

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Mark Rich (May 2020)

Mark Rich published the biography "C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary." He has published fiction, poetry, and criticism in publications including Analog, SF Age, Asimov's SF, and The New York Review of Science Fiction, and in such reference works as Magill's Literary Annuals. He co-founded, and has taken on the responsibility of reviving from its doldrums, at least briefly, The Magazine of Speculative Poetry. His short stories have been collected in two books and four chapbooks. Prior to his biography of C.M. Kornbluth, he published four books relating to toys and toy history. A new book that looks at both Modern wonder tales and toys, within the context of social and technical developments 1859-1958, will be published this year by McFarland.

David Stuckey: Apart from wanting to be known more for work under his own name, were there any other factors that led to the end of Cecil Corwin, Kornbluth's pseudonym and the victim of the conspiracy in "MS Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie"?

To answer a few questions about Cyril Kornbluth, at long last, gives me a certain pleasure. Ten years have passed, almost to the day as I write this, since I turned in my biography-study to McFarland Publishers. In that time, no one has requested an interview.

As to the disappearance of "Cecil Corwin," we may never know the full answer. Knowing the circumstances of the Corwin debut, however, makes part of the answer clear. Cyril used the name in 1940-42, on stories in which he had invested himself fully — which is not to say that he was holding back on others of his pseudonymous works of the time. Along with a few other Futurians he was helping fill Donald Wollheim's new science-fantasy magazines, which began operations with a story-budget of zero. With multiple stories of his appearing in each issue, Cyril used several pen-names. Those names all disappeared once wartime conditions consigned Wollheim's struggling efforts to oblivion.

"Cecil Corwin" is obviously close to Cyril's birth name, with "C--il (K)or--n" being the sounds in common. The thought that, as Corwin, he was writing essentially under his own name gains some weight from the fact that his strong early story, "The Rocket of 1955," already fanzine-published under the Kornbluth name, saw reprinting as by Corwin.

The war, I suspect, killed Corwin. Cyril, who had leanings toward poetry in high school, felt the loss of the muse early in wartime. Without a doubt other parts of his youth fell away, as well. Moreover, he had married at war's entrance. When he resumed his writing efforts postwar, his professional-writing name reflected his changed status. The "M" in "C.M. Kornbluth" represents his wife Mary, who did collaborate with Cyril, to an unknown degree.

All the same, as noted in the question, Cyril did breathe life into Corwin once again, in that brilliant story, "Ms." — thanks in part to Wollheim's having reintroduced the Corwin name to the reading public without Cyril's consent.

John Grayshaw: The movie *The Matrix* has elements very similar to *Wolfbane*. I was wondering why issues of copyright never came up, and to some extent the same thing with "The Marching Morons" and the comedy "Idiocracy." Then I realized they were both in the public domain. How much of Kornbluth's work is still copyrighted and who protects it? Does he have an estate?

A good question — for which I have a less-than-good response. Though some oversight of the Kornbluth oeuvre may continue, no watchdog effort exists, so far as I know, to insist that treatments and adaptations acknowledge their sources, let alone pass along the due pittance to his heirs. It may amuse you to know I have seen neither of these versions you mention, nor the movie that Barry Malzberg thought based on Cyril's "Gomez."

Except for its opening sections, *Wolfbane* was purely Cyril's work. Its astonishing character is all his. So now, if opportunity arises, I may have to grit my mental teeth to watch *Matrix*, to see if, indeed, the connection is there! The agency responsible, the last I knew, is Curtis Brown.

Eva Sable: Kornbluth's name is mentioned in *Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events* as a member of V.F.D., a secret organization dedicated to the promotion of literacy, classical learning, and crime prevention. Have you ever reached out to the author Daniel Handler to see how big a fan he is?

For this interview I did send a query to Handler's agent, but received no reply.

John Grayshaw: What makes Kornbluth interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to his work?

It may be the puzzle I saw there, presented by the person who seems to peer out from within the tales. No facile, unconsidered passages or moments occur in his stories: and a consistency, including a consistency in threads of a symbolic nature, runs through all. I find it fascinating, moreover, how Cyril drew on the symbolic values inherent in technical culture and scientific insight. As to what drew me to Kornbluth's work, I will leave that explanation where I already have put it. I wrote an essay for the *New York Review of Science Fiction* at David Hartwell's request, on the experience of writing *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary* (hereafter simply *CMK*). For reasons of his own, however, David claimed that in my essay I was inventing matters — which I was not. I withdrew the essay. I long ago decided, but have long delayed, placing it on my blog, "[Vines, Wines, and Lines.](#)" I will do so, to supplement this interview.

John Grayshaw: What are your favorites of Kornbluth's work?

So hard to say! In several closing chapters in *CMK* I delve into one of his short-short stories, "Everybody Knows Joe," which has surprising depth and richness. I find it hard to pick out individual titles. The stories and novels that I want to re-read include all of them. I take great joy in his novel *The Syndic*, for instance, but have probably read *Not This August* more times. I find "The Last Man Left in the Bar" dazzling — yet the earlier "The Mindworm" dazzles in a similar way. I feel myself in the presence of a master, in tale after tale. The quality, intelligence, and intensity in his writing still astonishes.

The image comes to me of the reader's mind being drawn like a vapor out of the skull and being sucked down, whole, into the paper page. Rare is the writer to have that power over a reader.

Some tales identified as classics, such as "The Little Black Bag" or "The Marching Morons," have had less such impact on me — perhaps because I have known them since a teenager, and never have managed to approach them with completely fresh eyes. Do I love more the early novel *Takeoff* or the late *The Man of Cold Rages*? Or the grim "Reap the Dark Tide/Shark Ship" versus "The Doomsman/Two Dooms" — ? And who that has met her can forget Tigress McCardle? And so on, and so forth.

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

Oddly enough, we do know that his father gave him all the Oz books. Whatever "all" might mean, it offers the sign of an influence behind Cyril's often delightful sense of humor. I gave this item about Oz little thought ten years ago, when finishing *CMK*. Now, though, having put in ten years studying and trying to understand the "wonder tale" and its development, from Poe through Kornbluth's time, this fact takes on larger significance, for me. Baum had a surprisingly solid instinct for literary symbolism, although I doubt he called it such; and he had a firm grasp of the story structure I call "symbolic melodrama." I hope to do another reading of Kornbluth to better understand his place, there at the end of the wonder tale: for he was a practitioner of the wonder tale's late form, "scientifiction." Thoughts about Baum may offer one means for reexamining that.

After Baum, Cyril plainly read science-fiction magazines, since he showed up at the first Futurian meeting, at age 15. He knew his E.E. Smith and Van Vogt, and probably read other big names of the time. Yet he also read outside the field. Writers from the Irish Literary Renaissance seemed to be important to him, in his teenage years. Hemingway, likewise.

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

I wish I had better insight into this than I do. The group "The Five," within which Kornbluth served as the focal personality, suggests how much he valued being with other writers of talent. He had a strong cooperative streak that emerged in this group, whose other members were James Blish, A.J. Budrys, Damon Knight, and Jane Roberts. Kornbluth acknowledged Knight's influence upon his developing critical sense. Richard Wilson, too, had Kornbluth's friendship and respect, in the years before the The Five.

John Grayshaw: Did Kornbluth have favorites of his own works?

He felt a justifiable pride in many. As to his favorites, we do have some evidence. That in his first collection he included "The Rocket of 1955" and "Thirteen O'Clock," from among his teenage stories, tells us something. For his Doubleday collection in 1958 he chose two other 1941 stories: "The Words of Guru" and "Kazam Collects." So he ranked these high among his early works. I believe the wonderful trio of 1950 — "The Mindworm," "The Little Black Bag," and "The Silly Season" — must also have occupied a special place in his heart, since they announced with so noticeable a splash his return to science fiction.

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

He pursued it with a serious attitude, which we know from his efforts to understand the Civil War battle named "the Crater," for a novel left unfinished. Mostly, though, we know this from the little gems of historical perspective that crop up in his stories.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us of Kornbluth's school days? How did he graduate high school at 13? And why was he kicked out of college?

Cyril was born in 1923 and graduated from high school in 1940 — so obviously was at the usual age for that rite of passage. His first attempt at college he himself gave up, in order to concentrate on his writing. His father's memory on that point is clear. Whether the college simultaneously wanted to expel him is another question.

In correcting misstatements about his life — and the whimsies — I documented and pointed to sources for all that I could, in writing *CMK*. In those pages I do offer details and insights into his schooling, with notes on a few specific teachers. Naturally, I wish I knew more.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about the Futurians? Were all the members just starting out at the time or were some more established than others?

This question requires the chapters that I devote to it, in *CMK*. I cannot hope to improve upon them here. I give an account there of the group's first meeting, in some detail, and continue with the group's story, episodically, up to the split between Kornbluth and Wollheim. Since Damon Knight was a latecomer to the group, his *The Futurians* offers a different focus.

But the group, as it developed, had a membership of those struggling toward lives in writing, art, and publishing. The members with most seniority and experience were Wollheim and John Michel. What an extraordinary and contention-ridden group!

John Grayshaw: What was his experience in World War II? And how did it affect him?

He was in the Battle of the Bulge. Besides overstressing his heart while carrying a machine gun, the experience left him with traumas which, to my knowledge, he never directly expressed. Phil Klass, who would write as William Tenn, unknowingly followed a remarkably similar route through the same times and events. His memories helped me enormously. In Cyril's novels in particular, there do appear scenes, images, and motifs that arose from his war experience.

I have a friend, age 93 or 94 now, whom I encounter at auctions now and then, who fought at Iwo Jima. He still suffers from convulsive nightmares about the war. Cyril's avoiding the subject of his personal war experience, in any direct manner, seems to me utterly natural.

John Grayshaw: Did Kornbluth go to any early sci-fi conventions and interact with his fans?

I know mainly of his attending prewar conventions. Of the 1950s, when he would have been appearing as a known and respected writer, I know less. Yet he was present to lose a Hugo for novel, to Heinlein; and he attended some smaller conventions, since Charles N. Brown met him at one. Unfortunately, in pursuing so many strands in trying to understand Cyril's life in his last decade that I failed to nail down these moments as well as I might have liked.

But the earliest conventions, of the late 1930s, played an important role in his life. He met many fans, of course — who were *fellow* fans.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his friendship and collaborations with Fred Pohl?

The friendship was not much of one, so far as I have been able to determine. I will only say that Pohl seemed so often self-serving in his aims and ambitions that whatever friendship or love he felt for Cyril went under-expressed, thus unknowable to us who were not there to witness. One terrible bout of drunkenness involved the two, before Cyril entered the Army. During it, Cyril's negative aspect emerged distinctly, to judge from the memories of other Futurians; and it was in this fugue of alcohol that an already embattled relationship between Fred and Cyril was forged, apparently, into friendship. Pohl appealed to this bond, later; Kornbluth seemed to place less weight upon it.

The collaborations were unfortunate, to my mind. Their story is complicated and unpleasant, beginning with the teenaged Kornbluth writing stories to outlines by Pohl, who then took more than half the take; moving on to problems at the Dirk Wylie agency that led Pohl to beg Kornbluth to save him by writing a novel for him, which Cyril did accomplish; and ending, after Cyril's death, with Pohl taking over the literary miniatures which were among his last works, and which Cyril's agent, Harry Altshuler, had been trying to sell to the slicks and literary magazines. Pohl pasted these together and perhaps added to them, to make them "collaborations." Among the stories Altshuler had been marketing was one entitled "The Meeting." Cyril had regarded these as finished works. If you know "Advent on Channel 12" or "Everybody Knows Joe," you begin to see what Cyril could convey — as in a poem — in the short-short-story format. Pohl moreover made changes to Kornbluth's solo writing, as in the novel *Not This August*.

I think that in speaking of the collaborations as unfortunate, I am being mild.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his friendship and collaborations with Judith Merril?

Cyril probably had an ideal collaborator in her. They did have temperamental and philosophic differences that helped divide them; but I believe that, at root, Cyril's inexpressible feelings about his war experience made the relationship impossible to continue. I will leave it at that, since my work on Merril, though much delayed, remains ongoing.

John Grayshaw: What was "the Five?" What was the significance of their friendship?

The Five as a group formed at the first Milford conference, in 1956. It appears to have been a gestalt experience that, for a time, bound five individuals with a sense of deep commonality. It seems a telling fact that work by Blish, Budrys, and Knight commanded central attention within science fiction, in the years soon after Cyril's death. Roberts exerted her impact largely outside the genre. The gestalt experience itself undoubtedly pointed the way to *Wolfbane*.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Kornbluth?

His interest in mathematics, for one, along with his regrets concerning it. His regrets strike home to me, since I literally have had dreams at night concerning my own having turned away from mathematics. The strength of his early interest in poetry, too.

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

Pohl's hijacking the celebratory festschrift in honor of Cyril, for one. Phil Klass had planned it; Pohl took it away. Pohl also monetarily benefited from what had been planned as a pure fundraiser for Mary and the children.

Other matters, too, should make some jaws drop, among *CMK* readers.

John Grayshaw: What are the funniest things you've found in your research of Kornbluth?

Certain things he wrote, inside and outside his stories, have a marvelous wit. Yet for me the sadness in his story, which I still sometimes feel as a visceral anguish, threatens to overwhelm even the genuine sparks of joy to be found there.

Yet . . . yes. The story appears elsewhere, besides in *CMK*, but still amuses me. I obtained family verification on it — that Cyril, when being wheeled along in his baby carriage did, indeed, once say to his mother and a neighbor, "I am not the baby you think I am."

John Grayshaw: Pohl, Damon Knight, and Asimov all said in their memoirs that Kornbluth was a man of odd personal habits and eccentricities? What were some of these oddities? Is it true Kornbluth didn't brush his teeth? If so, why?

Most people possessed of genius have eccentricities or oddities. I have no idea why Knight spoke of Cyril not smiling, which was not really a true statement. Lack of tooth-brushing likewise seems an odd assertion. Was Cyril the lone middle-teens young man to fail in his personal habits? Knight himself, I recall, was kicked out of one Futurian domicile for this reason. If anything, Kornbluth may have been more fastidious than others in the group. As a high-schooler who stayed weekends at a Futurian house, he paid his rent by washing dishes — which were usually all the past week's. At least in his later years, Cyril seems to have groomed himself in conventional ways. Virginia Kidd regarded him as being, in appearance, much like any other Jewish businessman on the street.

Knight, when he wrote *The Futurians*, was using the task of assembling it to draw himself out from a terrible writer's block. Although not presented as such, the book is as much a scrapbook as memoir. Whole passages, I discovered, were direct quotations from other Futurians interviewed by Knight. It had struck me that some statements had a catty tone that sounded somehow off. Were they Knight's thoughts, or another's? He relied heavily on the words of others, as a necessary crutch in overcoming his difficulty at producing words of his own. The toothbrushing statement still strikes me as odd.

Pohl did find Cyril difficult, which is unsurprising, given the distrustful and worse feelings concerning Pohl in the Kornbluth household. As to Asimov, I think Cyril baffled him. The imp of mischief in Cyril, I have little doubt, must have been provoked by Asimov's personality.

That there *were* stranger aspects I have little doubt. I leave those conjectures alone, however.

John Grayshaw: Was Kornbluth in poor health at the time of his death?

From the ending of World War II, his Furies — the damaged heart, the hypertension, and to some degree or another his being overweight — were handmaidens to his days.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Kornbluth's works under consideration for movies or TV?

I would have no way to know. Even if I tried to keep up on such matters they might evade me. Someone, for instance, might do a version of *Two Dooms* and call it a version of Dick's *Man in a High Castle*, with no one the wiser.

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

A never-previously-published poem does appear in *CMK*. I do also give, in that study, the title of a story by him that was sold to a magazine and presumably published, but in a way that has evaded bibliographers. I had hoped that, by now, some careful reader might have found the clue in the biography, and uncovered the story's fate.

Beyond that, almost all his work on his historical novels, as well as other drafts and manuscripts, were destroyed, it would seem, in a house fire after his death. I would love to have this knowledge be proven false, of course! I hope documents still exist somewhere.

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

At the height of his powers, the little-each-day-with-careful-revisions approach saw him through. He forever remained capable of the bursts of creative energy that let him, for instance, turn out *Gravy Planet* almost solo.

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

Cyril wrote, in 1954, "I have no formal hobbies, but am interested in practically every human activity except sports." He viewed his writing as vocation, not avocation.

John Grayshaw: Since he died at such a young age I think it inevitable to ask, what if he'd lived longer? What might he have accomplished. And would he be more highly regarded/remembered if he had?

He would have prospered with historical novels, and with his editorial work for *F&SF*. Since it seemed that he was finally leaving behind the difficult financial struggles of the middle-late 1950s, he might have found the peace to write the capricious fantasies that his youthful output had promised the world. I suspect that his fame would have been such, in the end, that no one like me would have felt haunted by the inconsistent and erroneous accounts about him and felt compelled to bring a long-obscured life into better light.

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

The legacy of genius is to disappear into the fabric of society. Whether society will get around to correcting the misperceptions and untruths surrounding this particular genius, so that he occupies a place not tertiary but primary, remains to be seen. Historically, he pointed the way to the New Wave — in "The Last Man in the Bar," in particular, and in the magazine, not truncated book, version of "With These Hands." He had a hand in, during the Flying Saucer scare; he participated in the *noir* genre; he initiated and led the writer's group within the Futurians which was, according to Knight, the genetic predecessor to the Milford conferences and Clarion.

I am not quite digressing, in saying the following. My new book being published this year by McFarland, even though its title points to toys, addresses throughout its pages the technical enclosure of the human world. The title is *Toys in an Age of Wonder: Science Fiction, Society, and the Symbolism of Play* — with one sense of "toys" being the one used by Emerson: "Populations, interests, government, history — 'tis all toy figures in a toy house." In his science fiction, Cyril was struggling with thoughts and images concerning the final stage of total technical enclosure. Having read Orwell and Koestler, he found his focus fixed upon that technology whose powerful symbolic weight was becoming reality, globally, around the time that he himself disappeared into memory. This focus may "date" some stories of his, for some readers. For others of us, it validates a reason, prominent among the many that there are, for his lasting significance.

I thank you for your questions!