

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with Michael Page (May 2020)

*Michael Page is the author of a number of books which examine the history and cultural importance of science fiction. He has published analyses on the life and works of Frederik Pohl, James E. Gunn, and edited a collection of stories by Miles J. Breuer a "forgotten" science fiction writer from the Pulp Era. He is a lecturer at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and regularly teaches courses on both science fiction and nineteenth century British literature. He also acts as the faculty advisor for Laurus, UNL's undergraduate literary magazine.*

**Blaine Savini: There is a belief that most writers approach novels from one of two directions...either they write the first sentence and find out what happens as the story is written or they know how it will end and then explain how the ending occurred. Would either of these descriptions describe Mr. Pohl's writing style...why or why not?**

My sense is that Pohl primarily took the latter tactic. His adage was "four pages a day," meaning that no matter what he was doing or how he was feeling, he always carved out some time to write those four pages each day. I'll paraphrase what he says in *The Way the Future Was*: sometimes the four pages come fast and I'm done in half an hour; sometimes it might take 16 hours to grind them out. This is a different kind of discipline than the discipline of planning work out well in advance. That's not to say that Pohl didn't plan, but I think once he got started he'd let the story and the characters go in their own direction as he got going on a project.

**Marina Akushskaya: I've only recently read Gateway and liked it, but I also vaguely remember reading some book by Pohl and Kornbluth in the nineties when I was a kid. It was, of course, the Russian translation. In the 90s lots of Western SFF was translated (usually badly) and published in Russia for the first time. I always wondered, were authors compensated for these publications or was it piracy en masse?**

Some might have been fairly contracted, but I imagine much of it was pirated. Pohl helped start the World SF organization, to make connections between SF writers across the globe, and he was well-acquainted with many Russian science fiction writers. In the 1960s, he founded the short-lived (just two issues) *International Science Fiction* magazine.

**Eva Sable: Related to the last book of Pohl's that I read ... I'd like to know more about his association with the Soviet Union and later Russia and the Ukraine. I vaguely recall something in a forward or afterward of Chernobyl, but it was a library book and I can't get it out to check ... Did that association start before or after the accident? I had friends who travelled to Russia in the late 70s/early 80s before it became commonplace. It required quite a bit of effort then.**

Yes. Sort of following on the previous answer, Pohl began traveling to Russia in the 1970s, if I recall, but certainly by the 1980s, in his involvement with the World SF organization. Like James Gunn, this was financed by the State Department as an outreach effort. As you mention, he wrote a novel *Chernobyl*,

about the Chernobyl incident, and did spend time interviewing some of the scientists and engineers. It's a different kind of novel than Pohl's usual science fiction, and one well-worth reading.

**Eva Sable: As an agent, and later an editor, were there any writers that he either "discovered" or particularly respected their skills?**

Pohl was instrumental in fostering the careers of many writers during his period as an agent in the late 1930s and early 1940s and in his various editorial posts. For instance, as a very young editor of *Astonishing Stories* and *Super Science Stories* in 1940-42, where he published the work of a lot of his fellow Futurians, one could say that, in a sense, this is where these writers honed their skills, although many of them did not emerge as major writers until after the War. This group includes Cyril Kornbluth and James Blish. If I recall, he also published one of Leigh Brackett's first stories. As an agent, he represented many new writers in the early 1950s who went on to become important writers, notably James Gunn and Mack Reynolds, among others. Later, when he was editing *Galaxy* and *If* in the 1960s, he published most of the early work of Larry Niven, for example. Keith Laumer and Fred Saberhagen come to mind here, too, as writers who Pohl nurtured in the 60s. As science fiction editor for Bantam, he published the controversial novels of Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* and *Triton* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*. When the mammoth *Dhalgren* arrived in the Bantam offices (in two cartons; the paperback runs around 830 pages, making it the longest SF novel up to that point) other editors joked that it was "Fred's Folly," thinking it would flop and Pohl would get fired; *Dhalgren* sold about a million copies. At Bantam, he also received a strange, phantasmagoric fantasy-like Vietnam novel, which he thought could use some developmental editing to turn it into a more realistic novel about the war, so he passed that on to a fellow editor. That became *The Short-Timers* by Gustav Hasford, the basis for Stanley Kubrick's film *Full-Metal Jacket*.

**John Grayshaw: Did Pohl enjoy editing as much as writing?**

He did. Indeed, he might have, at times, enjoyed it more. When I spoke to him at his home a few months before he died at age 93, he really perked up and got excited when he talked about his idea to launch a new science fiction magazine of reprints of stories from the 40s, 50s, and 60s. He wanted to show contemporary readers the wonders of that era, which is something he felt was missing from contemporary SF. Although we often point to John W. Campbell, Jr. as the great, influential editor of science fiction, in many ways, Pohl was just as important of an editor, especially in the 1960s when he was editing *Galaxy*, *If*, and *Worlds of Tomorrow*.

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

I first read Pohl when I got started reading science fiction regularly at age 14. I'd just "discovered" genre science fiction the previous Christmas and had picked up about twenty paperbacks of great SF writers – Heinlein, Asimov, Van Vogt, Sturgeon, Clarke, Bradbury – at the local Salvation Army thrift store. Sometime in March of that year (1982) I saw Pohl's novel *The Cool War* in the paperback rack at the grocery store and bought it. I don't think I'd yet seen Pohl's name, but it was a SF book, so I was interested. A year or so later I found his memoir *The Way the Future Was*, some of the *Star Science*

*Fiction* anthologies he edited in the fifties, and his collaborations with Kornbluth. When the University of Illinois Press series *Modern Masters of Science Fiction* was announced, I instantly thought that Pohl would be an ideal subject for the series, because of his multi-faceted career in the genre. Pohl's work in the 1950s, including the collaborations with Kornbluth, is significant, as pointed out as early as 1960 by Kingsley Amis in his book *New Maps of Hell*, for its interrogation of consumer culture and Cold War politics (a running theme throughout Pohl's work), and his novels of the 1970s and beyond, beginning with *Man Plus* (1976), further Pohl's examination of politics, economics, and science through the lens of science fiction, which to my mind makes Pohl a writer of significance, not just in SF but in literature as a whole.

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

I went back to graduate school in 2000. At that time, science fiction had been dropped from the undergraduate curriculum here at UNL. I had taken a science fiction class when I was an undergraduate in 1986, taught by a scholar named L. David Allen, who had written one of the early academic critical studies of science fiction, *Science Fiction Reader's Guide*. I had read his book while I was in high school, so to my mind when I stepped into the classroom at age 19, he was a celebrity. But, as mentioned, by 2000, the class had been decommissioned. As a graduate student, I got interested in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and in the poetry of Erasmus Darwin. This led to a thesis on these writers and on science and Romanticism more broadly. My Phd dissertation extended upon this and examined the impact of evolutionary ideas on literature throughout the nineteenth century. This eventually became my first book, *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells: Science, Evolution and Ecology*. So my path was meant to be 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature. But then I started reading science fiction again heavily around 2004, after writing a paper on the late Victorian precursors to Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, M.R. James, and Algernon Blackwood. Meanwhile, I was working on my dissertation reading list, especially re-reading Wells; and I was also getting interested in the early science fiction magazines. That's when I came across a blurb in a Silverberg anthology mentioning that Miles J. Breuer had been a physician in Lincoln, Nebraska; since I had lived in Lincoln most of my life, this intrigued me. I gathered most of Breuer's stories from microfilms and made a proposal to the University of Nebraska Press to do an edition. They accepted and therefore that became a side project while I was working on my dissertation (fortunately I had a fellowship that year and did not have any teaching duties). This eventually led me to communicate with Jack Williamson, who had collaborated with Breuer, and I took a research trip to the Jack Williamson Library at Eastern New Mexico University (alas, Williamson had passed away the previous fall). Before the trip, I contacted James Gunn at the University of Kansas and stopped to visit with him on my way home. From there, I got involved with Gunn's Teaching Institute and over the years have worked with Gunn on various scholarly projects.

I love teaching SF because I think it is important; just as important, if not more, than a lot of the literature we teach at the university. And that is because SF is about humans in a technological present and future – it is about today...and tomorrow. I think SF helps students frame their experience in a technological world and imagine possible futures; and to contemplate their place (and humanity's place) in the universe.

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

Pohl read voraciously as a youth. He says he probably averaged a book a day while in his teens. H.G. Wells would be an obvious example of a writer he admired, as Wells was the most well-known writer of the period, not just for his scientific romances, but for his mainstream social novels and his books on politics and science. Like many of his contemporaries, Pohl found the early science fiction magazines around 1930, and then spent time looking for the back issues of *Amazing* and *Wonder* that he could find. Like most of his generation, he was inspired by the “sense of wonder” in the Doc Smith and John W. Campbell space operas, but recognized a change in SF’s development when Stanley G. Weinbaum appeared on the scene and when Campbell became more introspective in his Don A. Stuart stories. I believe he mentions the early satiric SF novels of Stanton A. Coblentz as being inspiring, and certainly Coblentz’s work resonates with Pohl and Kornbluth’s satires of the fifties. Another story he mentions is David H. Keller’s “The Revolt of the Pedestrians.”

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

Kornbluth, obviously, as they were tied together as friends and collaborators. Another collaborator was Jack Williamson and Pohl respected Jack’s work. Heinlein was another writer Pohl aspired to be as good as. Asimov, another close friend, but certainly one of Pohl’s favorite writers. When I spoke to Pohl prior to his death, he spoke highly of Mack Reynolds. He said that though Reynolds was not what we would call a great stylist, he was an idea man, and his stories were consistently good for the social, political and economic ideas he weaved into them.

**John Grayshaw: Did Pohl have favorites of his own works?**

I think he was particularly fond of *The Space Merchants* and *Gateway*. *Gateway* led to several sequels because he was fascinated by the alien Heechee he had created, so he continued to examine and world-build in that setting for an additional five books. His non-fiction book on the environmental crisis *Our Angry Earth*, in collaboration with Asimov, was important to him, because he felt like we needed to start paying serious attention to what we are doing to the planet – in this sense, we’ve failed him. The story “Day Million” was also one of Pohl’s favorites.

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

Pohl was fascinated by science (see his book *Chasing Science*) and, indeed, he said he enjoyed reading about science just as much or more than he enjoyed science fiction. When he came across an idea in science that interested him, he read as much as he could about it and incorporate it in his novels. This is especially true of the later works, I think. He also loved to travel and you can see this interest in geography in his novels, even when he sets them on a far off planet.

**John Grayshaw: Was the success of “Man Plus” and “Gateway” significant for Pohl? I mean, he’d already been in the business for 40 years, but it seems like those two novels are perhaps his best-known works?**

Yes. What happened was that Pohl had been an editor first and a writer second for many years. With these novels, writing became first for Pohl. Also, these novels and later ones incorporated much that he learned as an editor. In other words, he learned the lessons of the “New Wave” and created a new synthesis of sorts, combining values of the SF tradition with some of the stylistic and thematic concerns of the New Wave. I’d also mention the novel *JEM* here, which won a National Book Award for Science Fiction, it’s the book that came out after *Gateway* and it’s a heck of a book too; the best example of Pohl’s “Cold War” fiction. And this was also the time he published *The Way the Future Was*.

**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 Pohl?**

They were all very young, in their teens, when they formed the group. Kornbluth was only about 13 when he began hanging out with the group. Asimov, I suppose, was the first one to really break through, because he started selling to Campbell and *Astounding*. Donald Wollheim, like Pohl, was a powerful personality and, like Pohl, he began editing some early magazines. James Blish was an occasional member of the group, but he lived in New Jersey and wasn’t there all the time. Damon Knight moved to New York from Oregon and became part of the group during some of the shared apartment phase. Knight’s book *The Futurians* is an excellent documentation about the whole scene.

**John Grayshaw: Why did Pohl drop out of Brooklyn Technical High School at 17?**

I don’t recall exactly, but I think some of it had to do with he’d already learned everything (he’d read through the textbooks in the first week of the semester) and it was cutting into his own interests, both writerly and politically.

**John Grayshaw: Why did Pohl have several unsuccessful marriages? And what worked in his marriages to Carol Stanton and later Elizabeth Anne Hull that they both lasted longer?**

I don’t recall if Pohl said that he was a “serial monogamizer” or if someone said that about him. The first marriage was because they were very young and then the War started. The second marriage was a wartime marriage and when they got back to the states they realized it wasn’t going to work out. The Judith Merrill marriage was too volatile; two dominant personalities who ultimately just couldn’t get along. The marriage to Carol produced more children, for one thing, and this was the marriage of middle age; it fell apart as the kids grew up. His marriage to Betty was the most successful because it was his marriage in maturity and old age.

Going back to the youthful marriages, keep in mind that was in a time when people did not “move in together”; instead they got married. Since the 1960s, most educated young people “shack up” (sometimes more than once) before committing to a marriage.

**John Grayshaw: Was Pohl an extrovert? I see that he and his then wife Judith Merrill hosted the sci-fi social club (Hydra Club) out of their apartment. Was this because he was an extrovert or was it more because he was a literary agent at the time?**

I think Pohl might well have been an extrovert. He was gregarious and social in ways that other writers might not have been. In general, he was comfortable around people and was not shy. A lot of this had to do, I think, with self-confidence and competence; Pohl struck me as being confident in who he was and what he was capable of.

**John Grayshaw: What are some interesting anecdotes about Pohl going to conventions and meeting his fans?**

I'll tell you of my own first encounter with Pohl at the Heinlein Centennial/Science Fiction Research Association Conference in 2007. I had already become acquainted with James Gunn, but Pohl (at that time) was another order of magnitude. I went up to him and introduced myself and told him how I had bought *The Cool War* those many years ago. Pohl looked up at me and said, "Did ya' like it?" Later, as Pohl was in a rush to get to his next panel, he almost ran my wife over with his scooter – she won't let me forget that.

**John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his friendship and collaborations with C.M. Kornbluth?**

Well, I've been working on these questions for the last few hours and I'm starting to tire! So I think I'll go down to get some lunch and come back to this in a moment...

I think the friendship ran deep, but it was also volatile, like the marriage to Judy Merrill. In other words, close friends, especially those formed in youth, sometimes fight, argue, and get seethingly mad at each other. Had Kornbluth survived, the friendship may have evolved in other directions.

As for the collaborations, they obviously worked well together. There are moments in the SF books and in the mainstream books (*Presidential Year* and *The Town is Drowning*) where you can kind of see which writer's imprint is stronger in a particular section.

**John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his friendship and collaborations with Jack Williamson?**

Pohl's friendship with Williamson had the benefit of longevity; they got closer as the years went on. At first, they collaborated when Williamson was struggling with writer's block (hence also the Williamson collaboration with James Gunn, *Star Bridge*). But over the years, they became closer, as Williamson also became an English Professor, and Pohl would often come to New Mexico to participate in various events Williamson was holding at the university. They also traveled to China together.

Whereas the Kornbluth collaborations were largely political and social novels (including the two mainstream novels), the Williamson collaborations are more in the tradition of adventure and hard science fiction. I think Pohl liked the world-building aspect of his collaborations with Jack.

**John Grayshaw: Who are some of the other science fiction writers he had correspondence, friendships, and/or collaborations with?**

The correspondence with James Gunn is archived in Gunn's papers at the University of Kansas and makes for fascinating reading, especially when Gunn was trying to get Pohl to send him his money for

his stories, when Pohl served as Gunn's agent. This relationship, though, also matured over the years and Pohl and Gunn remained great friends for decades. Like Gunn, I'm sure Pohl's papers contain correspondence with just about every science fiction writer, but I did not have the opportunity to look at the entirety of his archives.

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

One thing that struck me as interesting was that Pohl was stationed in Italy during the War in a region just a few miles from where Joseph Heller was stationed, so Pohl's war experience parallels that in *Catch-22* to some extent. At the time I wrote the book, I was also interested in Pohl's frequent appearances on late night talk radio in New York City in the 60s/70s. Hopefully those will get archived on the internet (if they still exist) at some point. Lastly, I was interested by a suggestion that a mainstream novel about corporatism called *Executive Suite* appeared around the same time as *The Space Merchants*. The paperback of that novel was published by Ballantine, I believe on Pohl's suggestion. It was interesting to see how the concerns about a growing corporatism were examined both in the mainstream and, to my mind in a better more biting way, in the science fiction novel. Of course, *The Space Merchants* remains a widely-known classic in and outside of SF, while *Executive Suite* is mostly forgotten.

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

It has been awhile, but perhaps the anecdote about Pohl and Walter M. Miller, Jr. (who was shacking up with Judith Merrill at the time as the marriage with Pohl fell apart) getting into fisticuffs. Speaking of fisticuffs, the remark by Sam Moskowitz in *The Immortal Storm* when describing the incident at the First World Science Fiction Convention in which they barred the Futurians from entering. Moskowitz describes the encounter in the third person and states something like "And Moskowitz, unknown to the Futurians, had sufficient training in boxing." Can you imagine rail-thin Pohl and Wollheim putting up their dukes in the hotel lobby!

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

I suppose those incidents I mention above.

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

Pohl's son, Rick Pohl, handles the film rights and last I heard *Gateway* was in development with the SyFy Channel but that had run into some difficulties, so there may not be any action going on at the moment.

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

I don't know about this. At one point, I talked with Betty Hull about doing what she called a "full biography," but I've since moved on to other projects.

**John Grayshaw: Pohl talked in interviews about doing an update to his autobiography. Am I right in thinking that update became his blog? Are there any plans to turn the blog into a book? Especially since the blog is currently down and only available through the Internet Archive.**

Yes. In a sense, the blog became the update. I do know that Betty talked about doing a revised edition, incorporating some of the material from the blog into book publication, but I don't know where things went with that. I do not know what has happened to the blog and I suppose I should follow up on that, maybe I should see if we can manage it here at UNL.

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

I mentioned the four pages a day in the first question. That was his major mantra. I also think he smoked heavily while he was writing (although Betty said he mostly quit, on her insistence, by the time he was 80); you can see the smoking in his writing; it's amazing how many people light up a cigarette in a spaceship in Pohl's work! Betty also told me he liked to make instant coffee using tap water.

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

Science. He subtitled his book *Chasing Science*, "Science as a Spectator Sport." As mentioned, he also loved to travel and observe natural formations and man-made structures.

**John Grayshaw: As I was reading about Pohl, I was struck by the fact that he was there at the forefront for so much of the history of the genre. In the "Golden Age" he was a founder of the Futurians, during the New Wave he edited such influential works as "the Female Man" by Joanna Russ and "Dhalgren" by Samuel R Delany. He had very successful novels in the 1970s. He even won a Hugo for his blog in 2010. How did he keep adapting so well to changing times?**

As my friend Chris McKitterick called him in an article in *Foundation*, Pohl was Mr. Science Fiction. He loved science fiction and science fiction culture, and in fact contributed much to the former and helped invent the latter. I think he was wholly devoted to it and that's why he adapted to changing moments, by keeping his hand in the field, rather than getting disillusioned, as many of his contemporaries did over time.

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

For the reasons you mention above. His involvement in science fiction from its beginnings to well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a writer, editor, agent, and fan inextricably links Pohl to science fiction. You can't know science fiction and not know of Pohl and all he did for the genre.

Thanks for inviting me to revisit Pohl here. One thing that I've said to students is that when you finish a book on an author where you read everything they published, you realize at the end that you're not going to read that author all that much anymore. With the exception of teaching *The Space Merchants*, "Day Million" and "The Tunnel Under the World," I haven't read any Pohl for 5-6 years now – and



there's nothing left to discover for the first time. So thank you for the opportunity to spend some hours here thinking about and waxing on Frederik Pohl and his legacy to science fiction.

All the best,

Dr. Michael R. Page