

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Joe Haldeman (April 2020)

Haldeman is best known for The Forever War (1974). That novel, and other of his works, including The Hemingway Hoax (1991) and Forever Peace (1997), have won major science fiction awards, including the Hugo Award and Nebula Award.

He was awarded the SFWA Grand Master for career achievements. In 2012 he was inducted as a member of the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

Leon Coombs: Which stories (by other authors) do you wish you'd written?

My first reaction to this was "What a curious question!" But I guess the more useful answer is another question . . . "Why would somebody wish to have written somebody else's story?" There's a whole book there, of course.

Perhaps I wish I had written Dhalgren, by Samuel R. Delany. Or "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," by James Joyce. I would love to have written Moby Dick, but I should live so long!

Thomas Watson: There are many ways to express yourself creatively. How did writing come to be yours?

If I go back far enough, I think it would have been cartooning . . . that's what I loved when I was a little boy, and perhaps I would have been an artist if I'd had the mechanical talent, and early success at it. Instead, I had immediate success writing fiction and poetry, so I followed that inclination. (I also loved science, enough to immerse myself in it through college years. But no special talent, and no early reinforcement.)

Erik Wilkenfeldt: Have you ever wondered about the consequences of what you have written, and how you may have influenced your readers?

Rarely enough, to confess the plain truth. I write well and am rewarded for it. Never really exceptional at anything else. If I'd never had a single reader to influence, but had somehow been paid for writing anyhow, writing is what I would have done.

Martyn Coppel: How do you take that germ of an idea and turn it into something substantial. Does the story all come at once, or do you play around with different scenes before they coalesce into a whole?

I've followed various patterns over the years. Most often I just start writing and see what happens. If nothing happens, I start something else. But for most of my career as a writer, I've only started a book after getting a contract for it -- that is, I send an outline (sometimes pages long, sometimes just a paragraph) out through my agent, and when somebody makes an offer, I write the book.

Rob Morganbesser: Who are your favorite other SciFi authors?

They're all my brothers and sisters, and if I don't like somebody's writing, I assume I haven't read the right book by them. Maybe because they haven't lived long enough to write it.

Rob Morganbesser: Is there any author you'd like to collaborate with?

No.

John DeLaughter: There is a theme throughout your stories of people badly used by a government for dubious ends. How much of that is influenced by your experiences in the service and how much is just the way you see things?

Most stories are about some sort of conflict; most science fiction stories set that conflict in some interesting social or political matrix. I was and remain a bookish child, so most of the ways I see things are bookish rather than "real life." Of the experiences I've had in that more or less "real" life, the military ones have the most immediate dramatic potential -- I mean, I could write about being a graduate student. Wouldn't that be exciting? (See [The Accidental Time Machine](#), for instance.)

David Stuckey: You and your late brother Jack wrote one novel together, "There Is No Darkness" which I enjoyed immensely. What was it like to collaborate with him, and was it for you an easier or harder process to write with someone than on your own?

I really kind of hated it. I've never enjoyed collaborating (though I've never tried being a Nazi spy), I guess because I don't like to share the credit for my creation with someone else.

We did have an interesting way of going about it. This was before email and ubiquitous computers. I would write a chapter and send it by bus to him (we lived a few hundred miles apart); he would rewrite it. Then we'd reverse the process for the next chapter.

I think we agreed that the whole thing sucked. You both wind up doing more work, for half the credit (and money). So why?

David Green: Have you got a new novel in the pipeline? Fingers crossed.

I do, though it has quite a way to go.

David Agranoff: You wrote very early Star Trek tie-ins can you tell us about what early guidelines you were given?

They gave us a thick stack of mimeographed notions, most of which I more or less ignored, and then they turned the ms. over to some underemployed secretary to critique. That was lots of fun. Like, I had Spock say "by Occam's Razor," and they warned me "Spock does not swear."

David Agranoff: Forever War has almost been filmed a few times. If you were asked by the filmmakers is there anyways you would change the story after years to reflect on it?

Sure. Movies are different from novels.

It would be a very strange novel that could be made directly into a movie. It would probably be about some guy sitting at a typewriter!

Michael Sloane: I've heard you corresponded with J.R.R. Tolkien while you were in Vietnam but never heard the story from you. How did that happen?

I wrote Dr. Tolkien a note after reading The Hobbit, just a hand-written page, about something he wrote about having been a soldier, and he was kind enough to reply. I rather wish I had held on to that note! It's probably buried under a foot of topsoil in the Vietnam jungle.

Donovan S. Brain: Are you still writing your manuscripts with a pen, and which pen is your favorite? Jack Vance used to write with colored pens, changing color for different moods; do you have a favorite color?

I write with various fountain pens, and have about three dozen different bottles of ink. Favorites are Noodler's Asquateague and Montblanc Burgundy. Montblancs are also my favorite pens, but I also have a weakness for Osmiroid and Platignum italic-nib fountain pens and the cheap drawing pens made by Pen & Ink. (I could insert a twenty-page treatise here, but would have to be paid for it!)

I do usually start the day with a different pen and a different color of ink, just to show where one day of writing ends and another begins.

Eva Sable: Do you have a particular writing process that you follow? Work in a particular part of the house, define working hours for yourself, or are you more, um, bohemian about it?

For most of my life I have written in the early morning, starting before dawn, and I do still start early. But I am pretty "bohemian" about it now that I'm not really writing for a living. (Boring but true: like most people, I worked for most of a lifetime and then retired. How dramatic!)

At various times in my life I have set various goals, like "write three pages" or "write 1000 words," but the only one that I've consistently followed for fifty-some years is "write every day."

The notion of being on vacation has always made me uncomfortable. If I don't write I get antsy.

Eva Sable: Do you have favorite authors or genres you turn to when you're not writing or reading for research?

I have an enduring fascination with American writers of the twenties and thirties -- Hemingway and Fitzgerald and that gang. I also read science fiction (mostly magazines) and thrillers and mysteries. Popular science, especially space sciences. I read pretty seriously in the physical sciences, especially astronomy and astrophysics, and don't have any trouble with elementary mathematics through differential equations, though I have to admit my eyes start to glaze over when faced with academic work in the life sciences.

I read a lot of magazines and journals, and spend way too much time screwing around online.

Anastasia Hilvers: The science in your novels varies from one aspect of physics to another. Your background plays a huge part in that, but are there any other scientists or experts that you consult with regularly when you are writing?

Not really. When we lived at M.I.T. I could pick up the phone and use my professorship to talk to almost anyone, but I don't really have that entree anymore -- nor do I miss it, really. The keyboard will get you anywhere.

Francois Leblanc: You've been recognized for your speculative poetry. Can you talk to us about what poetry means to you, how you came to write it within a speculative context, and what influences your poetry?

Poetry is really basic to all of my writing, but I only write poetry qua poetry regularly when I have a local audience, which comes and goes over the years. It doesn't pay, as you may have heard.

"What poetry means to me" is sort of like what oxygen means to me -- I don't have to think about it; it's always there and it always nourishes me. I don't think about either of them because I don't have to.

Francois Leblanc: Camouflage is among my favourite repeat reads. The pace and style are so superbly executed and fun to read, like a thriller. Can you talk to us about Camouflage and your experience of writing it and what you hope a reader comes away with from the experience of reading it?

Camouflage did wind up being quite a complex novel, with strange alien points of view alternating with both male and female human characters doing things that were sometimes very mundane and sometimes extremely exotic. I was having a lot of fun!

I hope the reader comes away from it also having had a lot of fun.

I remember that the section written from the point of view of a Japanese soldier (who is also a flesh-eating alien) was written in a lovely cafe in France, while I sipped espresso and nibbled on croissants. That was truly one of those "I get paid for doing this?" moments.

Part of it was also written on the road in America, crossing the U.S. in a ramshackle RV, camping along the way and bicycling every mile, from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. That was a different kind of fun.

Every evening we would note where we got off the bikes, and start right there the next morning, having meanwhile taken the RV to a campground to spend the night in relative comfort. So we did cover every mile on the bikes, but not in one grueling 3000-mile crank! (We did meet dozens of people engaged in doing exactly that. They were leaner and meaner than we were.)

fun.

Rob Morganbesser/Francois Leblanc: Which is your favourite of your own works?

That's sort of like asking a parent which of his children is his favorite. It depends on the day more than the child.

And if you love one more than the other, does that say more about you or about the child?

Aldo Defraites: My father is a Vietnam vet, a Petty Officer, who did two tours on a PT boat in some very rough waters. I gave him a copy of The Forever War a couple decades ago and he's told me the book evoked the feelings he's had concerning the war, not just the experience in-country, but the feeling that you could never go home. Do you have a large readership among veterans? I think there's something about your book that connects with vets and helps the rest of us understand what they've gone through, and continue to go through.

The simple truth is that I don't usually think one way or the other about my theoretical readers. I know that some are veterans, of various wars, and I've had correspondence with them over the years.

Of course I have a special affinity for people who have also been through war. There are things you know without speaking, and of course there are things you don't talk about -- not because you're ashamed of what happened, but because it's so hard to express to someone who hasn't been there.

Sergi Linares de Terán: When I read "The Accidental Time Machine," I found there to be concepts for a few potential books inside. Every stopover of the time travel shows a wonderful world to discover. Some of these worlds are briefly outlined. The reader is left with the desire to know more. Were these worlds in any way sketches of other possible novels?

No, I don't work that way. Clean slate every time.

Sergi Linares de Terán: Carmen Dula, Marygay Potter, or William Mandella, for example, are unforgettable characters. Could you tell us something about how you conceive such ideas for creating these people? What is your process of conception?

I don't really have anything like a method. It comes naturally -- which makes it hard for me to teach writing! How do I create these people? Well, I sit down with a fountain pen and start writing. I know that's extremely helpful!

This is equally unhelpful, but some characters just appear to you, like ghosts made solid, and some have to be manufactured to fill spaces in the story.

(If it was easy, everyone would do it.)

Sergi Linares de Terán: I am interested in memoirs of writers. Your blog is, in my opinion, an excellent example of life writing that oozes authenticity. How do you manage the balance between transparency and privacy?

I'm pretty conscious of the elements of autobiography in my fiction, and do try to avoid being too lazy in that autobiographical direction. But I'm not too concerned with privacy, since until the laws are changed I don't have any illegal habits. As our great savant Richard Nixon once said, "I am not a crook!"

So I can relate things that happened to me without fearing jail time.

Joshua Carrasco: What is a story that you enjoyed more than you thought you would?

Not to be simplistic, but the main thing I enjoy about my own stories is finishing them. So one "I enjoyed more than I thought I would" would be one that I got stuck on -- which may have been All My Sins Remembered or Worlds Apart.

The very ending of The Hemingway Hoax gave me a real chuckle because I didn't really expect it so soon! I took out the page I'd just written and rolled a new piece of paper onto the platen, and suddenly realized Hey! The story's over!

I picked up the previous page and looked at it again, disbelieving. Yep. The story had finished itself!

Gloria Scott: Do you ever get frustrated when you're writing, or get so much engulfed in a character's feeling?

Like most writers, or creative people in general, I do get frustrated when I'm blocked; when the words won't come. But I can usually get past that by getting up and doing something else for awhile -- which is why it's healthy to have other interests.

I really can't imagine being "too engulfed" in a character's feeling. That's exactly where you want to be.

Kathy Corbin: What did you enjoy the most about teaching? Did anything from your teaching life cross into your writing life? Discussions with students or papers by students that caused you to view something from a new perspective for example.

I enjoyed talking with the students, getting to know them a little. Teaching did cross over into writing frequently, because explaining how problems got solved can help you with current problems.

One specific paper by a student revealed a lot to me. This person had not shown a lot of talent, but suddenly he wrote a genius story.

After he graduated, I read exactly the same story in a British magazine. He had just changed the names of the characters. But I guess he got away with it; he'd graduated and I was retiring. If he's a surgeon now, I hope I never wind up on his operating table

John Grayshaw: I read that your family traveled quite a bit when you were a child so that you lived in many places? (Puerto Rico, New Orleans, Washington D.C., Bethesda, and Anchorage). How did that impact how you viewed the world? And did it impact your writing?

I guess it may have given me a less parochial point of view than someone who, for instance, just lived in a small town and never went anywhere. But there are plenty of brilliant original writers who did exactly that -- and also plenty who had a vast variety of experiences and yet, somehow, write boring crap.

It may have been important that when I was just learning how to talk, in Puerto Rico, we had a maid who only spoke Spanish. I only learned a few phrases, but I knew at a fundamental level that there was another world out there -- one that didn't speak my language. It's an important thing for a child to know.

John Grayshaw: What are some amusing stories from science fiction conventions you're been to?

That would take forever and a day.

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

Over the years I've known dozens of writers, and been friends with many. Gordon R. Dickson was my main pal in the old days, and I think Robert Heinlein and I liked each other instantly, though we were more than a generation apart. We had a kind of a gang in the seventies, self-identified as the

Guilford Gafia -- a pun on "Milford Mafia" and the sf fannish acronym "GAFIA," meaning "get away from it all." (When a person got tired of science fiction, you would say he "gafiated.")

John Grayshaw: You've been married to Gay Haldeman for 55 years? What's the secret to a lasting marriage? "Keep your mouth shut when you're about to say something hurtful" will get you a few years.

"Be kind and loving especially when you don't feel like it" is another one that should be obvious, but evidently is not.

John Grayshaw: Do you have any advice for writers who are just starting out?

Write like hell. Have fun while it is fun -- it will be work before long. (Then learn to have fun even when it's work.)

John Grayshaw: Any movie or TV shows of your stories in the works?

Ya never know. People take options, but they don't have to keep the writer apprised on their progress or lack of same. I just keep checking the mailbox, at least metaphorically.

To me it's kind of interesting, but not earthshaking. I've done movies and television, and they're fun. And yes, I get it, having lots of money and influence is better than having none.

But having some money and some influence might be even better. That's something that was not obvious when I was a kid.

I live in a modest house that's completely paid for, and have a car that runs and a bicycle that works. I don't have to worry about groceries. I'm surrounded by friends and loved ones and don't have any powerful enemies.

Life might be more interesting if I was poverty-stricken and had a powerful emperor after me with legions of zombies with rayguns. But I'll take what I've got.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your interest in cycling?

I've always liked bicycling, since grade school, but never thought about taking long trips until I read an article in a writing magazine about a guy who strapped a typewriter to his bike and just took off, going to various national parks around the west.

It sounded like a perfect combination. Get exercise and make money and see all sorts of new places all at once. So I did it myself, and continued for decades.

I'm old now, and kind of busted up, but I can still crank out a dozen miles or so -- and you can rent bikes anywhere. Many of those places have boardwalks with pretty girls and junk food. What more could you ask for?

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your interest in astronomy?

My love affair with the night sky must have started in Alaska, where the winter nights are very dark and very long -- but it really began when I was thirteen or fourteen, and I got a telescope as a birthday present, a 4" Dynascope. One look at the moon and I was hooked. (Then the space program started, which really set the hook deep.)

John Grayshaw: Any other hobbies other than writing?

I play guitar a lot, and draw and paint. I have a library card -- and a library, for that matter, rooms full of books.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel is your legacy?

Here I make a sweeping gesture that encompasses four bookcases full of published works of fiction and poetry. I'm also a pretty good cook, and have thrown some hellacious parties.