

**Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Stephen W. Potts (December 2020)**

Stephen W. Potts wrote The Second Marxian Invasion: The Fiction of the Strugatsky Brothers (winner of the J. Lloyd Eaton Award for Science Fiction Criticism). Until 2017 he taught in the Department of Literature at the University of California at San Diego, specializing in twentieth-century fiction and popular culture. Since retiring he has worked as an editor on publishing projects with science fiction author David Brin.

Bill Rogers: Has more been written about the Wanderers in addition to the mentions in the Noon Universe stories (other stories, essays, notes, etc.)? Ditto Leonid Gorbovsky (my favorite character of the Strugatskys', with the possible exception of Maxim Kammerer)?

For more on the Wanderers you would probably have to learn Russian. I recall allusions to them from Russian fans, and the post-Strugatsky novella "Vacations in Space" by Kir Bulychov references them. Gorbovsky's presence is one of the elements that defines the Noon Universe, so you wouldn't find him outside of it. However, one work on the margin is "Disquiet," which includes Gorbovsky in a story reminiscent of *Snail on the Slope*.

Eva Sable: I've only read Roadside Picnic, but I couldn't help noticing the pro-Soviet tone, especially in the scene of the visit to the decadent hotel. Was this part of their writing style, or was it in there perhaps to get something slyly critical in a later chapter past the censors? And does this sort of writing show up in other of their works?

The Strugatskys' relationship to Soviet orthodoxy is complicated (see other answers below). Especially early in their writing career, they made little distinction between Marxist idealism and liberal humanism, and they maintained that linkage in interviews even though it is not so obvious in their later work. In *Roadside Picnic*, the only one of their stories set explicitly in the West, they implicitly criticize the short-sighted, dog-eat-dog environment surrounding the Zone, where personal aggrandizement and the misuse of science go hand in hand, with all the demeaning and morally debilitating results we see by the conclusion. It is harder to identify anything specifically pro- or anti-Soviet here, and this novel was less controversial than others depicting decadent societies, like *The Final Circle of Paradise* or *Prisoners of Power*.

David Merrill: We've had recent new translations of Hard To Be A God, The Snail on The Slope and Prisoners Of Power (The Inhabited Island). Do you know if there are plans for new translations of the rest of The Noon Universe books?

I don't know. I welcome the relatively recent translations by the Chicago Review Press, but unfortunately the Strugatskys don't have as large a readership in the U.S. as they deserve. Only twice in my long teaching career was I able to order copies of a Strugatsky novel for class, and then only *Roadside Picnic*. Under American capitalism, sales drive publication, and Russian science fiction has always been a small niche market—mainly dominated by academics and other xenophiles. It's more likely new translations would come from European sources.

David Merrill: I'm often looking for autographed books by my favorite writers. I don't often see signed books by one of the brothers, let alone both. Did they do signings in Russia? Was that a thing? Or is this something they didn't do much of?

We tend to generate autographs at fan conventions and bookstore events, neither of which were common in the USSR. Nevertheless, considering the size of their Russian fan base, there are probably some autographed books floating around that part of the world. Signed copies are hard to come by in the West. Note that Arkady died just as the Soviet Union fell, and it was rare for the brothers to leave their country before that. An online search will identify some autographs on their novels in English, though the only ones I've seen are from U.K. publishers. An efficient dealer in rare books might be able to find you one, if you can afford it.

David Merrill: One of the things I think is unclear to a lot of people outside of the Strugatsky's native country is the degree to which they criticized the Soviet government in their work. I know when the Bantam edition of *The Snail On The Slope* came out it was recalled because they objected to the back cover blurb that described them as being in disfavor with the Soviet government. Were they working actively against Communism or the government or were they just critical of the government with the idea of improving it? I guess I'm not even sure how to ask this question because I'm sure this changed over time. I think a lot of us in the US might assume they might have been involved in something like a Science Fiction dissident underground, but I suspect what was really going on was more subtle than that. I guess I'm trying to get a handle on how they viewed themselves and how they were viewed by the government and their readers. What's your take on this?

A good, long question that deserves a good, long answer. The Strugatsky brothers never saw themselves as dissidents, although they ended up treated as such by some on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Their writing career commenced during the so-called "Thaw": Khrushchev's de-Stalinization of Soviet government and culture circa 1960. Khrushchev oversaw a relative, if incomplete, liberalization of Soviet society while preaching utopian hopes for the economic and scientific development of the USSR. The early firsts of the Russian space program—Sputnik and the flight of Gagarin—led Russians to believe these promises could be kept.

This was the background for the first stories in their Noon Universe, which openly celebrate the triumph of utopian communism. They could arguably be classed among the forward-looking intellectuals and writers known as the *shestdesyatniki*—best translated as "the Sixties generation."

Unfortunately, the Strugatskys were just hitting their stride with their most popular books, *Hard to Be a God* and *Monday Begins on Saturday*, when Khrushchev was toppled and replaced by Brezhnev. The new regime meant an end to liberalization and utopian promises. Among the cultural institutions to suffer was publishing, especially science fiction. Because the Soviets treated literature as an arm of education, it was supervised by official organizations like the Writers' Union. Under Brezhnev, there was a renewed emphasis on orthodoxy. This was inconsistently applied, however, leading to excessive caution and conservatism and a lot of ideological hairsplitting.

Criticism of the Strugatskys began with the 1965 publication of *Predatory Things of Our Time* (which we know as *The Final Circle of Paradise*). I needn't go into the details; they concern quibbles over whether the decadent society depicted comports with current interpretations of communist theory. Similar complaints were leveled at subsequent novels, especially those that also depicted dystopian societies like *Prisoners of Power (Inhabited Island)*. After its publication in 1969, they started having problems getting into print—again, through a bureaucratic excess of caution more than anything else. In the same year, however, they were the first science fiction authors to be admitted to the Writers' Union.

In the early 1970s all Russian science fiction took a hit—both for economic and ideological reasons. Given the critical controversies, some of it actually motivated by jealousy or differences over the orientation of science fiction, the Strugatskys were regarded for a time as all but unpublishable. Yet they continued to have their supporters; the official *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* praised them for their humanism and optimism, passing off the critical attacks as mere “polemics.” Ironically, it was in this decade that the Strugatskys were discovered by the West, and their status as Soviet authors under pressure—perhaps even dissidents—became a selling point in the U.S. While this considerably broadened their readership and their foreign royalties, it did not help their case in the Soviet Union, leading to their withdrawal of the Bantam edition of *Snail on the Slope*.

Still—the Strugatskys remained engaged in Soviet science fiction and publishing, even if on the margins. Arkady helped edit a series of volumes of Russian speculative fiction, although the work of the Strugatskys was not included. They collaborated with Andrei Tarkovsky on *Stalker*, released in 1979. In the 1980s they continued to be voted the most popular science fiction authors by Russian fans. Pressure eased under Gorbachev and *glasnost*, but by then Arkady was ill and blamed some of his condition on struggles with the publishing establishment. Ironically, as the situation for writers like them improved, their output declined. With like irony, their best fiction was written during the Brezhnev era, when they were under the most stress.

Molly Smith: How much influence did non Russia writers have on their style? Is their writing style mainly Russian or cross-cultural?

Russian science fiction has its own long tradition going back to the nineteenth century. After the Revolution, Lenin himself encouraged science fiction as a means for introducing Russians to the notion of social and technological progress. Early in the Soviet era readers had access to western writers, especially those with known socialist sympathies like H. G. Wells and Jack London (for his utopian/dystopian fiction, not the adventure tales he is known for in his native U.S.). During the Thaw, a number of western sf authors appeared in Russian translation, the most popular of which were Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, and his fellow satirist Robert Sheckley. The Strugatskys may well have been familiar with these authors, but they had plenty of Russian models to rely on.

Molly Smith: There are science fiction writers who write in a style that has a pro-socialist/communist ideas in it, could this be said to be a genre of science fiction and how do Stugatsky bother fit into this?

One can point to a number of classic Russian science fiction novels that engage with socialism/communism, from Zamyatin’s *We* (by a revolutionary who opposed Leninism) to Leo Tolstoy’s *Aelita*, which sets class warfare on a Burroughsian Mars. While there were a few other sf writers of the Strugatskys’ generation who took utopian communist futures for granted—e.g., Ivan Efremov, Sergei Snegov—most avoided political themes, favoring stories of space exploration, time travel, robots, and technological advances or dangers.

Molly Smith: How popular was their writing and science fiction within the Soviet Union during their lives?

See above. Soviet science fiction in general had its ups and downs during the Strugatskys’ career, as did they. But they remained—and probably remain to this day—the most popular science fiction writers in Russia.

Andrzej Wieckowski: What are the themes that feature in Soviet/ Communist East European SF, and how do they differ from themes in Western SF?

I've mostly answered this already. Much Soviet sf of the Sixties resembled Western sf of the time— dealing with space, time, technology—in part because during the Thaw more western sf was available in Russia. If the Strugatskys were among the few Soviet writers of their time who touched on political themes, this was slightly more common in Soviet bloc sf outside of Russia. Czech author Gerd Maximovič, for example, produced a couple of stories that explicitly criticize capitalism. “The Tattooed Man” is a variation on “The Illustrated Man” in which the title character sells off every inch of his body to be tattooed with ads. In “The Investigation of the Omega-Planet,” the spacer protagonist discovers the last pathetic survivor of a society that operated on extreme social Darwinistic principles.

Of course, the best known Eastern European sf contemporary of the Strugatskys was Polish author Stanisław Lem. He not only studiously avoided political themes, but criticized the Strugatskys for going there.

David Brand: How did they feel about the Tarkovsky film?

They worked with Tarkovsky on the script. As Boris later wrote, producing a film script is “a history of difficult interaction between writer and director—a mighty struggle of opinions and ideas that are often incompatible.” Of their collaboration, he added, “Andrei Tarkovsky was cruel to us, uncompromising and damned rigid.” He reports they won few battles over creative decisions, so that the finished product was almost entirely the director's.

Ed Newsom: The golden sphere at the end of Roadside Picnic has been rolling around in my imagination for decades. Not telling the reader what it actually is was a brilliant decision, but I was wondering if either brother ever expressed thoughts about its meaning.

I seem to recall Arkady said something about it in an interview, but I can't locate it now. They did intentionally cut away from the results of Schuhart's final wish to keep the reality of the Golden Ball vague. Ultimately his is a fairy tale wish, arising from the horrible conditions the Zone has produced, including his own moral degradation. The focus at the end was the evolution of Schuhart, for better or worse.

John Grayshaw: Just in case someone has never read any books by the Strugatsky Brothers. Where should they start?

Happily, one of their best, *Roadside Picnic*, has also been longest in print in the West. I also recommend *Far Rainbow*, *Hard to Be a God*, and *Definitely Maybe* as starting points.

John Grayshaw: What makes the Strugatsky Brothers interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to their work?

Second question first: During my last year of graduate school, I produced my first published paper—on Lem's work, with a particular focus on *Solaris*. The organizer of the conference where I presented it, Professor George E. Slusser, was a specialist in French and Slavic science fiction, and he recommended the Strugatskys to me. Having grown up with science fiction's Anglo-American tradition, I was intrigued with this completely separate and historically rich tradition. And having grown up during the Cold War, I

found it eye-opening to discover what could, in fact, be published and discussed in the Soviet Union. Aside from the political aspects of their work, which have dominated much of the literary analysis, I enjoy the stylistic and thematic range of the stories—from the satirical whimsy of *Monday Begins on Saturday* to the noirish *Ugly Swans*. Ultimately, however, their commentary on the perfectibility—or not—of humankind deserves more attention.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers the Strugatsky Brothers grew up reading? Who are some writers that were the Strugatsky Brothers contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired and how did they influence their work? Who are some of the other science fiction writers they had correspondence and friendships with?

Probably the ones mentioned above in the answer about Russian and other literary influences. As for professional friendships, the history of their troubles with the Soviet publishing establishment says much about their opponents but little about their allies. They had few connections with western critics and writers, and most of these I am aware of were German.

John Grayshaw: What were some of the things they found interesting about the “Noon: Universe” that they kept returning to it?

Like many sf writers in the West (Heinlein comes to mind), they did not begin with the intention of writing a complete future history. At least at the beginning of their career, their vision of the future as a communist utopia fit the times. Once that fictive world and its characters became popular, it is not surprising that the brothers would want to use them for other stories.

However, notice that the Noon Universe evolves over the next two decades. Not only is Earth less obviously utopian in *Beetle in an Anthill* and *The Time Wanderers*, but the characters and their arcs have changed. Maxim Kammerer is no longer the superman he is in *Prisoners of Power*, capable of perceiving radiation and expelling bullets. Leonid Gorbovsky, who apparently sacrifices his life in *Far Rainbow*, dies of old age in *The Time Wanderers*. This universe was a convenience, but not a consistent one. It changed with their themes.

John Grayshaw: Did the Strugatsky Brothers have favorites of their own works?

Hard to say. The ones they most often alluded to in interviews were their most popular, like *Hard to Be a God*, or the most prominent because of cinematic or international status, like *Roadside Picnic*.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did the Strugatsky Brothers do for their books?

They occasionally fell back on their own specialties—language in the case of Arkady, astronomy in the case of Boris—but for the most part they didn’t need extraordinary research to respond to the context of their times or the speculative themes they borrowed or invented. *Monday Begins on Saturday* makes considerable use of Russian folklore, which would have been common knowledge in Russia just as familiar fairy tales are in the West. Their very funny chapter in the same novel that carries a time traveler through the history of science fiction presumes a knowledge of the genre any fan would already have.

John Grayshaw: How did the Strugatsky Brothers’ works first reach people outside of Russia? How were Theodore Sturgeon and Isaac Asimov involved?

In a happy moment of cultural exchange in the depths of the Cold War, American readers were introduced to Soviet science fiction in translation in the 1960s, soon after the Thaw introduced Russians to Anglophone sf. For marketing reasons, publishers here wanted familiar names on their covers, so well-known American authors Asimov and Sturgeon were brought on board to introduce the volumes. On my 1979 Collier edition of *Far Rainbow/The Second Invasion from Mars*, Sturgeon's name appears in amber capitals at the very top of the cover; the Strugatskys are named in smaller letters below the title. As two of the more liberal sf authors of the time, however, they get credit for lending their influence to this effort in cultural understanding.

John Grayshaw: What are some interesting anecdotes about the Strugatsky Brothers meeting their fans? Did they ever go to sci-fi conventions? Did you know the Strugatsky Brothers personally?

I never had the chance to meet either brother myself, but I can claim a couple of degrees of separation from Boris. Science fiction author Gregory Benford, who I've known for 40 years, told me he met Boris at a science fiction convention in Brighton, England, in 1987. He recalls walking on the beach with him and discussing the problems the Strugatskys had had, even though matters had lightened up under Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy. According to Greg, the brothers had applied for emigration to Israel and been refused. I found this interesting because one critic who wrote about their political troubles alleged that the rumor of their application to Israel had been falsely circulated circa 1980 to calumniate them.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of the Strugatsky Brothers? Was there anything in your research of the Strugatsky Brothers that surprised you?

The multiple versions of their publishing troubles and alleged "dissidence." When I was first researching their history, I was surprised to find out that, even as they had difficulty staying published under persistent attacks (early 70s to mid-80s), they continued to work in the genre, exercise roles in the Writers' Union and Soviet publishing establishment, and win praise in their native land. Being on the outs under Brezhnev was obviously frustrating but not consistent or terminal—not what one would expect for "dissident" intellectuals.

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

Defining "funny" broadly, probably what I just wrote. More than anything, their experience under the Brezhnev regime suggests *Catch-22*.

John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Strugatsky Brothers works in drawers or archives somewhere or is everything published? Are any of the Strugatsky Brothers works under option for movies or TV?

I haven't seen anything new in either category.

John Grayshaw: What was their writing dynamic like? How did they write together? Who wrote what? Did the Strugatsky Brothers have any particular writing habits or routines they stuck with?

From what I can gather from my reading, they sometimes got together in the same room but often worked at a distance, given their other occupations. Apparently, their collaboration worked as so many

do: taking turns with first passes, reworking each other's drafts, until a finished product met both their approvals.

John Grayshaw: What were some of the Strugatsky Brothers' hobbies other than writing?

I haven't come across anything other than their professional interests: Arkady in English and Japanese language and culture, Boris in astronomy and space.

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

I fell in love with the culture of the university at first sight, during my first semester as a freshman. I enjoyed the personal interaction of the classroom, the overall atmosphere of free inquiry, and the sense of connection with all of human cultural history--past, present, and future. I decided then I wanted to go on to get my PhD and teach, although it took a couple of years to settle on literature. I loved learning, and I enjoyed sharing my love of learning. The extroverted side of my personality embraced public speaking (I considered majoring in theater) and the "people" aspects of the profession. But after 40 years I was content to retire. As I tell others, I got tired of listening to myself, and I wanted to devote the remainder of my professional life to research, writing, and publishing.

John Grayshaw: What is the Strugatsky Brothers' legacy? Why was their work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

Much of the answer can be gleaned from my other answers. They were the best of the generation of Russian science fiction authors who arose during Khrushchev's Thaw. For both Russian and Western readers, their work uniquely demonstrates how the utopian expectations of the early Sixties devolved into the skepticism and doubt of the succeeding years. Much of their best work agonizes over humanity's poor historical record and the difficulties of perfecting society in the face of human fallibility. Although their experience was unique to the Soviet Union in its final decades, I can see parallels in the U.S., where we have come a long way from the Great Society.

Social history aside, authors like the Strugatskys and Lem introduced western readers to the great tradition of Russian and Eastern European speculative fiction, thanks in no small part to a few courageous publishers. As an academic and--I like to think--global citizen, I welcome literature from a variety of international and cultural sources. In this decade American readers have embraced the Chinese sf of Cixin Liu et al.—inviting us to understand our new potential Cold War competitor—as well as Afro-futurism, which features authors of the African Diaspora like Nalo Hopkinson.

The test of great writers is their ability to speak to their own time and to the times that follow. I believe there is enough in the work of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky to interest future readers. New editions of their stories continue to appear, and as many movies have been made from these in this century as in the previous one. Their fiction is not just historically relevant but interesting and entertaining on its own terms.