

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Martha Wells (September 2020)

In 2018, Wells had great success with her new Murderbot series. "All Systems Red" won the 2017 Nebula Award for Best Novella, the 2018 Hugo Award for Best Novella, the 2018 Locus Award for Best Novella, and was nominated for the 2017 Philip K. Dick Award. It was followed by several sequel novellas and a full novel sequel, Network Effect (2020), which made The New York Times Bestseller List for Novel. She has published a number of fantasy novels, young adult novels, and media tie-ins. She has a B.A. in Anthropology from Texas A&M University.

Eva Sable: Which authors do you regard as your influences?

Phyllis Gotlieb, Tanith Lee, Diane Duane, Janet Kagan, Barbara Hambly, Jayge Carr, F.M. Busby, Andre Norton. I started reading SF/F in the 70s, when I was growing up.

John Grayshaw: How did you come up with the Murderbot series? Did you know it would be a series? Did you have any idea it would be so successful?

I didn't originally conceive of it as a series. Originally, I thought it would be a short story, and once I started working on it, I realized it needed to be longer and that a novella would be a better length for it. When I finished All Systems Red and it sold to Tor.com, they asked for a second novella and I decided to write a sequel. By the time I finished Artificial Condition, I'd developed a story arc for the character and wanted to continue it in more novellas. I hoped people would like the story, but I had no idea it would be successful. I write the stories I want to write, I don't really think about how they'll be received by an audience.

Anastasia Hilvers/Kaye Cochran/Jedidiah Ragweed/John DeLaughter: Murderbot has a unique personality, how did you arrive at the mix of characteristics? Were there actual people whose traits you incorporated? Some people see autism spectrum traits to Murderbot was that intended? And did you envision a gender for Murderbot?

No, the character isn't based on other people. I drew from a lot of my own experiences, my own anger and frustration and social anxiety. I didn't intend for Murderbot to have autism spectrum traits, but again, I'm drawing from my own experience. Murderbot is pretty clear about its gender in the books.

Blaine Savini: How and to what extent did the addiction of Murderbot to videos allow it to escape its initial programming?

Murderbot wasn't able to access any videos until after it hacked its governor module. Murderbot talks pretty extensively about the effect media has on it in the series, that watching Sanctuary Moon allowed it to put its own feelings in context. It didn't really have to overcome any programming so much as it did its own fears (from a lifetime of abuse) and inertia.

Trey Palmer: So, what further adventures do you have in mind for Murderbot? Or any other writing projects you might be working on?

Right now, there's one more novella scheduled for April 2021, which is called Fugitive Telemetry, and it takes place between Exit Strategy and Network Effect. At the moment, I'm working on fantasy again and I don't know if I'll be doing more Murderbot.