

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Adrian Tchaikovsky (Jan. 2021)

Adrian Tchaikovsky (pen name for *Adrian Czaikowski*) debut novel, "Empire in Black and Gold" in 2008, the first in the Shadows of the Apt series. He won the 2016 Arthur C Clarke Award for his novel "Children of Time." His latest novels, "Doors of Eden" was published in September 2020 and "Bear Head," the second part in the "Dogs of War" series came out this month. He studied Psychology and Zoology before working in law and developing a full-time writing career. He is a keen gamer and live action role playing enthusiast.

Jessica Anderson: When is Children of Time part 3 coming out?

I mean, I haven't finished writing it yet, and then there's the business of sourcing someone to publish it, then that whole tedious round of edits and the like. So, a bit soon to say, is what I'm getting at. 😊

Bryan Stewart: I'm curious what's your favorite answer to the Fermi Paradox? Do you think we'll make first contact in our lifetimes?

I have become more pessimistic about this as I've got older (and the personal element of that 'in our lifetimes' necessarily becomes shorter). I do believe life is common in the universe, but the universe is very big so that can still produce colossal, uncrossable vistas between any two species that might appreciate each other's existence. On a bad day I feel that a sufficiently advanced civilization is likely to destroy itself rather like we're in the process of doing ourselves. On a good day I suspect that our attempts to find life are predicated far too much on that life being like us, and that we may simply not be sifting unusual alien signals from the background hiss, or may be looking in the wrong place.

Bryan Stewart: Any thoughts on the Artemis Project and human plans to colonize the moon?

I am mostly ignorant about this, so pinch of salt, but: I am not entirely sure what the benefit of the Moon is, compared to a larger body like Mars or a gas giant moon, which might conceivably be made eventually habitable.

Mel Powell: What attracted you to basing your alien creatures on arachnids and other species with too many legs?

Just enough legs please. 😊 I always identified with the creatures people didn't like. And you can't really get something more disliked than a spider. I love most invertebrates, especially arthropods, and I started off with insect-people in Shadows of the Apt, and then read about the Portia genus of spiders and their uncannily complex behaviour. CoT is a thought experiment about how jumping spiders might have evolved naturally, as much as anything, given the chance. Also, it's a story about empathy, and if you can make people feel for a spider you're doing well.

Eva Sable: What did you grow up reading? Are there any authors you feel influenced your desire to become an author and your work?

The single biggest influence on me growing up was Diane Wynne Jones. She is an exceptionally good writer, and many of her books have some real twists that opened my eyes to what you could *do* in a story. Other early influences were Terrance Dicks and the Dragonlance authors Weiss and Hickman.

Later reading that really inspired me, though I can't pretend to equal them, includes Gene Wolfe, Mary Gentle and Peter S. Beagle.

Vikrant Rana: What is your favourite world building (by someone else) that still fascinates you?

Aliette de Bodard's Xuya novellas and short stories are beautiful, a SF setting that's full of different ideas reflecting both the author's own cultural background and her crackling imagination. Recently, RJ Barker's Bone Ships books have also offered up a spectacularly well considered fantasy setting, where the author's really thought through all the implications of his world and how it would shape the lives of the people within it.

David Stuckey: A French biologist once said that "Alien life will most probably consist of unfamiliar combinations of familiar parts" Would you agree, and even if not, how do you go about designing alien species?

Not sure, to be honest. I think it will certainly *not* consist of familiar combinations of familiar parts. There's still a huge bias towards the philanthropic principle and humanlike aliens in fiction, and given that most of life on Earth isn't humanlike, that seems a waste of imagination. I think there's a good chance the parts themselves will also be unfamiliar, but that the principles behind them may yet be recognizable – a need to take in energy, get rid of waste, reproduce in some way. It's just that these things don't need to be done in the same way that they work in Earth life.

Anne-Marie Caroline Kramer: Has your Polish heritage influenced how you write and what you write about?

I wrote a postapocalyptic novella set in Poland, 'The Bloody Deluge', which was heavily based on Polish history, and I tend to import Slavic names and characters here and there. Plus there's a certain amount of 20th century echo history in Shadows of the Apt and you can certainly find a Polish analogue there if you try (all the way to a mirror of the Warsaw uprising, for example).

Erik Wilkenfeldt: When you were a kid did you love watching and reading about animals? Did you ever want to be a zoologist or something similar? I remember walking to school one day and being late as I had stopped to watch a garden spider catch a fly.. do you have any similar memories?

My childhood was absolutely steeped in animals, past and present. David Attenborough and Gerald Durrell were my great heroes, and the Natural History Museum was my favourite place in the world.

Charles Williams: What are his favourite places in Leeds?

The Armouries, for sure. And Travelling Man, the games store, which I've not had a chance to visit in a long time now for obvious reasons. Other than that, I don't tend to get particularly attached to places, as a rule.

Charles Williams: What recent discoveries in the world of science excite you most?

I am waiting for them to get some decent probes off to Europa and other gas giant moons. I think if we're going to find life elsewhere in the solar system it may well be there. I was following the news about possible life signs on Venus, but that seems to have gone quiet.

Vinca Russell: You seem to be very prolific and have brought out a number of different series in both fantasy and science fiction genres. What do you find to be most enjoyable and most challenging when writing in each genre? And, are there any differences in the way you approach the two genres?

Both offer different challenges and different satisfactions. And there's a big crossover – so writing a less real-science space opera like Shards of Earth feels a bit more like writing a fantasy because I have more freedom to make things up. Whereas a harder science take like CoT feels as though it involves more precise craftsmanship because I'm working, insofar as is possible, with what *is*. Of course, the most work turns out to be when you write something set in the present day and the real world, like much of Doors of Eden, because the research for that is profoundly onerous.

Vinca Russell: How do you keep track of all the different worlds you write in? They all seem to be very well developed!

Honestly, I think it's just something I do, the way my mind works. A long history of running role-playing games probably helps.

John Grayshaw: Tell us about how you used RPGs and LARPing (Role Playing Games and Live Action Role Playing) in your writing process? And are you still doing that at all?

I haven't LARPed in a while but I'm playing and running several pen and paper games at the moment. I think playing in games, and especially GMing them, can teach a lot of skills about character, narrative and world-building, and I don't think I'd be the writer I am without them.

John Grayshaw: When did you start to feel like you'd made it as a writer?

The flippant answer is "ask me when I feel that way" which, whilst true, also positions me at a place in the field that kind of edges out writers who are on the way up but haven't made it yet. Honestly, CoT winning the Clarke Award was the big levelling-up experience, but from a practical point of view, when I could afford to go full time, and survive just on writing earnings.

John Grayshaw: What made it possible for you to start writing full time?

Money. Literally just that. The books were doing well enough that I could bring in sufficient wherewithal to pay the bills and keep us fed and secure. They still do, and some day they may not.

John Grayshaw: Were you surprised by the success of the Children of Time Series?

It had a weird arc. It died on its spidery ass for the first year, unimpressed reviews and low sales. Then when it hit the Clarke shortlist it just started snowballing – which is apparently not in any way a guaranteed thing. And honestly, I wrote it out of contract with no actual certainty of even getting someone to publish it. So yes, I was gobsmacked, frankly.

John Grayshaw: What parallels do you see between the bioforms in "Dogs of War" and present-day or near future military technology?

The major message in the military deployment of Rex & Co is that non-human soldiers become a way to commit appalling acts while notionally keeping your hands clean. What, that drone exploded a village of civilians, and your robot police car ran over those protesters? Tsk tsk, better check the programming for bugs. Certainly not something that would lead to a court martial or a tribunal. Right now, we're going

the robots and drones route (which, in *Dogs*, has crashed and burned spectacularly, opening the way for the bioforms), and these tools will be tempting to those who wish to commit despicable acts for precisely the same reasons. Autonomous weapons have built in plausible deniability.

John Grayshaw: You studied zoology and psychology and you were a lawyer. How has all that influenced your writing?

Not as much as you'd think, with the psych and zoo. I was a bit disillusioned with the focus of the study and the way that so much of psychology seemed to be about juggling statistics rather than actually looking at how people thought. With the law, I think it lent an interesting perspective. Law is often the under-the-hood part of society a lot of people don't think about, but that shapes a great deal of how things work. Hence there is the big court scene in *Dogs*, and a space-lawyer in *Shards of Earth*. It's an underrepresented area in genre fiction.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research do you do for your novels?

Literally, whatever research they need. For *CoT* I researched giant spiders. For *Ruin* I looked at the physics of water-filled spaceships. For *Bear Head* (out now!) I got together with people to talk Martian colonization (especially the brilliant author Simon Morden). For *Doors of Eden* I had to schlep about London way too much to make sure everyone in the book was obeying the traffic signs.

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

Gareth Powell, Emma Newman, Aliette de Bodard, Ann Leckie, Kameron Hurley, all of them top flight SF authors, really the cutting edge of the game. I've mentioned RJ Barker for fantasy (and Aliette's fantasy series is good too), and I really like Joe Abercrombie's writing too. Peadar Ó Guilin has a marvelously warped imagination. Claire North is streets ahead in her ideas and style – *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* and *The Sudden Appearance of Hope* both blew me away. And there's Justina Robson, of course, and Peter F. Hamilton, and... basically, there are a whole load of really good writers out there right now.

John Grayshaw: What science fiction writers are you friends with? Any fun stories about these relationships?

For me, SFF has proved to be a very supportive community. I remember the first ever convention I did – I'd never gone to one just as a punter. My publisher put its stable of writers up in a cottage near the event, and I basically found myself washing dishes at the sink with people like Paul Cornell, Peter Hamilton and China Mieville. I was very braced to be treated like *The New Guy*, but everyone was extremely welcoming. And I've tried to pay that forwards as I've gone on.

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?

It took a little while to get me to them, but yes. Because of where I am in the industry, and the people I know, there are a set of conventions that feel very familiar and safe spaces to me. I am not a naturally sociable person and I have real difficulties dealing with environments where I'm not sure where I fit or how things work. I love meeting people who've enjoyed my books, I like giving readings when anyone'll let me. I like doing panels. Most of all I just like meeting up with people from the industry, old and new, and chewing the fat, having a drink. It can be a very solitary business. Of course, right now we're all on Zoom, which has been a bit of a lifesaver given I've not seen the inside of a convention for over a year.

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

Dogs of War. It's hard to say exactly why, but there's just something about the structure, the characters, the voices and the overall tone that I think really comes together. And I think I've carried that into the sequel, Bear Head, as well.

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

People keep talking about CoT, and obviously that would be grand. For most of the rest of it, not yet! I'm always delighted when someone shows an interest, and who knows how things might go.

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

Gaming, as above – both pen and paper, and a continuing addiction to World of Warcraft. I also love board games, although that's another thing that's suffered, given meeting up with people face to face has rather taken a nosedive.

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

Right now, I tend to write in the mornings and then sometimes a second session later, but I'm able to be flexible. I used to get out of the house and write in bookshop cafes and the like, but I have been able to just keep going at home

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

Right now, I'm prepping to do the narration for One Day All This Will Be Yours, my time travel novella. I'm going through the early draft of Children of Memory (working title), and the copy edits for Shards of Earth. The sequel to that is with the publishers, as is another novella with Rebellion, and one more with tor.com, both standalones. And there are ideas queuing up in my head, of course.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

I'd like to write some more fantasy to be honest. Right now, there's definitely a demand for SF from me, but it would be good to do something with a sword and a spell in it. Beyond that, I have a variety of possibilities on the back burner, and who knows which one will rise to the surface to get scooped out?