

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Gary Westfahl (June 2020)

Gary Westfahl, now Professor Emeritus at the University of La Verne and formerly employed at the University of California, Riverside, has retired to focus exclusively on research and writing. His many books on science fiction include two of the University of Illinois Press's Modern Masters of Science Fiction series – “William Gibson” (2013) and “Arthur C. Clarke” (2018) – the three-volume “Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy” and “Hugo Gernsback and the Century of Science Fiction.”

Marina Akushskaya: What's the main difference between Gibson's early and more recent works?

First, there are of course different ways to define Gibson's “early works.” To me, that would refer to his contributions to science fiction fanzines in the 1960s and 1970s, though I am probably one of the few people who has ever read them. They oddly do little to suggest that he would blossom into an accomplished fiction writer, since he then focused on writing poetry and journalistic nonfiction, and he also drew numerous cartoons. Yet he has continued throughout his career to produce a considerable amount of nonfiction, much of which recalls his earlier efforts and demonstrates both his skills and interest in writing nonfiction.

If one defines his “early works” as his publications in the 1980s, it is clear that he initially felt most comfortable writing short fiction, and even his novels tend to contain episodes that could be extracted and published, with minimal editing, as short fiction. But he was determined to master the art of writing true novels, and one can observe in early novels his deliberate efforts to experiment with more complex plots and multiple protagonists; he also prioritized the creation of fully realized female characters. He was noted at the time for spectacular rhetorical flourishes, and while his prose style remains one of his strengths, he seems to display his talents less conspicuously in later novels, as if he no longer feels any need to show off. One of his early concerns was to make his fiction less American, foregrounding foreign settings and characters, but he has grown more comfortable writing about his native country, perhaps feeling that he has sufficiently exerted himself in making science fiction a more international genre. His later works also reflect some of the different interests he developed over the years, most obviously a fascination with fashion.

Marina Akushskaya: Why Japan is so important to him?

In the 1980s, Gibson perceived that Japan as a society was much more focused on developing new technologies for personal use and incorporating them into everyday life; visiting Japan, in other words, seemed to be a way to visit the future. I think he was also intrigued by the Yakuza, and the way they functioned as a sort of underground government, foreshadowing the common expectation in cyberpunk fiction that such independent entities would become more important than governments in the future. And in his essay “My Own Private Tokyo,” he reflects on the

way that one can interestingly observe, in contemporary Japan, disparate evidence of the many disruptive changes throughout Japan's history; so it is that one sees in Japan not only its future, but its past and present as well. Unique features of Japanese society that intrigue Gibson – such as the solitude of many young people – are also discussed in another essay in *Distrust That Particular Flavor*, “Shiny Balls of Mud.”

Marina Akushskaya: Do brands mean a lot in most of his works or is it just reader's bias (I started reading his books from *Pattern Recognition*).

First, Gibson has written about how he has always sought to make his future worlds as detailed as possible – providing what he termed “hyperdetail” – and one aspect of that would be to provide brand names whenever possible. Also, as part of his interest in fashion, he likes to explore why it is that some brand names became very popular while others do not – a recurring concern in his Bigend novels. And Gibson himself is partial to particular brands; he wrote a very interesting article, for example, about his fondness for the works of fashion designer Paul Smith – “Paul Smith: A Most Benevolent Marvel” (2001) – which he declined to include in *Distrust That Particular Flavor* because, as he said in my interview with him, it “struck me as too sucky. I think it reads like I was angling for a bespoke suit, which in fact I was, though I never got one.”

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

What I found most interesting about Gibson was the way that his work had been seized upon by other writers and critics to advance their own “cyberpunk” and “postmodern” agendas, when the actual priorities in Gibson's life and fiction struck me as quite different. Their central concerns, in fact, seemed quite peripheral to Gibson himself, and one theme of my book became my effort to detach Gibson from the movement that had attached itself to him and bring out his true nature. (Of course, in doing so, I was accused by one reviewer of advancing my own “political agenda,” when I was doing nothing of the kind – I was simply disagreeing with the reviewer's own political agenda, which displeased him.) When I began discussing possible projects for the University of Illinois Press's Modern Masters of Science Fiction series, I frankly chose to write about Gibson because I thought a book about him would prove more popular and profitable than a book about other contemporary authors I might have examined.

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

First, I don't know if I could say they are true favorites, but I do wish that some of Gibson's essays from fanzines could be made available to a larger readership – some are just as good as the pieces that ended up in *Distrust That Particular Flavor*. In terms of sheer quality, I prefer Gibson's later novels, as he evolved into a more confident and capable writer; some aspects of his earlier novels now strike me as trendy and ill-advised, as if he was tossing things into his

novel only to please devotees of cyberpunk. As a general rule, Gibson's "trilogies" begin strongly but get weaker and weaker, though one exception would be his Bigend trilogy, since the two Gibson novels I most enjoyed reading were its first volume, *Pattern Recognition*, and its last volume, *Zero History*. Of his short fiction, my favorite story is probably "The Gernsback Continuum."

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

This was one of the surprising discoveries I made while looking at the fanzines that Gibson published as a teenager in Virginia. His favorite author at the time was Fritz Leiber; he even wrote to Leiber about his Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser stories, and Leiber responded with a postcard, the text of which he published in one fanzine. There was also a Gibson poem that very much recalled Clifford D. Simak's *City*, though Gibson reported that he did not recall reading it. But I suspect that, like many young fans, he was an omnivorous reader, reading most of the science fiction authors who were publishing stories and novels at the time; among other publications, he regularly read Judith Merril's annual anthologies. He later reported that Alfred Bester had had a strong influence on his work, and he was once very fond of H. P. Lovecraft, though he grew to dislike him, as he discussed in another fanzine article. And, for what it's worth, Gibson did agree to write introductions to two Professor Challenger novels by Arthur Conan Doyle, a collection of stories by Jorge Luis Borges, a story by Avram Davidson, and a collection of Philip K. Dick's letters, suggesting some special affinity for their works.

John Grayshaw: Who are some contemporary writers that Gibson enjoys/admires and how have they influenced his work?

I have no personal knowledge of Gibson's reading habits in recent decades, but one indication of his interests in contemporary writers would be a list of the writers whose works he has agreed to introduce. Consulting my bibliography, those authors would be: Samuel R. Delany; Greg Girard; Eileen Gunn; Rudy Rucker; John Shirley; Bruce Sterling; and Michael Turner. He also wrote two articles about the science fiction of Jack Womack. One can further recall that when he was regularly reviewing books in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the books he chose to review included works by Shirley, Michael Moorcock, William S. Burroughs, and Don DeLillo. However, I found it difficult to discern the influence of any particular contemporary writers in his novels, and I would guess that Gibson's current reading habits mostly involve nonfiction.

John Grayshaw: Does Gibson have favorites of his own works?

I have absolutely no information about that, and I suspect that if asked that question directly, Gibson would answer evasively, not wishing to stigmatize any of his other works by identifying them as not among his favorites. However, if forced to offer an opinion, I would have to think that Gibson was particularly proud of *Pattern Recognition*: it represented a significant departure

from his previous works; it required an unusually long time to write; he overcame the challenge of rewriting some of it to reflect the impact of 9/11; it achieved an enormous amount of commercial and critical success; and it remains, I think, one of his best novels. I also believe that, after a long period of devoting his time entirely to novels, Gibson was very pleased with his 2010 short story “Dougal Discarnate,” and he has expressed disappointment that it received so little attention – understandably, because it is an excellent story with intriguing autobiographical resonances.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research does Gibson do for his books?

Again, I cannot speak authoritatively about his research habits, but my sense is that Gibson does not engage in specific research in order to prepare for specific works; rather, he has made his entire life a sort of ongoing research project, as he regularly travels and reads voraciously about innumerable topics that interest him, and the information he thus obtains serves to enrich whatever he is writing at the time. In the course of writing, I am sure that he goes on the internet to confirm the accuracy of whatever he is talking about at the time, but that sort of research accompanies, and does not precede, what he writes.

John Grayshaw: Know any stories about Gibson going to sci-fi conventions and interacting with his fans?

One thing that few people realize is that, in the 1960s and 1970s, Gibson was himself a fan, as he attended numerous conventions in British Columbia and wrote, edited, and contributed to numerous local fanzines. It is a community that he was very familiar with, and very comfortable within. Indeed, he attended a 1996 convention in Vancouver where he was named its “Fan Guest of Honor” and, acknowledging his past reputation as a fanzine cartoonist, he spontaneously drew another cartoon while there that was subsequently published in a fanzine. Having said that, I must also acknowledge that Gibson has generally been disinclined to attend science fiction conventions or to interact with the science fiction community since the 1980s; at this stage in his career, he has little incentive to do so, and I suspect that he would rather stay at home and go on periodic vacations to destinations of his choice.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his friendship and collaborations with Bruce Sterling?

There can be no doubt that they were friends in the 1980s, though one must also bear in mind that Gibson was living in British Columbia and Sterling was living in Texas, so they had little personal interaction. My impression, however, is that the relationship quickly devolved into Sterling, who was achieving less success in his own career, periodically nagging Gibson about collaborations, which he occasionally agreed to. Based on published comments and my own reading of “Red Star, Winter Orbit,” for example, I am confident that the story is basically

Sterling's work, with Gibson solicited to make minor contributions and provide his name as a co-author in order to facilitate its publication in *Omni* magazine. Also, while Gibson did write some of *The Difference Engine*, the project was undoubtedly conceived by, and largely executed by, Sterling. More recently, Sterling commented that he has contacted Gibson about launching another collaborative project, but Gibson always reports that he is too busy – obviously, the truth is that he has no desire to again collaborate with Sterling, and of course has nothing to gain by doing so.

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

I can discern no evidence that Gibson ever had any real interest in collaborating with other authors, and I believe that most of the works credited to Gibson and another author are in fact primarily, if not exclusively, the other author's work. Consider "Dogfight." In a conversation at a science fiction convention, Gibson made a few remarks about interactive games, and Swanwick drew upon those remarks to write "Dogfight"; he sent the story to Gibson, who perhaps made a few changes and agreed to be credited as its co-author. "The Belonging Kind" was originally written by Shirley, though he sent the story to Gibson, who made a few changes to result in the story being published as a collaboration. Other than *The Difference Engine*, Gibson's only genuine collaborations may be the two scripts he wrote with Tom Maddox for *The X-Files*. As for friendships and correspondence, it is no doubt the case that Gibson regularly corresponds via email with several authors, though he probably does not see them very often, since he seems to spend most of his time either staying at home or traveling with his wife. Twitter has become the main way that he communicates with the world.

John Grayshaw: What is Gibson's impact on cyberpunk? Would cyberpunk even exist without him?

Gibson, basically, is the only reason the cyberpunk movement ever existed; he was properly acclaimed, and very successful, so other authors rushed forward to claim that they were similar "cyberpunk" writers and hence were entitled to the same amount of recognition that Gibson had received – even though, in almost all cases, they were not. Bruce Sterling is the true creator of the cyberpunk movement, since he effectively articulated its agenda in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* and endlessly argued on its behalf, even as Gibson remained visibly indifferent to the whole matter. Today, it is my impression that few people really care about cyberpunk any more, and that all of the other writers identified with the purported subgenre are mostly being ignored because, on examination, they simply were not as interesting or as talented as Gibson.

John Grayshaw: What is Gibson's impact on steampunk? Would steampunk even exist without him?

Steampunk existed before *The Difference Engine*, in the works of K. W. Jeter, Tim Powers, and others, but Gibson and Sterling's novel undoubtedly served to popularize the subgenre and perhaps helped to establish it as a recognized category of science fiction. The irony is that Gibson has displayed absolutely no interest in the Victorian era, except for necessary work for this novel, and he has never revisited the subgenre again. (Just about the only other work of Gibson's I can think of that is fixated on the past is "The Gernsback Continuum," and its focus is common images of the future in the 1920s and 1930s.) I believe he has recognized that, in contrast to describing contemporary worlds and their contemporary problems, stories positing imagined but contrafactual technological advances in the nineteenth century simply were not especially stimulating or valuable, an opinion I would share.

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

Again, the first two decades of Gibson's career, and his numerous contributions to fanzines in the 1960s and 1970s, remain largely unknown, even though many of them display the talent that would later make him famous. The extent to which he was influenced by the conventional science fiction being published during his adolescence remains underappreciated, in part because Gibson himself has downplayed how that contributed to his career; I read dozens of Gibson interviews, for example, and he never mentioned his youthful obsession with Fritz Leiber, preferring to have his name associated with more respected authors like Bester and Dick. The key role that the late Susan Wood played in advancing his career needs to be further researched, and Gibson's variegated interests in art and music can only be appreciated by seeking out the articles and introductions that (in my experience) require an Interlibrary Loan service to obtain. As one example, his appreciation for the unique sculptures of Jeff de Boer was only expressed in his very interesting introduction to a 1994 book displaying his works.

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

I have mentioned his youthful fondness for Leiber, and it was also surprising to find just how much nonfiction he has written, as only incompletely presented in *Distrust That Particular Flavor*. One hopes for another compilation of his nonfiction that might include some of his fanzine writings. Also, everything in his novels about rebels, criminals, and social outcasts only reflects, if anything, his early years in Toronto, as displayed in one documentary. But since he settled in British Columbia, to the best of my knowledge, he has carried on a conventional suburban life with his wife and children, never doing anything that might draw the attention of the authorities. In this respect as in others, there is a major disconnect between the image of Gibson that many critics prefer and the actual Gibson.

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

One would first have to refer to his numerous cartoons, that were published in his own fanzines of the 1960s and Vancouver fanzines in the 1970s. I cannot provide images, but my bibliography records the captions of three of his cartoons, to convey their nature: “No, We Don’t Have a Mr. Fafhrd Registered Here – Why Do You Ask?” “Whereas My Previous Work Often Dealt with Invasions of Earth by Ant-Like Creatures with Periscope Eyes and Garish Neck-Wear, I Now Feel Such Themes to Be Below My Serious Consideration as a Novelist ...” “Hi, There. Bet You Didn’t Know Giant Insects Wear Big Plastic Tits.” Of course there is humor in Gibson’s later writings, but in my view it tends to surface more in his nonfiction than his fiction.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Gibson’s works under consideration for movies or TV?

At any given time, I suspect that several of his works have been optioned as possible films or television series, though given current circumstances in Hollywood, they remain like so many other projected works perpetually “under development.” For years and years, films based on *Neuromancer* and *Pattern Recognition* have been repeatedly announced, and have repeatedly been indefinitely delayed, and the Internet Movie Database now reports plans for a television series based on *The Peripheral*, though one never knows if it will ever be produced. Gibson himself has retained some interest in launching film projects, though like everyone else he has found the entire process of getting a film into production to be frustrating. Gibson’s graphic novel *Archangel*, for example, was originally pitched as a film script, but he eventually gave up and turned it into a graphic novel – which also became the fate of his rejected screenplay for *Alien 3*.

John Grayshaw: Does Gibson have any particular writing habits or routines he sticks with?

I am not familiar with his daily habits, though I know that he visits Twitter on a regular basis, and his record of publication would suggest a commitment to being constantly productive. It seems that he wants to finish a novel about every three years, while periodically diverting his energies to minor projects like articles and introductions. While he famously wrote *Neuromancer* on a typewriter, he long ago shifted to writing using computers, and my suspicion would be that, like Robert A. Heinlein, he sets himself regular goals, seeking to write a certain number of words every day, week, or month while otherwise doing what he pleases.

John Grayshaw: What are some of Gibson’s hobbies other than writing?

Gibson and his wife, first of all, are inveterate travelers, and their experiences have been the basis for a number of his articles. He has expressed a special fondness for visiting major cities like London and Tokyo. He wrote one article about his repeated use of the eBay website in an effort to obtain various sorts of watches, and he loves being on Twitter, though he has abandoned

his blog. “Dougal Discarnate” suggests that Gibson was long fond of watching bad science fiction movies, while his essay “William Gibson’s Filmless Festival” conveys a curiosity about alternative cinema. Gibson has dabbled in photography, and three of his photographs were published in a 2003 book, *On the Other Side of the Lens*. His musical tastes include an expressed fondness for listening to the Velvet Underground. Overall, reading *Distrust That Particular Flavor* indicates that Gibson has a broad range of interests, and these may include some that he has not yet discussed in print.

John Grayshaw: It seems like even though cyberpunk authors envisioned the computer age, rather than embrace it they’ve become off-the-grid types. Is Gibson like that?... Do they know something we should?

In the first place, although Gibson has become a regular user of the Internet like almost everyone else, he was never the computer geek that some proponents of cyberpunk wished to present him as, and his nonfiction clearly communicates a general preference for the real experiences of travel over the virtual experiences of cyberspace. Gibson is certainly not a troglodyte or Luddite, but I do suspect that he is less enamored of the latest and greatest technology than his early novels would suggest, and I have argued that, in many respects, he seems like a rather old-fashioned individual, utterly uninterested in being the most up-to-date and coolest person around (that is Bruce Sterling, not William Gibson).

John Grayshaw: What is Gibson’s legacy?

Of course, this is a question that is inherently difficult to answer during an author’s lifetime, since one never knows what future generations will think about their works. Booth Tarkington was very popular in his day, but no one remembers or reads him today, and it’s possible that Gibson will suffer the same fate. If nothing else, Gibson will always be mentioned in histories of science fiction because of the impact that he and the cyberpunk movement had on science fiction in the 1980s, though I suspect that the whole business of cyberpunk will increasingly be viewed as silly instead of profound, a bunch of people getting all worked up about writers and issues that, viewed in retrospect, were of little true importance. Gibson might endure, when all of the other cyberpunk writers have faded from memory, simply because he is a genuinely imaginative and talented writer who is consistently both entertaining and thought-provoking, but the extent to which he will speak to future generations remains, to me, unclear. His foregrounding of advanced technology and a global perspective might be seen as prophetic, but his views that once seemed revolutionary might become so commonplace in the future as to command little attention. One never knows.