guarding come to be murdered, and the house was still empty? Why did a general who was famous for taking care of his troops, of not risking their lives unnecessarily, come to mount a pointless charge up a hill protected by a heavy enemy troop engagement?

Unfortunately, the Father Brown TV show sidesteps all these, and is simply another whodunit series.

John Grayshaw: What are the key elements in writing a hard SF mystery?

Creating an event that seems to make no sense. Like the space station that vanishes in *Octavia Gone*. In *Polaris*, an interstellar vehicle carrying wealthy passengers drops out of sight. When it's finally found, adrift, the passengers are gone. But there's no place in the system to which they could have retreated. And the lander is still on board. The critical aspects are that the solution explains what happened and why it happened, without using any sleight of hand.

John Grayshaw: Plotting for mysteries seems like it would be intricate work. How much do you outline before writing?

Ursula Le Guin advised me to keep the outlining to a minimum. She was right, although it took me a while to realize it. Too much happens as you ride along, and you do not want to be stuck to an outline. All I need is the nature of the mystery and, ultimately the reason and explanation of how it happened. Then the narrative virtually writes itself.

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

I set up a given amount of work that is to be done, measured in words or in scenes. I don't plan using time. Give me four hours to write and I'll spend half of it playing Free Cell or staring out the window.

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

I enjoy reading. Love chess. Do occasional jigsaw puzzles. And having lunch with friends.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

An Alex & Chase novel. Working title: *The Last Star*. Life is rare in the universe, and intelligent beings almost nonexistent. A research vessel comes across a living but dark world which seems to have one town with electric lights. The houses are made of stone and there are also log cabins. The ship is not supposed to make contact so they return home and a special team is sent out. When they get to the world, the town is gone. As are the houses and cabins.

John Grayshaw: What is your legacy?

John, I'm going to have to leave that for someone else.