

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Christopher Cokinos (March 2020)

Christopher Cokinos is a nonfiction writer, poet and critic who teaches, among other things, the history of science fiction for the University of Arizona, where he is an associate professor of English. He's published critical work on Ray Bradbury, Clifford Simak and science-fiction film.

Jim McClanahan: Both Clifford Simak and John Scalzi had newspaper careers (Scalzi in my own local rag, *The Fresno Bee*). Do you see any literary style similarities between the two as a result of their career arcs even though there is a pretty significant time difference?

Chris: I don't know Scalzi's work, I am chagrined to say. I know the name. I am often overwhelmed (in a good way) by how much there is to read. I tend to read older authors. I returned to reading science fiction in my 40s after reading, oh, the usual suspects in childhood. I tutored myself with Brian Aldiss's history, *Trillion-Year Spree*, and the SFWA Hall of Fame anthologies. So I got pretty interested in how science fiction became more lyrical in the 1950s and more experimental in the 1960s. That span remains my favorite era. So there are a lot of contemporary writers I've just not had time to read, though I'll give a shout-out to Kim Stanley Robinson, who is my favorite living author.

Richard Whyte: Do you think Simak's writing changed after he retired from his 'day job' at the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*?

Chris: You know, that is an interesting question. I tend to think not, except I think the novels rather declined in quality a bit as he got older. I'm thinking of, say, *The Visitors*, which is a really bad novel in several respects. It was an attempt, I think, at a multi-braid "thriller," but he just didn't pull it off. But your question is a good one and worth investigating.

Marina Akushskaya: Was Clifford Simak an optimist? His works are often bittersweet, but I think that in the end he believed in humanity.

Chris: I love this question. You know, I think he ultimately was optimistic about our ability to awaken to a kind of "cosmic ethic," what I term his universal version of Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic. Why would he keep writing if he didn't think his themes of compassion and kinship and right relation to technology mattered? And they do matter. His was a quiet and isolated voice in the genre for placing a moral compass at the center of social and technological change. There is darkness in his work, of course, and I think that his ambivalence about how we may respond to those messages is pretty clear. I recall an interview with him where he talked about how hard he took the Second World War and the Holocaust and the atomic bomb drops in particular. So he saw a real darkness in us. But he saw our essential humanity as growing out of a relationship with the land and with other creatures. He was a kind of nature writer in that way.

Carl Rosenberg: I sometimes think of Simak together with Ray Bradbury and Zenna Henderson as constituting a (very loose) subgenre of pastoral science fiction, something different in a genre which is otherwise rather urban. Do think Simak's work could be seen in this light?

Chris: See above! Oh, yes, Simak is often considered “the” pastoralist in science fiction. There are critics like David Pringle who have criticized how the work holds up as a result, claiming, say, that Simak never had an original idea. I think that’s wrong. His cosmic ethic, focus on places as real environments for kinship and understanding, his belief what the Buddha called “right speech,” his love of animals and his identification with robots as misunderstood life forms...all that combines in his gentleness and that is a kind of idea! Further, as I’ve argued, while, like Bradbury, he can be corny, his prose often sparkles when he is describing rural settings. His pastoralism is a kind of corrective to the placeless or overly urban settings of a lot of science fiction. His “sense of wonder” is often placed in service of showing us the Earth, in particular his beloved rural Wisconsin. I would add to your list Ursula LeGuin, whose work is deeply invested in place. I don’t know that I’ve seen her called a pastoralist but her Tao-infused stance contains that readily, I think.

Kevin Kuhn: I haven't read enough Simak, working on it, but his writing seems to have little violence. In Way Station, his main character requests a gun range, but seems to struggle with violence. Was this a paradox for Simak personally, based on his background?

Chris: I don’t know if Simak hunted. I rather think he didn’t, based on his descriptions of animals as sentient. You’re right. It’s very gentle work, and maybe that’s partly why it doesn’t wear well for contemporary readers. Like we’ve moved past gentleness. Which is a shame. I don’t see this as a paradox. He really abhorred what we did in war and was appalled by the Cold War, as I see it. I really do see some Buddhist strains in his work, though I asked James Gunn once if Simak was aware of Buddhism or Taoism in any deep way. Gunn said, “That doesn’t sound like Cliff.” I don’t know his personal life—he really should have a biography—but everything I’ve read about him and in all the work of his I’ve read, which isn’t everything but quite a lot, the ethical locus is one of trying to empathize with the other. He really is a kind of quiet radical in his insistence on kindness, understanding and compassion. It’s a good tonic. Now, in terms of narrative, this often means not a lot happens. The lack of violence linked to character conflict results in sometimes stilted narrative situations. For me, that is offset by his focus on place-based writing, which is another way of avoiding violence.

Richard Whyte: Simak's novel 'Empire' seems a bit of an outlier to me, although I've read that it's a rewrite of an unpublished John W Campbell story. Do you know anything about this?

Chris: I don’t, actually. I read this a long time ago and no longer have my copy. I have stopped loaning books! I recall it being similar in feel to *Cosmic Engineers*. Earlier Simak has a kind super-science feel to it, which would tie nicely to Campbell. So maybe it is? I do think it’s ironic, to shift a bit here, that Campbell published as much of Simak’s work as he did, given the former’s believe in humanity’s superior intelligence and problem-solving ability and given the latter’s distrust of that stance, one he considered hubris. By the way, the book *Astounding*, recently out, is a great biography of the Golden Age, with a focus on Campbell, Asimov, Hubbard and Heinlein. Highly recommended.

Richard Whyte: Simak published many exceptional stories (IMO) in John Campbell's 'Astounding' magazine. Would you say that Campbell influenced Simak's development as an SF writer, and if so in what way?

Chris: I agree that he published some great stories in that magazine. This is a fascinating question and based on my reading of the continuities in Simak—and how these two men had fundamentally different views of humanity—I'd have to say that I don't think Campbell had a huge effect on Simak's development. As to individual stories, that likely is a different matter, and would require archival work. Campbell, as you may know, was famous for writing many, many, many very long letters to authors suggesting ideas, arguing and picked apart submissions. So it would be interesting to see how that played out with Simak's great stories in *Astounding*. But once Campbell took a piece he did no editing to it whatsoever.

John DeLaughter: Simak's work had a strong undertone of religion and faith. How did his personal beliefs influence that?

Chris: I don't know, actually. I have long wondered about his childhood and young adulthood and how that influenced his stance. There is a kind of pantheistic faith in his work, a sense of the universe working out some destiny for life for the betterment of all. It's an attractive view though one I don't share. Again, Simak deserves a biography, though I don't think I'm the one to do it. I have too much on the plate and the plates to come.

Ed Newsom: What makes Simak interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to his work?

Chris: Simak was just different from so much of what I was reading when I threw myself back into science fiction. I had a sabbatical from Utah State after I finished a nonfiction book called *The Fallen Sky: An Intimate History of Shooting Stars* and wanted to really delve into the genre and maybe teach it. So I took two intensive summer institute courses with James Gunn at the University of Kansas. It was like getting another graduate degree. I read his Road to Science Fiction anthologies, which I highly recommend. Anyway, Simak is a quiet writer and he can write some lovely prose and he's interested in nature. All that resonated with me. I remember reading "The Big Front Yard" and City and Way Station in my hammock by the Blacksmith Fork River. I think he would have appreciated the setting. So, for me, style matters a lot. Weirdly, one of my favorite writers is sort of the anti-Simak in some ways, and that's J.G. Ballard. The guy can write sentences that are astonishing. That and an eye for description of places—those things matter to me a lot more than plot or even premise.

John Grayshaw: How did you get involved with teaching science fiction? And what are your favorite things about teaching?

Chris: Well, after my sabbatical at USU, I asked to teach history of the SF short story and another class on the novel and no one laughed at me. When I interviewed at Arizona, I said I would not come unless I could continue that teaching. Mostly I teach nonfiction writing, but I get to teach some science fiction not infrequently. My favorite thing about teaching the genre is showing students how capacious it is and

to show them its historical roots, especially in the 19th century. It's a lot of fun to take texts that seem "superficial" or just "entertaining" and complicate them by discussing questions ranging from the ethical implications of point-of-view or how a story might reinforce certain forms of power. When I teach a science fiction film class, I love having the class close-read a still shot from a scene in terms of aspects of craft. It's fun. I like it more than teaching personal essays, honestly.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Simak grew up reading?

Chris: Good question, another one I don't have the answer to. I'm guessing he was reading the classic writers like Wells and Verne and reading stuff in Gernsback's magazines. My big question is whether he knew Aldo Leopold. He must have read *A Sand County Almanac*.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers that were Simak's contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired and how did they influence his work?

Chris: You guys are asking tough questions! Simak was in the thick of the science fiction world, so I imagine he was in touch with and enjoying work by people like Bradbury, Asimov, Clarke and even Heinlein, even though Heinlein's ethos would not be something Simak shared.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did Simak do for his books?

Chris: Um, I would guess very little, actually. There is no little interest in paying attention to the science, as in a hard science fiction writer of his era, someone like Hal Clement, that I suspect Simak was doing very little in this way.

John Grayshaw: Was there anything in your research of Simak that surprised you?

Chris: So, yes, just his sense of attention to detail, cadence and diction, sound, all the craft tools one would find in a mainstream literary novelist or nature writer. Does he deploy these equally? No. He didn't blow open the genre in the way that, say, Bradbury did, or later one, someone like Le Guin or Ballard or Tom Disch. But he took steps that deserve to be honored.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Simak's works under option for movies or TV?

Chris: I saw mention that *Way Station* kept being optioned, but I don't think anything is coming of that. He would be a hard sell in today's visual culture. Now a play would be cool...

John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Simak works in drawers or archives somewhere or is everything published?

Chris: That is the \$64,000 question. I am sure there are unpublished works.

John Grayshaw: Did Simak have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

Chris: I don't know but I suspect his work as a reporter and editor just enabled him to put butt in chair and do the work. Then again most SF writers of his day were doing that just to make a living.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Simak's hobbies other than writing?

Chris: I'm sorry that there are so many biographical details I don't know. You are making me want to write that book now! Clearly, he was a keen observer of nature. I can well imagine walking a rural wood lot in Wisconsin with Simak and having him teach me the birds and flowers. He clearly loved the nonhuman world.

John Grayshaw: What is Simak's legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

Chris: This I can answer! I think Simak deserves more attention today than he gets. He's been overlooked precisely because of what makes him unique: his gentle, pastoralist tone. I've argued that his attention to style, while sporadic, became a kind of pulp lyricism in which he pushed against genre conventions. Bradbury ran with that. But there was Simak also quietly pushing the genre into a more literary, environmental and skeptical mode. Simak was no bomb-thrower but his work really holds power and money as two terribly unhelpful things we've indulged in; he actually foreshadows more radical work in the 1960s. He was no fan of war or thoughtless technological change or of capitalism. For all that, he needs to be reckoned with. The paradox is that those challenges are contained within stories that are very comfortable and comforting. One can be lulled by Simak. But if you pay attention, he's asking us to change ourselves, to become, like so many of his characters, human or otherwise, more giving, more loving and less reactive.

This was fun. I am sorry I could not answer all these great questions as well as others. Keep reading!