

Science Fiction Book Club  
Interview with Nancy Kress (February 2020)

*Nancy Kress is the author of thirty-three books, including twenty-six novels, four collections of short stories, and three books on writing. Her work has won six Nebulas, two Hugos, a Sturgeon, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and has been translated into two dozen languages, including Klingon. In addition to writing, Kress often teaches at various venues around the country and abroad, including a visiting lectureship at the University of Leipzig, a 2017 writing class in Beijing, and the annual intensive workshop Taos Toolbox, which she teaches every summer with Walter Jon Williams.*

**Tony DeSimone: “Nano Comes to Clifford Falls” is one of my favorite short stories. Do you think the advent of 3D printing could lead to that story becoming a reality?**

The 3-D printers in my story are super-machines, capable of creating anything. Although I think that large, versatile 3-D printers are certainly going to change manufacturing, by themselves they will not create the sort of universal unemployment that my story explores. You would still need to have raw materials mined or grown, transport to get those materials to the printers, and an economic reason to put traditional companies out of business. Competition will accomplish part of that, but not all of it. Like much SF, my story exaggerates the situation in order to spotlight it, especially its effects of my characters. That’s what, in my opinion, good SF does: not so much invent tech as examine what its effect on society could be.

Let me add, however, that most of the effects in my story can, will, or already do exist if you use a broader definition of subversive tech: automation. 3-D printing is a part of this larger picture. We have already seen huge numbers of manufacturing jobs disappear in this country. The usual scapegoat is globalization: “Those jobs went overseas.” Some, of course, did. But many studies say that as many as 80% of those jobs were lost not to globalization but to automation. This can only increase as technology advances in self-driving trucks, AI that can handle routine clerical tasks, and a host of other computer and/or robotic tasks (one tiny example: food-delivery robots from Starship Technologies, essentially “coolers on wheels,” now deliver some items like pizza in D.C.) What are all those displaced workers going to do for money, for meaningful time-filling occupation, for life structure? Some can adjust; some will not. That’s what I wanted to explore in “Nano Comes To Clifford Falls.”

**Mike Saltzman: Like you, I find that I require a lot more sleep than most people I know. I can sleep 10 hours a night and still be tired. Did you ever find a way to alleviate that problem in your own life?**

No, but with advancing age, the problem has shifted. Now I can’t get enough sleep, waking far too early no matter what time I go to bed. Ironies abound.

**Joshua Carrasco/Jeff Minor: Who are some of you favorite current authors?**

Although not exactly current, my favorite SF author of all time is still Ursula K. LeGuin. I reread THE DISPOSSESSED every few years: for its characters, its passionate belief, its prose. Of those alive now, I enjoy N.K. Jemison (even though I don’t usually read fantasy, tending more toward science fiction), Daryl Gregory, Jack Skillingstead, Karen Joy Fowler. In mainstream, I have long been a fan of Anne Tyler (now, alas, retiring). I am about to read the

controversial AMERICAN DIRT. However, I find that the older I get, the more non-fiction I read. Some of that is research, but a lot is curiosity about the world outside my head—more curiosity than I had when young. I don't know why.

**Peri Dwyer Worrell: I just read “After the Fall” (etc). Why do you think you return to the plot element of exceptional children in your work?**

Children interest me. Fresh out of college, I taught the fourth grade for four years. A young mind is certainly no *tabula rasa*—we arrive with a full set of genetic traits, and our families and neighborhoods shape kids to an enormous degree. That's part of why children interest me: To what extent can we have a hand in creating a society with humane beliefs and practices, and to what extent are we stuck with inborn proclivities toward hierarchy, violence, and gender differences? Complex questions—more complex than the shouting and outrage that even asking the questions often leads to. Children are the natural laboratories for studying those issues, as well as the eventual (I hope) solutions to them. Besides, young children are engaging. And exceptional children make good protagonists because, by definition, they are not like everyone else and that inevitably leads to conflict, the engine of all stories.

**Molly Greenspring: Are there ways to write about the future from a more removed perspective or are all writers a product of their time?**

All writers are products of their time, yes. But we can struggle—and sometimes it *is* a struggle—to transcend what we experience all around us and imagine a different way of life. Why was Euripides, of all the great Greek dramatists, the one to see that slavery was morally wrong? We don't know. For SF writers, a new perspective can come from extrapolating a current trend (“If this goes on...”), from imagining a way of life suited to a completely different environment (How would we live differently if some among us could control earthquakes? See N.K. Jemison), or from setting a story so far in the future that there exist entirely different rationales for living meaningfully (I tried to do this in “My Mother Dancing.”)

**Molly Greenspring: How much research is done for your books about subjects like genetic engineering, divisions in society and transhumanism?**

A lot. A very lot. I am not trained as a scientist, and when I write the kind of hard SF that exists, for example, in “Yesterday's Kin” or STINGER, I research the science first, and thoroughly. I read journals and books, I research online, I plague scientists and doctors I know with questions. Such research often shapes or even suggests plot points. When I wrote “Beggars in Spain” in 1991, both my scientific research and the science in my story were minimal, and not particularly supported. Since then, I have more, and more accurate, science. This presents its own challenges; the science should be interesting, credible, and clear, but it should not slow down the story or distract from it.

**John Grayshaw: Do you have advice for other writers that aren't scientifically trained how to do scientific research and get the science right?**

First, find some development or piece of tech that interests you (I subscribe to SCIENCE NEWS, which every two weeks provides brief introductions to what's happening in a variety of fields.) Once you've got something, go to trusted sites on the web to learn more. Then find books and journal articles, as recent as you can, and read them. I do this, incidentally, for other aspects of my stories besides science. For my character Army Ranger Leo Brodie in IF TOMORROW COMES, I read three memoirs by Rangers who served in Iraq, studied the Ranger Handbook, researched sniper rifles and Stryker tanks online, and finally hired an ex-Ranger to read the manuscript and correct whatever I had wrong or outdated. Which he did. My closest friend is a doctor, and she reads and vets everything medical in my stories (Bless you, Maura!)

**Eva Sable: So much to read, so little time ... If I wanted to get a sense of you as a writer, which of your works would you recommend?**

For short stories, THE BEST OF NANCY KRESS, which conveniently brings together a bunch of my short work. For novellas the ones that have won awards: "Fountain of Age," "The Erdmann Nexus," "Beggars in Spain," "After the Fall, Before the Fall, During the Fall," "Yesterday's Kin." For novels, probably the novel version of BEGGARS IN SPAIN. But taken all together, that's a lot of verbiage. I've been at this a long time ☺

**Jan van den Berg: I used to subscribe to Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine (1980s and 1990s) and read quite some short stories by you. Does the short story format suit you better than novels (or the other way around) or do you like both formats?**

Novellas are my favorite length (17,500 – 40,000 words). They are long enough to create an alternate world, but short enough that one plot line can barrel on through, without the need for subplots that a novel has. I also really like short fiction. Probably soon I will stop writing novels entirely and concentrate on the shorter lengths, which I enjoy more and think I'm better at.

**Gary Denton: I loved that you explored a moral, political, and philosophical question in The Beggars in Spain series. "In the most objective terms you can manage, what do we owe the grasping and nonproductive needy?" What was the process of creating this series like? Were there incidents or inspiration that made you decide this would be your next work?**

I think you are paraphrasing! I didn't say "What do we owe the grasping and non-productive needy," I said "What do the haves owe the have-nots?" Many people are have-nots despite working one, two, even three low-paying jobs to support their families.

What got me started on exploring this question was two very different books. I read (again) LeGuin's THE DISPOSSESSED, in which the answer to the question is "Everything." In a society in which no one owns anything, not even personal pronouns (they say "the handkerchief I use" rather than "my handkerchief"), all is shared. The other book was ATLAS SHRUGGED, to which the answer is "Nothing. Let them fend for themselves." I wasn't satisfied with either answer, lacking both LeGuin's faith in property as the root of (nearly) all evil, and Rand's coldness and inconsistency (too long to go into here.) So I wrote the book as a

way of figuring out what I did think the haves owe the have-nots, and why. The other two books of the trilogy were written because the story did not seem done.

**Gary Denton: In another interview, you said that genetically engineering people who don't need sleep gestated as a story you tried different versions of for 13 years before you send off "Beggars in Spain" as a novella where you combined it with economics and morality. Do you feel most good science fiction stories need two or more ideas to explore?**

Yes. In fact, most good fiction except very short stories combine an idea about the outer world with a change in the protagonist's inner world. This is especially true of science fiction and fantasy, which is in the business of inventing outer worlds different from our own.

**Gary Denton: Your latest book 'Terran Tomorrow' had a similar genesis as 'Beggars in Spain' - a Nebula Award-winning novella that became a trilogy of novels. Is that the nature of the publishing industry, they want to turn great shorter stories into trilogies, or did you plan it that way?**

I did not plan it. My entire career has been pretty much unplanned, writing whatever moved me at the time instead of doing what the publishing industry finds most lucrative: building a "brand," writing long series so that there is an automatic readership of people who liked the first one, sticking to one subgenre (fantasy, horror, hard SF, space opera, etc.) If I had done it the way I was "supposed to," I probably would have made more money. But this way has satisfied me. The novellas became novels and then trilogies because I felt I wanted to say more about the characters or the situation.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the Science Fiction writers you are friends with. Do you have any interesting stories about any of those relationships?**

For the last eleven years, I have lived in Seattle, which has a thriving SF community that includes Greg Bear, Ted Chiang, Eileen Gunn, Nicola Griffith, and, until her recent death, Vonda McIntyre. In addition, 35 years of con-going have introduced me to a lot more writers who became friends. Yes, I know stories about all these people, but I'm not going to tell any because I'd like to keep their friendship 😊

**John Grayshaw: I read that Bruce Sterling, at a workshop gave you some advice that ended up shaping "Beggars in Spain. Are you also friends?**

Yes, although now that Bruce lives in Europe, I don't see much of him. I admire his work a great deal, however.

**John Grayshaw: Do you like to go to Science Fiction Conventions. Do you have any interesting stories about them?**

I don't go to as many conventions as I used to, but I still enjoy them. Not only do I get to sit on panels and do readings, but I get to see friends scattered all over the country. And a lot of

business gets done at cons, as well, since editors and agents are there. I am enormously pleased to be Guest of Honor at the 2021 World Science Fiction Convention in Washington, D.C.

**John Grayshaw: How did you get involved in teaching writing? What are some of the things you enjoy about it?**

I have always been a teacher: primary school (teaching fourth grade), high school (did not go well), college (State University of New York). After I started publishing, the transition to teaching SF writing was a natural. I've done Clarion and Clarion West multiple times, and now each summer Walter Jon Williams and I teach Taos Toolbox, a two-week intensive workshop in New Mexico. Our guest lecturer is George R.R. Martin. I like teaching writing for several reasons: to help along new talent, for the camaraderie, and to help sharpen my own writing. Teaching craft to others forces a writer to think about their own. In addition, I've been fortunate enough to teach writing in Beijing and in Leipzig, both fascinating cities.

**John Grayshaw: A career such as yours has had many turning points, can you talk about some of these more pivotal moments?**

Every writing career (including George Martin's, as he explains to my Taos students every year) has at least one low point, where a writer thinks: Okay, that's it, my career is over, what are the chances of becoming a plumber? I reached that point after two books of mine in a row did not sell well and my publisher was going to demote me from hardcovers to only mass-market paperback. But the next books I wrote happened to be space opera, a popular genre (the PROBABILITY series), and an editor who believed in me said, "Wait...I think we can sell this." And they did.

On the writing side rather than the business side, you already alluded to Bruce Sterling's critique of a story of mine at a professional writing group we both attended in the early 1990's. His critique was harsh and, as I realized after licking my wounds for a few weeks, accurate. He said that the society in my story made no sense, was just stuck together "from 1950s and 1960s SF tropes" because I hadn't considered the economic underpinnings of any society. He was right; I hadn't. So I started to think about money and power, and the next thing I wrote won both the Nebula and Hugo, "Beggars in Spain." That was a turning point for me, for sure.

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

I play chess. Badly but with gusto.

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

Yes. I am very much a morning person, and so I write first thing (well, after my first coffee and a few online chess moves). I never write in the afternoon, although I can research, edit, or read and critique student manuscripts then. In the evening I can barely remember my own name. Fortunately, there are a lot of non-writing occupations where that is not required.

**John Grayshaw: What are you working on right now?**

A novel, in collaboration with a scientist. More than that I won't say, since I find that talking about work in progress tends to lessen my desire to actually write it. Talking is so much easier.

**John Grayshaw: What are your goals for the future?**

To write more short fiction, my first love. And to read more of the young up-and-coming writers. Ours is an exciting genre, and I'd like to learn more about where it's going now.