

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with John Vance II (April 2020)

*John H. Vance II is the only child of Jack and Norma Vance. And raised three children in the house that he and his father built with their own hands. He is now an “empty-nester” living in the old house with his fiancé, four cats and a dog (and the house remains a work in progress).*

*John has worked actively with fans to preserve and promote his father's work, starting with Paul Rhoads in 1999, an association which led to publication of a subscription-funded set of 44 volumes known as the Vance Integral Edition, now sought after by collectors and hardcore fans alike. John manages his father's legacy through the publishing company Spatterlight Press LLC.*

*John made his career designing and operating submersible systems and other marine equipment.*

**Robert Matthew Knuckles: Vance's "Dying Earth" is often cited as the inspiration for the Magic System of earlier Editions of Dungeons & Dragons. How did he feel about the level of influence he had on such a phenomenally popular game and its many imitators?**

He was hardly aware of it. After a letter or two with Gary Gygax at the start he had little feedback, and of course zero income from the situation—so he had no way of knowing.

**Aldo Defraites: My question is this: When will Night Lamp be released on Kindle? Great book! Loved it**

Aldo, you can purchase and download .epub or .prc files of *Night Lamp* right now, on jackvance.com under our Spatterlight Press imprint. The story should also be up on Amazon soon, along with our POD edition of the story.

**Donovan S. Brain: What's your favorite footnote?**

Dad had fun with footnotes, and a lot of peripheral story-telling went into the small fonts. But with so many to choose from I don't honestly have a favorite; I do reread the work frequently though and will try to sift one out!

Koen Vyverman offers this morsel from *Night Lamp*, and it's a standout:

*Unspiek, Baron Bodissey, a philosopher of Old Earth and elsewhere, and creator of a philosophical encyclopaedia of twelve volumes, entitled Life, was especially scathing in regard to what he called 'hyper-didacticism', meaning the employment of abstractions a half-dozen stages removed from reality to justify some pseudo-profound intellectualism. Toward the end of his life he was excommunicated from the human race by the Assembly of Egalitarians. Baron Bodissey's comment was succinct: "The point is moot."*

*To this day the most erudite thinkers of the Gaeen Reach ponder the significance of the remark.*

**Mike Garber: To what did Jack credit for his remarkable talents for dialogue?**

Dad generally would not discuss writing, so we have to guess answers to questions like this. I myself would postulate that Vancian dialogue arose as a byproduct of dad's word-craft rather than any stylistic intent on his part. He worked consistently at polish and economy, trimming and arranging phrases for clarity and impact in the simplest constructions he could find. Dialogue might emerge from this way of

writing having an arch, elegant flavor, possibly? It's true also that he had a mischievous sense of humor, and it may simply have amused him that every character, scoundrel and muck-spattered peasant should converse with elegance!

**John Grayshaw: What stories did he tell you about WWII and being in the Merchant Marines? What did he say about working in Pearl Harbor just a month before it was attacked?**

Dad did not see combat (and was never torpedoed, despite the suggestions we see on some dust covers). He spent the war chugging back and forth across the Pacific aboard Liberty ships. Anecdotes are best in his own words, which you can read in his autobiography *This Is Me, Jack Vance*—but one of my favorites concerns a distilling apparatus he built in the forward compartment of one of the ships. For a period the still was employed to create successfully stimulating beverages, using scrap fruit taken from the mess, but when the skipper eventually found out he took a dim view and placed a seal on the locker to preserve evidence for prosecution at the end of the crossing. Dad sweated bullets for fear of being jailed once the ship reached port, but in the end was saved by a technicality. The skipper broke the seal to exhibit the enormity to peers ashore before legal processes had started, and the evidence was considered contaminated so could not be used for prosecution. Thus Dad was saved the inconvenience of doing time.

Another incident concerned Dad's habit of practicing cornet in the bows during watch, while the skipper cocked a wondering ear to the tentative strains and trills which drifted back to the bridge. Dad's eyesight was poor, so his watch-keeping was probably not of much use anyway.

At Pearl Harbor, he enjoyed the beauty of the place but felt no love for his job in the Navy, having been demoted several times due to incompetence, to the point where his job was degaussing hulls, a strenuous activity dragging heavy copper cables through dark nether regions of vessels below the waterline. He got himself out of Honolulu a month before the attack. In retrospect he felt extremely lucky to have gotten out when he did, or as he put it—"he might never have left".

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers your father grew up reading?**

Robert W. Chambers

Edgar Rice Burroughs

L. Frank Baum

Lord Dunsany

Amazing Stories, Weird Tales (Seabury Quinn, H. P. Lovecraft, C. L. Moore, Clark Ashton Smith)

Jeffery Farnol

Kenneth Grahame (The Wind in the Willows)

**Adam J. Meek/SFBC Member: I'd like to know what Vance Sr. read for pleasure?**

P. G. Wodehouse

Erle Stanley Gardner

Dick Francis  
Georges Simenon  
Robert B. Parker  
Robert Barnard  
M. C. Beaton  
Ruth Rendell  
P. D. James  
Agatha Christie  
Patricia Wentworth  
Marjorie Allingham  
Ellis Peters  
E. X. Ferrars  
E. X. Giroux  
Rhys Bowen  
Patricia Moyes  
Dorothy Sayers  
Dorothy Simpson  
Georgette Heyer  
M. M. Kaye  
Mary Stewart  
Victoria Holt  
Phyllis Whitney  
Anya Seton  
Donna Leon  
Deborah Crombie  
Lawrence Sanders  
Vincent Lardo  
Bill Crider  
Hugh Pentecost

Erle Stanley Gardner

A. B. Cunningham

Jonathan Kellerman

Tony Hillerman

Arthur Upfield

Philip R. Craig

Ross Macdonald

John D. Macdonald

John Dickson Carr

**John Grayshaw: I've seen interviews where your father said he hadn't read science fiction or fantasy since he was a kid? Was that true? And how did that effect his work?**

He did not read F or SF as an adult, nor did he re-read his own work. He was also not a movie-goer and so didn't participate much in popular culture from the 60's onward. He did see the first Star Wars movie however, in 1977, which he enjoyed (though he thought the lightsabers were silly).

We could theorize insularity made his work "more original," though he was individualistic enough that he'd probably not have been swayed by another's work in any case. Who can say?

**John Grayshaw: Did your father have favorites of his works?**

I believe that he was quietly happy with all of his later work, though he explicitly disclaimed what he referred to as "his early junk", referring to more amateur work from the 50's. In later years, *Lyonesse*, *Cadwal* and *Night Lamp* were standouts. So much time went by after he wrote *Emphyrio*, *Durdane*, *Demon Princes*, *Planet of Adventure*, *Rhialto* and the later *Cugel* tales that he started to lose track of it.

If pressed to identify one absolute favorite, I think he would have chosen *Lyonesse*. *Cugel* was the character he enjoyed writing the most, Navarth a close second.

**Andrew ten Broek: Maybe another obvious question for John Vance II, but his father wrote quite a few stories. Did he ever read some of them to you as a child?**

Not a single one, in fact. But he and my mother did both read other things to me; the usual Beatrix Potter, Thornton Burgess, *Oz*, *Wind in the Willows* and so on.

**Blaine Savini: Obvious question...Which of your father's works is your favorite...not necessarily his best...and why?**

I can't identify a single favorite because he wrote in different styles. I would point to *Strange People*, *Queer Notions* among the mysteries, or either of the Joe Bain titles. *Lyonesse*, *Rhialto*, or the later adventures of *Cugel* are brilliant of course. Among SF titles I've returned often to *Maske: Thaery*, *Showboat World*, and *Wyst*. "Dodkin's Job" amuses me... *The Dragon Masters* is superb, of course, "The

Moon Moth” as well. *Gold and Iron (Slaves of the Klau*, first published as *Planet of the Damned*) is gritty and powerful. There is much to choose from.

**John Grayshaw: Was your dad's writing a significant part of your family life? What I mean is was it talked about, part of dinner table conversation, and so on, or was it regarded as just dad's job?**

Writing took place practically every day, wherever we were. Both parents were involved, the work permeated our lives. The names of other authors were familiar, publishers and agents, fans who went on to become writers and so on; many I never met but familiarity made them all feel part of the family. Talk of correspondence, deals, editing, checks in the mailbox or poste restante, the sound of my mother’s typewriter were always in the air. In old photographs I like to search for Dad’s clipboard, fountain pens, or inks, which may be found in a surprising number of images.

**John Grayshaw: Did your father have any good writing advice?**

His basic approach was to never use a fancy word when an ordinary word would do; be concise, use words effectively and efficiently; let every sentence move the story forward. Keep your personal voice out of the story; the author should be invisible at all times.

**John Grayshaw: He wrote both fantasy and science fiction stories, so what did he say or feel about the differences/similarities between the two?**

We never discussed this.

**John Grayshaw: What are some of your fondest memories of your father and what are some of the funniest memories?**

Funny memories tend toward the memorable misadventure, like the time dad fell off a dock into San Francisco Bay carrying our camera. Or when he tumbled down the hillside with our trash can, late one summer eve.

Dad was 46 when I was born (my mom was 35). He was never a prankster, mischief maker, outdoorsman, or athlete. He did not goof-off physically. Conversational humor for him was usually facetious and often highly so. His company was staid, from my point of view. I was the tolerant recipient of many lectures. But I was a good kid, and he and my mother were both kind, generous and indulgent with me. I have fond, sentimental memories of my entire childhood in fact.

The lasting impressions I have of my dad are bittersweet and difficult to articulate. Rather than specific moments or events, the older I get the more I treasure what I can only think of as his “spirit”. Life and existence, to him, were an impossible gift of inexpressible magnitude. He made me appreciate what I have, and inspired me to make the most of it.

**John Grayshaw: Vance traveled a lot. Tahiti, South Africa, Italy, Kashmir. Did you travel with him?**

Dad travelled around the Pacific during his stint in the Merchant Marine, before he was married in ‘46, then with my mother before I was born, into Europe and Morocco in 1951-52 and 1957 from San Francisco via the Panama Canal, Mexico in 1953 with Frank and Bev Herbert. In 1964 when I was 3 years old, they set out around the world to the west, but returned to California from Sydney when my mother contracted hepatitis (probably while in Tahiti). In 1969 we toured Europe in our VW convertible and spent 16 months from Ireland as far east as Istanbul, returning home with the car on a freighter as far as

Panama, wrapping up with a detour into Colombia to visit friends before turning north to drive through Central America and Mexico home to California. In 1973 we set off again around the world (not driving), this time to the east, and made it around in 13 months. Travels continued after that but were less ambitious, to France, Australia, Corsica, England. For some of the later ventures I was in my teens and stayed home watching the house and pets. In 1993 I traveled South America for 4 months with a friend.

**Ben Sheppard: One of the recurring features of Jack Vance's works was the intricate and exotic societies of the inhabitants of other worlds, very often human colonies, with no memory of cultural affiliation to Earth. Did the countries that he visited influence this, and if there is one, which country influenced him the most?**

Dad wrote mysteries after traveling to North Africa (*The Man In the Cage*), French Polynesia (*The Deadly Isles*), Italy (*Strange People, Queer Notions*), and Central America (*The Dark Ocean*). Those travels definitely informed atmospheres and depictions. *The House on Lily Street* takes place in Berkeley and Oakland during the 50's, and *The View From Chickweed's Window* in San Francisco, both areas my dad knew well. Beyond that, he scattered nuggets of experience and intuition throughout the matrices of his imaginative extrapolations.

No country had greater effect on dad though than his homeland, the United States of America, whose dynamism and can-do nature was reflected in the attitudes of many of his protagonists.

**John Grayshaw: How involved were you in the Vance Integral Edition? What an undertaking!**

I was nominally President of the project, but the role was symbolic. Even in my thirties I was a somewhat shy kid, so I kept my head down, did the books and acted as purser, trying to stay out of the way mostly, which for the most part I succeeded in doing. It was indeed an undertaking, and for the last year or two when egos crashed and factions lay waste across newsletters and message boards, we held our breath to see whether we'd finish, or need to send everyone's money back. There were some grim moments. Enough to say that we were never more relieved than when the last books were shipped, and people could go back to their own lives.

But all said and done, the significance of the VIE cannot be overstated. Dad's work was largely out of print and, like that of most other authors of his generation, on the verge of foundering for lack of commercial interest. If not for the foresight, persistence and gigantic effort of Paul Rhoads, and the hundreds of volunteers who pitched in thousands of precious hours, Vance might be no more than another footnote in the golden era of SF.

The VIE must have been one of the first, if not THE first large crowd-sourced project ever.

The project pleased collectors and commanded the respect of our commercial publishing partners, but other benefits came from the digital text archive which was left after the books were delivered. VIE texts have been used in every English-language Vance publication since then, and in some fresh foreign translations as well.

VIE texts are the basis of the e-book and POD offerings of our self-produced imprint, Spatterlight Press.

**John Grayshaw: The way Vance wrote so beautifully and so detailed about alien languages, I wondered how many Earth languages did he speak?**

Dad's family spoke German around the house, and so he did as well as a child. But as an adult he was fluent only in English. He knew a smattering of German, Spanish and French, and could thrash his way through simple constructions when the need arose.

**John Grayshaw: Did you go with your father to science fiction conventions? Any memories of these?**

Dad didn't go to conventions often, in fact ever—unless he was Guest of Honor. It wasn't obvious, but the truth is he was a bit bashful and prone to fumbling in the spotlight. And he didn't feel he had very much in common with some of the typical attendees. I went with him to one in Metz, France, around 1980 or so, also one in Melbourne Australia in the early 80's. It was fun to be wined and dined.

**John Grayshaw: What was your father's friendships with Frank Herbert? Any stories about it?**

Frank first met my parents in 1953 in Kenwood, California where my parents were renting a picturesque farmhouse among oak trees with a big field nearby which dad used to fly enormous hand-built kites. Frank was a reporter then for the Santa Rosa Press Democrat and came out to interview dad for an article which appeared with the title "Science Fiction Author is UFO Expert". They became friendly and the families went on to share adventures over the years.

Frank and Bev with Bruce and Brian joined my mom and dad on an expedition to Chapala, Mexico in late 1953 where they rented an apartment together and set up a "writer's household". Each day a flag was hoisted at a particular hour and the kids had to keep quiet so writers could concentrate. In the early 60s Frank partnered with my dad and Poul Anderson to build a 30' houseboat for use in the San Joaquin River delta, which was used to anchor out in the sloughs among the tules, drink beer, listen to music and argue politics and philosophy. When the houseboat sank Frank lost interest, but Poul and my dad soldiered on and raised the boat using 55-gallon drums, slings and an air compressor.

Dad shared an anecdote regarding the time Frank told him of an idea he had for a story, set on a desert planet where, "They mine something called Spice!". Dad assured Frank that the book would not sell.

When the Herberts moved to Port Townsend the families drifted apart, but remained in touch until Bev died, then Frank.

**John Grayshaw: What was your father's friendship with Poul Anderson? Any stories about it?**

After Poul died dad described him as the friend he admired, respected and revered more than any other. Dad could be fickle in friendships but Poul was honest, staunch, a gentleman and simply a fine human being. His mother Astrid was beloved by us all. Dad had a prickly relationship with Karen, who undoubtedly thought he was a pain in the neck; still, the families enjoyed many occasions together, expeditions, trips aboard the houseboat, vibrant dinners full of wine, tasty food, personalities, music and argument. Good times.

**John Grayshaw: Other than Herbert and Anderson did he have other close friends in the writing profession?**

Mom and dad were acquainted with many other authors, if not necessarily close. Herbert and Anderson were closest through the years, especially Anderson. Beyond that, they were friendly with Ursula Le Guin, Reg Brettner, Avram Davidson and Alan Nourse. Dad spent some time with Charlie Brown and the early Locus gang. In the 1980's we met Terry Dowling, who remained close.

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

We do have scraps of poetry, some youthful short stories, a lot of correspondence, travel journals and so on, but everything else of significance has now been published.

**John Grayshaw: Do you know of any future adaptations of your father's works in TV or movies?**

That dad was never “discovered” by the film industry has always been disappointing. Dad used to dream that “lightning would strike” one day, but it never came in his lifetime. *Bad Ronald* was made into a movie for TV in 1974, and *The Man in the Cage* was the basis of an episode of Boris Karloff’s “Thriller” series in 1961. Dad also wrote for Captain Video in the 50’s. *The Demon Princes* was optioned a few years ago for a TV pilot, but the pilot was never made. There’s been talk lately regarding *Planet of Adventure*, *Lyonesse* or a *Dying Earth* story. But the fire has gone out on everything with covid. So the short answer to the question must therefore be, unfortunately, “no”.

Dad’s work would do magnificently in the hands of the right group. We hope fervently that, one day, “lightning” may still strike.

**John Grayshaw: Was your father a writer who sailed or a sailor who wrote?**

Influenced by the blue Pacific during his time in the Merchant Marine, Dad always dreamed of owning a sailboat and cruising the South Pacific. This and the general topic of boats was always a favorite topic around here, at dinner table or over drinks. In fact during the late 70’s and into the 80’s dad owned a string of boats, starting with a 17’ fiberglass sloop he gave to me for my sixteenth birthday, setting me loose without ceremony on SF Bay, culminating with a 45’ ketch he named *Hinano* after the Tahitian beer. Our income could not however support both owning a boat and constructing a home at the same time, and the house came first. So, the dream was abandoned. I enrolled at Cal, and we sold *Hinano* owing the bank as much as when we started.

Dad was a writer who dreamed of cruising, but never got to do it.

**John Grayshaw: I know music was another of his hobbies. Was he passionate about it? Did he write music?**

Dad was absolutely passionate about music—so long as the topic was focused more or less narrowly on traditional jazz, which he was wild about. I’ve heard recordings of the Turk Murphy band taken in the fifties where I’m sure I can hear him shouting in the audience. Music was always a feature in this household.

He enjoyed classical music as well, but not to the same degree. He didn’t write any music but mentioned dreaming compositions in his sleep.

He was competent with the harmonica and in the 70’s taught himself to play the ukulele, strumming the old standards with four string chords. He accompanied himself singing and playing the kazoo with gusto. He would provide a vigorous, even boisterous performance for anyone interested, until the end of his days.

In 2007 dad was introduced by Paul Rhoads to a fan named Kevin Boudreau. Kevin became one of dad’s closest friends in those late years, when they teamed up to record music. Tuesdays without fail Kevin



would show up to work through tracks with dad, which he would take home and carefully stitch together. After a few years they put together a collection entitled "The Go For Broke Jazz Band". The music is idiosyncratic but the performances heartfelt; dad felt like a star.

Glimpses of music turn up here and there in dad's writing. My favorite is in *Gold and Iron (Slaves of the Klau, Planet of the Damned)* when Barch takes Komeitk Lelianr on a date to see Turk Murphy at Hambone Kelly's. The sensations which Barch goes through once the rhythm begins to drive are assuredly the same dad felt himself.

**John Grayshaw: What were some of your father's hobbies other than writing, sailing, and playing music?**

Dad fell in and out of love with all sorts of ideas and activities, like kite flying; stargazing; swimming, and boating. But his most persistent interest was in ceramics, a subject he indulged in with my mother early in marriage. They had a storefront on College Avenue in Berkeley called "Ceramic Center," with a studio with kiln, wheel, and glazing supplies. It was a losing endeavor commercially but always a magic moment when they opened the cooling kiln to see richly-colored ware inside.

This enthusiasm provided a backdrop for *The Potters of Firsk*, also wherever glazes were mentioned, for example in *The View From Chickweed's Window*.

He and my mother amassed a small collection of blue and white pottery from Portugal and picked up specimens of different styles, wherever they travelled.

**John Grayshaw: Did your father have a writing routine he stuck to?**

In early days (before I was born) he would write whenever he had the opportunity, which continued into the early 70's while he worked during the day as a carpenter. In those days he would arrive home dirty and sweaty, bathe, shave, slap on Lilac Vegetal or Bay Rum, put on a robe and slippers then sit down with clipboard and fountain pens to write usually with a spritzer, highball or glass of red wine near to hand. He would work until late in the evening, then retire to do the same thing the next day. My mother worked office jobs during that period and continued for years after he began writing full time. At home she would transcribe his handwritten folio into typed manuscript, ready for a subsequent edit or to be sent off to the publisher.

Once he gave up carpentering for hire, Dad spent more hours with the clipboard, sitting in one of our green club chairs with his legs on a footstool he built for himself, equipped with a cushion my mother upholstered for him. He would take breaks to dig at the hillside making room for the construction of our house, using pick and shovel to hew out yard after yard of shale and dirt which he barrowed out to the fringe of the property and dumped downslope. From an early age I was engaged in this exercise as well. The house entered a burst of construction in the later 70's during which the final extension was built; when his eyesight deteriorated early in the 80's he stepped aside, and I took over \*. After that he wrote more or less continuously, punctuated with bouts of listening to or playing music, socializing on the phone, listening to books-on-tape, or hoisting himself onto an exercise bicycle and peddling steadily for 20 or so minutes, a routine he kept daily for the rest of his life.

\*One might think after all these decades the house would be complete, or nearly so; but due (at least in part) to the casual nature of construction in the early days, I must tear out and rebuild as often as not. So, the house remains an ongoing project!

**John Grayshaw: Did being legally blind since the 1980s slow your father's writing down? Did it slow his travels or his enjoyment of some of his other interests?**

Dad transitioned early to word-processing under DOS, at first relying on custom software to provide enormous fonts onscreen which he could still make out visually, supported by audio support from a text-to-speech processor called Accent. As time went by his vision diminished even farther and he relied more and more on Accent. Later he could not use a screen at all, and I kept a small monochrome monitor in the system only for maintenance.

The first story he wrote on the word processor was *The Green Pearl*. Considering what followed, blindness could not be said to have held him back, but eventually of course productivity did wane. *Ports of Call* and in particular *Lurulu* went through some serious cogs and gears to finish. Lack of vision was not the sole problem however as he was then diabetic, maybe running out of steam after many decades of work.

Travels were curtailed, but not entirely so long as Mom or I were present to guide him. Eventually we used a wheelchair to get him around outside the house, which was a great relief for us all. At home I installed rails and other devices which he used to access his compact sleeping and toilet arrangements. When even travel became out of the question, he remained cheerfully engaged with friends and family around home.

**John Grayshaw: What kind of research did your father do for his books?**

Aside from travel we talked about earlier, whatever "research" he needed he accumulated during his youth by reading everything he could lay hands on. Personal experiences through the Depression and WWII also provided fuel for the fire. For most of his career, memory and experience gave him whatever he needed.

**John Grayshaw: What is your father's legacy?**

A large body of wonderful imaginative stories full of heroes, dastards, events and consequence. He is considered by many to be SF's premiere stylist, the best writer in science fiction.

A home to live in full of quirks and memories.

In a personal context, a way of seeing against the vast impersonal context of the physical Universe, how precious and rare a thing it is to be alive aware and cognizant; how foolish it is to fritter away time without care or heed, the lesson that we should live to the utmost, while we are privileged to be alive.

As follow-on, here are some interesting links.

There's a 1976 radio interview with dad here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FogkeDLMRA8&t=4s>

Dad sat on a panel at Norwescon in 2002. Three segments are here:

The Houseboat: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRRhbQ0JbRk>

Travelling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6jyGInel54>

Writing SF: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djbmr0H\\_1BQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djbmr0H_1BQ)

John Grayshaw—thanks for putting this together, and helping us to share and promote my dad’s work.  
All the best—John