

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with James S. A. Corey (November 2020)

Under the pen name James S. A. Corey, fantasy author Daniel Abraham began to collaborate with Ty Franck (who had worked as a personal assistant to George R. R. Martin) in 2011. Together they wrote Leviathan Wakes (2011), the first science fiction novel in the series The Expanse. Leviathan Wakes was nominated for the 2012 Hugo Award for Best Novel. The authors have released 8 novels in the series and the final novel "Leviathan Falls" will be released in 2021.

The Expanse series was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Series in 2017 and won in 2020.

The series was adapted for television by the Syfy Network. The TV-series was cancelled by Syfy after three seasons, then it was acquired by Amazon and a fourth season was released. A fifth season premieres in Dec. of 2020.

Thomas Watson: How did writing come to be your form of artistic expression, instead other arts such as music, painting, photography, or film making, to name but a few? In other words, what is it about storytelling with words that motivates you?

Well, some of those are things we've played with. Daniel took a year of photography in college, and Ty's a pretty decent bass player. Storytelling, though, has a depth and an ability to create a deeply lived experience in the audience that you just can't match other places.

Jeremy Szal: Have there ever been times where either one of you disagreed about where to take the series/narrative/story/characters?

There have been a couple times when we had to have conversations about whether to kill a particular character or how to stage a particular scene, but they've been pretty much in the fine tuning of the story. We agreed when we started the project what the Expanse at heart **was** and that's been a guidestar for the whole project. We can always say "Okay, which choice makes it most like what we said it was at the front" and that usually clears things up.

Brittanie Ricciuti: If you had to live in your own stories, would you be a Belter, Martian or Earther? What is the thing you'd most look forward to as that chosen role?

Probably Earther. We already know where the good coffee shops are on Earth.

Stuart Gillespie/Seth A. Milman: Is there any character you regret killing?... And why did you have to get rid of Miller? He was the most interesting character in the series.

There are several characters we miss, but none we regret killing. And Miller had to die. He was a noir hero, and noir is all about the degradation and death of the world. If he'd lived, he'd only be hardboiled.

Anastasia Hilvers: How did you meet and decide to work together?

Ty moved to Albuquerque because his wife got into the architecture program at University of New Mexico. Daniel already lived there. We had a friend in common – Emily Mah – who got Ty into the local writing critique group. Ty wound up running a tabletop role playing game, and Daniel thought it'd make a good book.

Eva Sable/Mark Burkett/Cecilia Wacholder: How did the Expanse idea start out? Did you know at the beginning of Leviathan Wakes roughly how things were going to proceed through the series?

Leviathan Wakes was built to stand on its own. We didn't know at the time if it would be picked up, much less a whole series. But it did well enough that the publisher was interested in a longer run, so while we were writing *Caliban's War* we plotted out a whole series arc. There were a couple of versions – a 9-book run and a 12-book one. We went with 9 because there was this kind of sluggish middle part in the longer one. But we've known the end of the story since then.

Eva Sable/Arthur Maia: How do you divide up the work (As a reader, it is pretty seamless ... I can't point to a section and say, so that's the one guy and this is the other over here)? What's the secret sauce in your collaboration that keeps the two of you from despising each other?

Pretty universally, we plot out the book and outline the chapters together, then one of us will write the first draft of a chapter and the other fella will edit it. Then at the end, each of us will go through the whole manuscript making any changes we think need to be made. As far as not despising each other, the trick is to remember that it's not supposed to be what it would be if we were doing it on our own. We can do solo work for that.

Lee Ann Rael: Which older science fiction writers have influenced your work? Who are your favorite science fiction authors? Beside yourselves and George RR Martin?

The Expanse in particular has a lot of Alfred Bester DNA. That was really the project most connected to it. But all the old 70s science fiction crew – Larry Niven, Harry Harrison, Cliff Simak, Heinlein, Clarke – were what we grew up on. For purely contemporary folks, Daniel has a soft spot for Peter Watts.

Eva Sable: For fans of The Expanse, do you have suggestions of your solo works to start with?

Well, for Daniel, there are a couple of epic fantasy series – The Long Price Quartet which is weird, and The Dagger and the Coin which is closer to normal epic fantasy, but also weird. Ty's solo fiction work was a short story. You could track that down. Or get into one of his RPGs.

Kelly Broadbent/Marina Akushskaya: If I haven't read the books or watched the series which one should I start with?... If I'm a fan of the TV show should I try the books as well or will they spoil the show for me?

Either one is fine. They're retellings of the same story, but that's like saying Burton's Batman and Nolan's Batman are retellings of the same story. They have a lot in common, and a lot different. So yeah, one will spoil the other some. And there will be surprises. There really isn't a wrong answer.

Rob Morganbesser: When will the final book be out? Are you thinking of doing any prequels/Spin-offs?

2021, and no. Once this story's told, we're closing the book and moving on. Good stories end.

Margaret Shooshani: Their female characters are so independent and powerful, was that a goal when you were developing the story? Also, I've noticed some influences from Persian culture, especially in the TV series...are these from the Persian actors?

It was always an intention to kind of remake the science fiction we loved growing up with a sensibility that reeked less of 1974. Fully-realized, interesting women is part of that. It also comes pretty naturally. A lot of our friends are women. As to Persian influences in particular, we were trying to pull in as much of the world culture as we could. I don't know that we targeted Persian culture in particular, but as one among many, absolutely.

SFBC Member: Can you please get all the short fiction stories into a single volume? I can't find any of them up here in Canada.

As soon as we write the last one. Seems shitty to make a collection that isn't complete.

Marc van Iersel: How do you guys do research about the more scientific aspects of the series? Is it something you research before writing or is it something done at editing phase?

We kind of went about that backward. We didn't research much for the books. We built the books out of enthusiasms that we'd already researched. Ty had a real passion for astronomy and the bodies of the solar system. Daniel has a degree in biology. Most of what we did was grabbing information we already had and finding ways to build fiction out of it, not building fiction and then figuring out what we needed to learn for it.

Philip Cowan: Are you happy with the portrayal of your characters on the TV series?

Yup.

Imogene Moses: Have either of you read Vernor Vinge? Wondering if there were intentional nods in the series to his work.

Daniel's first editor was also Vinge's. We've totally read his work, and while there aren't any conscious nods to him, it wouldn't be at all surprising if there were some unconscious ones.

Molly Smith: Many people today feel basic income would be a good thing for the world. Yet, your books take a more critical view of basic income, was this done on purpose, if so why?

Basic in the Expanse isn't basic income. Basic income – giving money to poor people – gives the recipient autonomy and trusts them to decide what's the best use of resources. Basic in the Expanse is a basket of goods and services provided and dictated by the government. It's not a comment on basic income, but on planned economies.

Molly Smith: Do you believe science fiction could help push people into studying or working in science?

We think it demonstrably has, and that's one of its real joys. There's this virtuous circle where science fiction inspires scientists, and science inspired science fiction writers.

Molly Smith: Were you influenced by any other science fiction works that feature conflicts between Earth and Mars, plus other colonies, such as Kim Stanley Robinson and others?

Sure. The big influence was *The Stars My Destination*, but KSR's Mars trilogy is also something that we'd read. And Ben Bova's Grand tour books, and probably a hundred others. The joy of the project is that there's this vast conversation between projects. We're just adding our two cents.

SFBC Member: Will the “Dark Gods” uplift humanity?

If they did, would the end result be meaningfully human?

John Grayshaw: What made you guys write a Star Wars novel? Did you just want a fun break from the Expanse universe?

Candidly, it was both a fun diversion (“Write a Han Solo novel in the part of the Star Wars arc where he’s at his absolute most fun.”) and a way to get “*New York Times* Bestselling Author James SA Corey” on our CV. The first part worked out great. The second part, not so much. *Honor Among Thieves* didn’t hit the list, and *Abaddon’s Gate* did. Who knew?

John Grayshaw: You both serve as executive producers on the TV series. What has that work been like for you both? What are some of the unexpected challenges and rewards of working on the show?

It’s been a gift and an education. We went into the writers’ room mostly as a resource. “Yes, you can make that change, but here’s what it breaks in season 3” kind of stuff. It turned out we’re pretty good at it. Ty is a thoroughly decent on-set producer. Daniel really enjoys film editing. And getting to engage with a whole different toolbox of storytelling conventions and constraints has been great.

John Grayshaw: Has the TV series changed how you think about writing novels? Has it changed how you think of your main characters in any way?

It doesn’t really change the writing directly. We’re so far ahead in the books that the division between book and show versions of characters is really easy to maintain. What it did point up was the importance of care in the little things. Our showrunner – Naren Shankar – is one of those folks who pays attention and cares about all the steps, and watching him tweak the sound mix and the color correction and the VFX design with every step making a tiny, maybe 1%, improvement to the story, and then seeing how that adds up to really elevate the project is an argument against laziness.

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?

We enjoy them, but we don’t get to do many these days. Between the books and the show, we’ve got four jobs and two people. It’s fun hanging out with readers and writers and artists, and seeing what people are thinking and excited by.

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

That’s a hard call. Almost everything we’ve done has been part of the same project, so that’s kind of like asking which branch of the tree is the best branch. Of the short work, maybe *The Churn* or *Drive*? But we kind of like all of it, or we’d have done it differently.

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

Computer gaming. Ty got Daniel into console gaming back before the Expanse even started, and has a fair amount of PC gaming. Daniel has dogs and a teenage daughter, so he may not have time or hobbies for a few more years.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future? Are you starting a new project together post Expanse?

Well, we have a new trilogy already under contract with Orbit. A very different space opera, and it should be pretty fun. There are also some television and film possibilities that may turn into something. It's a big world. We'll see what happens.