

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Peter Watts (September 2020)

Peter Watts' novel Blindsight (Firefall series), released in October 2006, was nominated for a Hugo Award. Echopraxia (2014) is a "sidequel" about events happening on Earth and elsewhere concurrent with the events in Blindsight. Watts other series include the Rifters trilogy and the Sunflower cycle. Watts earned a Ph.D from the University of British Columbia in 1991, from the Department of Zoology and Resource Ecology. He went on to hold several academic research and teaching positions, and worked as a marine-mammal biologist.

Molly Greenspring: You are often called a hard science fiction writer, what is hard science fiction to you? And who do you think are the best writers in this genre?

Honestly, I don't know if the term "Hard SF" is especially meaningful. At best it may be a sliding scale, more reflective of the reader's background than the author's rigor. Larry Niven is regarded pretty universally as a "hard-SF" writer (and as a former biologist I confess to really liking his aliens), but he writes stories where genes code for luck and our species descended from aliens. Any first-year biology student knows that's outright fantasy, utterly inconsistent with everything we knew about biology even back in the sixties and seventies when he was writing this stuff. By the same token you could describe as "fantasy" any novel involving FTL. How many "Hard-SF" novels would that disqualify?

Or look at my stuff. *Maelstrom* spends something like a page and a half detailing how an inimical microbe exploits pinocytosis to get into our cells by subverting the signal molecules on the cytoplasmic side of the cell membrane so that the vesicles don't fuse with the lysosomes. You might find that incredibly hard (in both senses of the word); most people do. A microbiology professor would still regard it as fantasy (I can say this with confidence, having consulted with one while writing the novel).

So I think it all comes down to the expertise of the reader. A high-schooler would probably regard Niven as a "hard-sf writer", but an undergrad would roll their eyes. I write "Hard SF" to people who made it into grad school; higher than that, maybe not so much.

As to who I'd regard as current best-in-field—I don't think I'm qualified to answer that question, because I've been so pathetically inept at keeping up. (That's one of the things that pisses me off about being a full-time author, by the way; back when I was just a fan I could blow through a few books a week just for pleasure. Now, it's a rare day when I get to read a novel that someone hasn't pushed under my nose in search of a blurb.) I know all the same names you do: Alistair Reynolds, Greg Egan, Catherine Asaro, Neal Stephenson. (Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Forward and Hal Clement if you want to include dead people.) I get the sense that Egan is the hardest of the hard, but I've only read a couple of stories by the man. I've read more by Reynolds, and really liked it; but is it better than Asaro, who's actually published scientific papers based on the ideas in her stories? I can't say. I have two of her novels, yet unread because of time constraints.

If you held a gun to my head and forced me to choose among those whose works I *am* reasonably familiar with, I'd have to go with Ted Chiang. He's never written a novel—and even his short story production tops out at less than one per year—but the man does his research, and when he plays with a concept he pushes it to rigorous and logical limits. And bonus points, especially in the Hard-SF end of the pool; in terms of sheer prose style, the man can write.

Molly Greenspring: You were part making the game *Crysis 2* how did you become part of that? And how does working on games differ from writing books?

One of the designers reached out to me; they liked my stuff, would I be interested in doing a game script for them? The catch was that they'd already built a bunch of mission levels, and those were carved in stone; so whatever story I told had to include those elements. Okay, said I, because the game industry pays *way* better than the publishing industry, plus they fly you around Business Class.

What I didn't know at the time was that EA—who was distributing Crytek's game—was worried that the project was falling behind schedule, so *they* had reached out to a different and far more famous author (Richard Morgan—you may have heard of him) to do the same gig. (Richard and I kind of knew each other via email, as fans of each other's work, but we had not met in the flesh). EA had worked with Richard before; they didn't know crap about me. So while I did some consulting on the techy aspects of the game (how the nanosuit worked, that sort of thing), Richard was the one who ultimately did the script. I ended up doing the novelization.

Legion remains a kind of not-so-guilty pleasure of mine. On the one hand, you don't get to build the plot; not only does someone else hand the storyline to you, but the storyline keeps *changing* as the game evolves. Once you factor in all the prose I wrote that had to be discarded because the plot changed at the eleventh hour, I must have written at least a novel and a half.

On the other hand, there's a special sort of challenge in adapting a game to novel form. The two media are utterly different; elements that are essential to fun gameplay are often downright stupid when you try to rationalize them in a novel, and elements that make for a killer novel can also make a game deadly dull to play. But that can be a challenge as well as a frustration: don't just ignore the fact that your aliens go into battle with their junk hanging out, draw attention to it. Don't gloss over the fact that ancient aliens with interstellar technology can somehow be shot down by a couple of guys in a Chinook helicopter, or the physiological impossibility that someone without a functional heart somehow stays alive for the hours it takes for someone else to bolt him into the supersuit. Make it an actual plot point, make it a mystery, come up with some cool retcon that allows it all to make sense.

Although it was high-pressure and stressful at the time (I had to write a whole novel in three months), I'm quite proud of the result. It's not great literature by any means, but it stretched muscles I don't usually get a chance to use.

Molly Greenspring: How does Canadian science fiction differ from American science fiction, if it does?

I'm not sure it does any more. Certainly, back in the day, every Canadian con had a goddamn panel on the subject; and the standard bromide that got trotted out in such cases was that Canadian SF was more focused on *Man Vs. Environment* and merely hanging on by your fingernails, while 'Murrican SF was more focused on *Man vs Man* (or aliens), and tended to be more triumphal in nature. (European SF, on those rare occasions when it got mentioned at all, was regarded as more literary than both.)

That was probably true a few decades back. Certainly, back at the turn of the century my American editor told me in no uncertain terms that the ending of my first novel (in which the protagonist swims

across a few hundred kilometers of seabed only to crawl out of the ocean and die on the beach) was "too downbeat" for US audiences, and at the very least I had to leave things more "open-ended". These days, though? The borders have pretty much dissolved. I hardly ever write for the Canadian market, and I'm guessing that's true of most of my Canadian colleagues. (It's too small a market to make a living in, for one thing: in terms of population size, Canada is Arkansas.) I am, if anything, more widely published overseas than I am in North America; and anyone who still claims that there's no room for downbeat or environmentally-themed SF even in the states has not been paying attention for a very long time.

Martin Dudley: For a few years now, you appear to have considered it a high probability that a virus-driven pandemic will hit and fundamentally impact human society. How does the Coronavirus stack up compared to other viruses presented in the SF genre?

Covid is a pansy. The pathogens in most genre novels are downright apocalyptic, either wiping out most of Humanity or threatening to (King's *The Stand*, Preston's *The Cobra Event*, Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain*). Lethality of these bugs is consistently on the dramatic side of 90%. Even the engineered flu in *Counterpart* (far and away the best portrayal of a pandemic's long-term effects I've seen on television) took out a solid seven percent of the global population. Of course, nobody's going to write a thriller about the common cold; dramatic storytelling demands a high kill count.

But forget about fictitious diseases; a lot of *real world* bugs have higher mortality rates than C19. SARS and Spanish flu have about a 10% kill rate; MERS is above 30%, garden-variety bird flu over 50% (higher than smallpox). There's a nasty little virus called Nipah that's been cruising around Southeast Asia for a few years now, racking up kills from 38% to over 90%. Half of Nipah infections are transmitted directly human-to-human. Only a matter of time before it gets over here.

Anyone who really thinks that C19 has wrought any kind of real havoc has a charming, almost childlike naivete. This is *nothing* compared to what's in store.

Louisiana Galileo Ahnström: Since you write both novels and short stories, what are some of the challenges and advantages you find with each form, and which [if any] do you prefer writing and why?

Short stories give you less room to get lost in; I've written novels that I thought I had well in hand until I hit the two-thirds mark, at which point I realized that plot point A contradicted plot point C and the whole epic collapsed like a house of cards. Short stories, in contrast, are *tight*: you pretty much have to know every beat before you start, because there's no room to fuck around.

As to which I prefer, well, novels make me more money, so there's that. But generally I write to whatever length the material demands. If I want to present one cool idea with one nifty punchline, obviously short is the way to go. If I want to get down in the weeds, novel. And more than once I've used a short story as a kind of dry run for a novel, trying out characters and situations and themes to see if they'd fit into a larger structure. On rare occasions, you'll even find bits and pieces of short stories transplanted directly into my novels. Self-plagiarism is definitely a thing.

John Grayshaw: How did you become interested in marine biology?

I was maybe five, six years old. Walking home with my friend, who asked me if I wanted to stop off at his place and see his aquarium.

I didn't really know what an "aquarium" was at that point. The only aquarium I'd even been to was the Calgary Public Aquarium, and to my dumb little six-year-old brain it was awesome: this big dim blue-green grotto with big tanks built into the walls, full of sharks and sturgeons and an octopus down at the end. And here was my friend, saying he had one of those in his *basement*?

Fucking right I wanted to *see his aquarium* (although of course, having spent my whole life in a god-fearing Baptist house I expressed enthusiasm in somewhat less-profane terms back then).

So my friend took me downstairs and showed me this pathetic ten-gallon tank full of guppies and swordtails and a couple of mollies. And a weird thing happened: instead of experiencing the crushing disappointment you might have expected, my excitement at the Grand Concept kind of locked on to the Modest Reality: *Hey, anyone can own an Aquarium! I can own an aquarium!*

From that moment on I was entranced with the underwater world. Discovering Jacques Cousteau and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* a couple of years later only cemented the deal (and for bonus points, TTLutS also turned me into an aspiring science fiction writer).

John Grayshaw: How did you make the transition between scientist and novelist?

I wanted to be a marine biologist since I was five or six; I wanted to write SF since I was seven or eight (when I heard the soundtrack album for Disney's adaptation of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* on the radio one Sunday morning). Those aspirations basically swapped back and forth for first place right into adulthood; educationally I concentrated on science because there were plenty of SF writers without writing degrees, but not so many marine biologists without science degrees. I started getting very kind, encouraging rejections while I was still in high school, but that was *all* I got until I sold my first story in 1990 to a little dick-ass Canadian anthology that no one's ever heard of. (In fact, during that time my "kind, encouraging rejections" from Analog got progressively shorter and terser, culminating with my first form rejection-slip from those guys around '89 or so. Which suggested that my writing was actually getting worse the more I practiced.)

By the early nineties I had run out of degrees to get and was working my way through a post-doc. I still had only sold a small handful of stories to tiny Canadian markets. But then I started working at a marine mammal research consortium based out of UBC; its stated purpose was to research the catastrophic decline of the North Pacific sealion population, but the catch was it got almost all of its funding from the US commercial fishing industry (which, by a curious coincidence, had started hoovering up all the fish in the affected area just before the decline had begun). As you can imagine, there was a certain conflict of interest inherent in that arrangement. I put up with the political bullshit for a little over a year before I gave up in disgust. At that point I had maybe eight months of unemployment benefits and no job, so I figured I might as well dive into that first novel I'd been wanting to write all these years.

That novel was *Starfish*. The rest is history.

John Grayshaw: Your science fiction has a close relationship with current science. How is the relationship between the two fields?

Fragile. The more rigorous my scientific research, the faster the resulting story staledates. I'll read something in the tech lit, extrapolate forward a few steps, plant that extrapolation in a story set in 2050—only to have something like it happen the year after the book comes out.

That's why I ended up putting O'Neil cylinders and routine interplanetary travel in *Blindsight*, which is set a mere sixty years from now. It seems wildly optimistic to imagine that a ship as advanced as *Theseus* might be cruising around the neighborhood so soon—but so many things in my Rifters books happened so much sooner than I expected, I figured I'd really compress the envelope for once. Maybe that might reset the schedule to be a bit more in-line with real-world events.

'Course, the way things are going now, we not only won't have *Theseus* by 2082, we probably won't even have a functioning technological civilization over much of the planet. Our population will be down to less than a billion, huddled around hydroelectric facilities that continue to provide some kind of consistent power; and the rest of the place will either be underwater or on fire.

John Grayshaw: Is it becoming harder to write Science Fiction because of change happening more quickly?

See previous answer. It's certainly harder to write *near-future* SF; you can rejig a story to account for Covid, but when equine encephalitis hits us in a couple of months you're gonna have to go back and do it all over again. Likewise when civil war breaks out openly in the US, and that benighted country burns to the ground. In this regard I've fared better than most; plagues and firestorms and hypermilitarized urban pacification have been part of the backdrop for pretty much every novel I've ever written (*Maelstrom* came out in 2001 and has aged pretty well, if you ask me). But even I've been consistently surprised at how much sooner-than-expected all this stuff happened.

On a tangential note, the BUG and I were watching Netflix the other night, watching all these shows that had been filmed before Covid but were only being released now, and were in fact *set* in the now: and we were struck by the realization that every one of these shows is now set in a parallel timeline that we will never experience.

Judy Badger: Could you expand on the condition of the main character of “Blindsight,” Siri, his role in the mission, and why you chose him as the book's narrator?

Siri Keeton is basically the government spying on its own scientists; someone tasked with observing what very smart people are doing, and then dumbing it down so the morons with all the power might be able to halfways understand it. He's a convenient narrative device insofar as your typical reader of SF in the early twenty-first century is bound to be a moron compared to the bleeding-edge savants who populate the novel, so readers wouldn't be able to understand the story if it was told from the POV of

anyone else. (For an example of what happens when you *don't* employ a narrator skilled in such translation, see *Echopraxia*.)

Of course, the fact that Siri can convey things clearly doesn't necessarily mean that he's conveying them *accurately*. For someone who keeps harping on his own objectivity, he's a surprisingly unreliable narrator.

Mike Irving: I'm a tremendous fan of your Firefall series. You show a great deal of trust in your readers by telling the story in a world that's wildly different from our own without a great deal of exposition. Was it a conscious decision to just drop your readers into a reality where there are vampires in space and people are genetically modified to fit their jobs, or did it happen organically as the story developed?

Neither, really. I grew up reading the usual self-help articles on How To Write Good, so *Show Don't Tell* was hammered into me from an early age. (It also helped to read a lot of turgid, badly-written SF full of expository infodumps; I came away from those books thinking *Well that's a road I don't want to go down...*)

On the other hand, Gibson managed to avoid infodumps in *Neuromancer* and it worked really well. Delany not only dropped you into the world of *Dahlgren* without explanation, but even after you'd read the whole damn book you still had no idea what was going on. I really liked those books; I took my lead from them. So "dropping the readers into the book's reality" was the obvious way to go.

But. That doesn't mean that my *intention* was to leave the reader floundering and confused. It's true I don't like to talk down to my readers, but that doesn't mean I want to make them suffer; it only means I'm treating them as reasonably smart people who don't need extra hand-holding. My intent is always to make my worldbuilding as clear and easy to understand as if I'd infodumped all over the place, *without* having infodumped all over the place. I try to slip the worldbuilding in around the edges, so the reader becomes familiar with the world without having to make a huge conscious effort.

Obviously, I don't always succeed along either of those axes. *Echopraxia* contains some pretty clunky infodumps, and I see complaints along the lines of *I never really understood what was going on or I had to read the same paragraph three times before I figured it out* leveled at any number of stories I've written. But that's not because I'm trying to be opaque; it's because I've failed to be stylish and transparent at the same time.

I like to think I'm a pretty good prose stylist, by the standards of the genre. But I've obviously still got a lot to learn.

John Grayshaw: One of Blindsight's main focuses is the subjects of consciousness and intelligence. The alien shows the signs of intelligence without being conscious. What made you arrive at that conclusion?

An admission of failure.

I started writing *Blindsight* thinking that I'd come up with some radical new spin on the purpose of consciousness, which would serve as the novel's thematic punchline. But the more I wrote, and the more I researched, the further away that punchline seemed to get. (Every time I invented or read some proposed function for consciousness, I would ask myself: Is it possible to imagine a nonconscious system performing the same function? And the answer kept being *yes*.) Finally, with deadlines looming, I had to admit that I couldn't think of *any* use for phenomenal consciousness that couldn't be done better by nonconscious agents. I had utterly failed in my goal.

Then it occurred to me that that very conclusion—that Consciousness serves no useful purpose, that the very thing we think makes us special might actually be maladaptive—was actually a more powerful, kick-in-the-gut punchline than any handwavy alternative might have been. So that's what I went with.

At the time I thought it was just a very cool punchline for a science-fiction potboiler. I was as surprised as anyone when actual neuroscientists started suggesting the same thing.

John Grayshaw: Was making *Blindsight* available for free a good idea? Did you lose money on it or did you gain it back in some other way?

My belief is that making *Blindsight* available under a Creative Commons license probably saved my career as a writer.

My previous novel had tanked. Tor had already signed the contract that forced them to publish my next, but in the wake of *Behemoth* they obviously weren't expecting much (for one thing, one of the two North American distributors had chosen not to preorder any copies of *Blindsight* at all, which meant it would be virtually invisible in bookstores). So they basically wrote it off as DOA before it even made it to the starting gate. Cheaped out on the cover art. Minimized the promotion. Tiny print run.

When *Blindsight* was released and, against all expectation, started raking in rave reviews, there simply wasn't enough stock available to meet demand; and for reasons that I can only guess at, Tor really dragged their feet about doing a second printing. There were genre bookstores that listed *Blindsight* as their local #1 bestseller several weeks in a row, based entirely on back orders because they had no physical stock on hand.

I waited for Tor to order a second printing. I waited while they moved the goalposts that would trigger such a printing on three separate occasions; and at that point I saw only a choice between *Blindsight* tanking commercially with no readers, vs *Blindsight* tanking commercially with as many readers as could download a free copy. I did not foresee a scenario in which I gave *Blindsight* away for free and it still made money; as far as I could see, my career as an author was toast. This was my Last Hurrah.

What I wasn't expecting was that Cory Doctorow, the Grand Archduke of CC Releases, would go onto beingboing and tell everyone I was giving my book away. I did not expect the wife of my editor to build a banner ad for *Blindsight*, free of charge, on her high-profile website. I didn't expect superstars like Scalzi to weigh in a boost the signal. All of a sudden people who'd never heard of me before suddenly knew I was giving my latest novel away online, and people who *did* know who I was but hadn't been able to get a copy of *Blindsight* had an alternative. It wasn't that everyone wanted to read *Blindsight* but didn't

want to pay for it; it's that one day nobody had heard of *Blindsight*, and the next day everybody had. Hardcover sales tripled the next week.

Since then the novel has been repeatedly translated, won a bunch of awards internationally (none in North America, curiously; it got nominated for all the major genre awards on this continent and won exactly zero of them), and been through a gajillion printings. It's come out in special boutique collectors editions with interior drawings and little red ribbon bookmarks embedded in the spine, like Bibles. Tor even reissued it this year in a new "Tor Essentials" edition, with cover art that's even more incoherent than the last one. Even Patrick Neilson-Hayden at Tor has publicly admitted that *Blindsight* was tanking until I broke my contact and gave it away for free (although he still won't answer my emails).

For several years now, on and off, Tor has tried to get me to take down the free version from my website. They've even offered to increase my e-royalties on that title all the way up to industry standard (they're significantly below that now).

So far, I've told them to get stuffed.

Martin Dudley: Do you have any update on the third "Firefall" book, "Omniscience"? Are you still motivated to write it, or have you lost the inclination? Would you consider a crowdfunding, or other non-conventional approach? What place do such approaches have in today's changing publishing industry?

I'm still motivated to write it, and I still work on it around the edges of my other projects. I very much want to finish the story begun in *Blindsight* and *Echopraxia*. But who would publish it? My editor at Tor is dead, and while I'm contractually obligated to give Tor right-of-refusal on my next novel (and they're contractually obligated to respond within a month), my past experiences with those guys have not left the sweetest taste in my mouth. I'd certainly publish with them again if they'd have me, but only under conditions that I doubt they'd agree to. And who else is going to buy the third volume of a trilogy whose first two volumes are owned by a competitor? (Actually, now that I think of it, there *is* a publisher in the UK who has also published both *Blindsight* and *Echopraxia*. I like them. We like each other. Maybe that's a potential solution.)

Self-pub is certainly an option I'd consider—it certainly hasn't hurt people like Andrew Weir or Hugh Howey—but I haven't explored it enough to develop an informed opinion on the subject. I do think the traditional author-agent-publisher model may be creaking towards collapse, though.

John Grayshaw: So, what happened at the border crossing in 2009?... COVID-19 aside, are you still not allowed in the United States?

That story was reported all over the place back when it happened, and the sordid details—the attempts to manipulate evidence, the perjury of the guards themselves, very-favorable post-sentencing report signed by one official followed by a recommendation for maximum jail time signed by someone else who no one had ever heard of, *et cetera, ad nauseum*—not to mention the prolonged police harassment of a juror who spoke out on my behalf—are too arcane to go into here.

Suffice to say: I asked what was going on during the course of an exit-border search that violated the Patrol's own stated protocols. Also, during the brief time between being punched in the face and being maced, I asked what the problem was instead of immediately getting on the ground.

In the US, these are felony offenses.

I am still not allowed into the US. As of 2015 I was eligible to apply for reentry, and I even undertook that process when a potential miniseries deal would have necessitated by travel to Los Angeles. But part of the process involved writing a "Letter of Remorse", which was an exercise I was (and remain) unwilling to undertake in the spirit demanded. So I remain banned.

Honestly, though, I have no great desire to re-enter the US anyway. I can watch it burn quite comfortably from up here.

John Grayshaw: How did you come up the Rifter series in which deep-ocean workers are physically altered for underwater living?

That literally came to me in a dream: a vision of a white-eyed mermaid floating above the seabed in a pitch-black ocean. I was still in grad school, still soaking up marine biology like a sponge; so it was pretty easy to take that vision and retcon it with sciencey rationales. I even wrote a story around the premise and sent it off, but it never went anywhere.

A year or so later I got involved with a woman with pale, icy-blue eyes and some serious emotional issues. Suddenly I had a person to fit inside the skin. Everything grew from there.

John Grayshaw: How did you come up with the idea for the Sunflower Cycle in which the Eriophora, a converted asteroid that travels around the galaxy building wormhole jump-gates over millions of years?

I guess I just read/watched one too many books/TV shows premised on the existence of vast networks of interstellar stargates, conveniently left behind by "The Ancients" or "The Progenitors" or whatever name got cooked up by writers too lazy to think of an original way of getting around the lightspeed barrier. The original builders had, of course, always disappeared millions of years before we discovered their handiwork, leaving us their wonderful superhighway network to skip merrily around the universe to our heart's delight.

Nobody seemed to care about the poor bastards who'd built the gates in the first place, though. *They* didn't have the benefit of any conveniently-extinct Ancients to help them along; they had to crawl around the galaxy at sublight speeds, building one painstaking gate at a time. So I figured someone should probably tell their story.

Robin Ellervino: Are you going to write a follow up to The Freeze-Frame Revolution? (please?)

Actually, I'm working on a story set in that universe right now. *FFR* is but one episode in a story arc that spans billions of years; so far I've only completed three other installments of that epic, but I see myself writing the damn thing for years around the edges of my other projects.

If the right offer comes along, I could even see myself buckling down and focusing exclusively on Sunflowers stories for a while, doing a whole series of doorstep books. Some (including my former agent) have encouraged me to go that route. But so far, the right offer has not come along. My ambitions for that project are pretty specific, and I doubt your average publisher would be willing to get on board.

John Grayshaw: Where is the line between an optimized human and a transhuman? And is transhuman something to strive for or to be fearful of reaching by accident?

It's not something I've expended a lot of thought on (I find the definitions a bit too vague to be useful), but I'd describe an "optimized human" as something we might all aspire to be: immortal, invulnerable, super-smart—basically, Clark Kent without the cape—but still adhering to the conventional human norm. We might be smarter than other humans, but we would still think like them. They would still find us sexy. Basically, everything we already have cranked up to eleven.

"Transhuman" strikes me as an essentially meaningless term, roughly equivalent to "missing link" in evolutionary discussions (you'll never find a "missing link" that satisfies creationist demands, because the moment you point to an intermediate B between A and C in the fossil record, they'll just reframe their demand to insist on an intermediate between A and B). Presumably "trans" means you're in the process of changing from one state to another; that would include everything from hearing aids to personality uploads. Where, on a smooth exponential curve, is "trans"?

"Posthuman" makes a bit more sense; I would define that as something so far past Human—cognitively, physically—that baselines would not aspire to the state. We all want to be Superman; how many of us want to be a giant superintelligent banana-slug with ten eyes who happens to not even have an individual identity because it's just one node in a hive mind? Posthuman means, by definition, not Human any more; and as I've suggested in my fiction, how does the brain stem distinguish between *turning into something else* and *dying*? Is there a difference? If you retain your human personality, your human perspectives, you're not "post" anything; you're just a human in SciFi Tupperware.

John Grayshaw: So, in 2011 when you had necrotizing fasciitis in your leg did you get an upgrade to cyborg parts? ;)

I did ask if I could embed some old RAM chips and motherboard fragments—maybe some clockwork gears—into the plastic that stretched over the wound during my convalescence. Purely for cosmetic purposes, you understand. But they wouldn't go for it.

I did have a device that hung on my chest, connected by a tube to the wound. A medical vacuum pump that sucked gore out of the injury 24/7 and dropped it into a clear plastic canister, almost as though it was making chunky tomato soup. Perhaps that would do.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite science fiction writers? And why?

This answer is going to be incomplete and inadequate; I have two big bookcases, each over two meters high, jammed full of books I have bought and want to read and just haven't got around to yet. (Let me emphasize once again that I am chronically pissed off by the fact that since becoming a full-time writer, I've had less and less time to read for pleasure.) But for what it's worth, there's no end to writers I admire (among my contemporaries I'd name China Miéville, Ted Chiang, and Lavie Tidhar just off the top of my head, none of whom I've read as much as I want to).

Those who influenced my own work, though, is that smaller subset I consciously tried to emulate while I was finding my own voice. First among equals has to be John Brunner: for the almost unimaginable amount of research that informed his books, for the seething rage at human stupidity underlying his best work, for the maturity of the realpolitick that informed his futures. For the snarling prose. *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up* literally altered the course of my life.

Ray Bradbury, Samuel Delany, Robert Silverberg (listed alphabetically, because it's impossible for me to choose one over another) for their gorgeous prose. William Gibson— his earlier stuff, at least— for fusing that same high level of stylistic accomplishment with hi-res Brunneresque worldbuilding. (Not that Brunner's own prose style left anything to be desired, mind you.)

John Grayshaw: Are you friends with any other science fiction writers? Please tell us about those relationships?

I am friends with a number of other SF writers (and if you broaden the genre constraints to include fantasy, I am even married to one). I am hostile to a few others. But seriously, dude: you want me to detail my personal relationships with a couple dozen people?

Next.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them? Or have you gotten any interesting reader feedback from your works in general?

Depends on where: I generally love overseas cons; new places, new faces, a whole different way of doing things. I've grown bored of Canadian ones; and I haven't been allowed into the US for so long I can no longer judge those ones. Of course, I haven't actually *been* to any cons anywhere for some time now; I was supposed to go to Russia last month but Covid had other plans.

I have fun stories, I have horror stories. But I'm already closing on seven thousand words in this Q&A and we're talking a whole new novelette if I shared them here.

Reader feedback. It's been pretty amazing. Ongoing arguments and discussions about the finer points of my novels; people whose choice of profession has been inspired by my work; one or two times I apparently even saved someone from suicide without knowing it. I've received some amazing fan gifts, too: a massive metal scale-model of Theseus (which doubles as a reading lamp) and a life-size plush Scrambler are two of my favorite things in the world.

Of course, there are also people who write just to tell me how absolutely *awful* they thought my last novel was, or to tell me I'm a racist because they went through all the names of my characters and too many of them sounded white. Not many, thankfully. And you gotta take the good with the bad.

John Grayshaw: Which one of your works is your personal favorite and why?

Tough one. *Starfish* is the novel I was happiest with when I sent it off. *Blindsight* is the book that made people sit up and take notice. Maybe though, if I had to choose, "The Things" would win by a hair, because it accomplishes the greatest number of things per unit prose. It's fanfic. It's a retcon. It's an exploration of an alternate, Lamarckian form of biology. It reframes its inspiration in an entirely new light. *And* it serves as a kind of allegory for the missionary/colonialist mindset.

John Grayshaw: Are there any TV or movie deals in the works for any of your novels or stories?

At the moment I don't actually know. The *Blindopraxia* works have been optioned, but not by a studio: rather, by a company that wants to pitch them to a studio (a so-called "shopping deal"). But I've heard no news on that front since the cheque cleared in January.

There's also been some recent interest in adapting a short story or two, but the last I heard on that was *We'll come back with an offer when our ducks are in a row* and then Covid happened. Who knows if those guys even exist any more.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies other than writing?

"Hobbies" is a blurry sort of word. I used to scuba dive, but it must be ten years or more since I strapped on a tank. I run, I work out, but I hate doing that; I stay fit because I don't want to get plump, and because I fear for my chances a few years down the road if I'm out of shape when the Collapse comes down (of course, at my age, sheer geriatric decrepitude is probably going to make any strength training pointless before long anyway). I think the point of hobbies is that you enjoy them, right? So working out wouldn't qualify in my case.

A lot of people list "reading" as a hobby. For me, though, it's research; even on those (rare) occasions when I read purely for pleasure, my author's eye can't stop looking for little narrative tricks and turns of phrase and *I see what she did theres*.

Video games. I don't play a lot of them, but the ones I do play I lose myself in (which is one reason I limit that indulgence; if I gamed as much as I wanted to I'd probably never do anything else.) *Half-Life: Alyx* and *The Last of Us 2* are a couple of recent favorites. But again, I've been gigging for the video game

industry on and off for twenty years now; it's hard to play one of those games without indulging in some element of research.

The house is chock full of companion critters: fish, cats, a pugilistic rabbit, my stepdaughter's bearded dragon. Whatever rodents my other stepdaughter brings back from Montreal when she's home. Maybe that would do.

Otherwise you'll have to settle for bingeing Netflix and grabbing pirated content off bittorrent. We do a *lot* of that here.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick to?

I do have a routine. I never stick to it.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

A very strange story, set ten or fifteen years in the future, about an actual real-world architect. For inclusion into a big glossy (nonfiction) coffee-table retrospective on said architect's actual life and work. (Turns out the guy's a fan. He approached me.) Also I'm finally finishing "Hitchhiker", the Sunflowers story whose first half served as bonus online content if you deciphered the hidden message in *Freeze-Frame*. Also a non-novel-related project that I don't think I'm allowed to talk about.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

Wait, what? You're saying there's a future?