

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Jad Smith (Feb. 2021)

Jad Smith is a professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. He has written about Alfred Bester and John Brunner for the University of Illinois Press's Modern Masters of Science Fiction series.

Eva Sable: Hi. I'm the one. I read widely in science fiction, but have managed, with the possible exception of short stories I cannot name, not to have ever read any John Brunner novels. Do you have a suggestion for which of his books I should read to get a good sense of who he was as a writer, and may entice me to read further?

JS: I don't think you're alone. Part of the reason I wanted to write about Brunner was that I thought it was a shame that his work was critically neglected and so little known. I guess it depends on your tastes as a reader. *The Shockwave Rider* (which I describe in detail below) is one of Brunner's near-future works that still holds a lot of topical relevance, though I'd note that it's probably the least experimental of these works, in terms of form. If you like future history, *The Crucible of Time* is a uniquely interesting specimen of that genre. *A Maze of Stars* is a space opera that is a sentimental favorite of mine. *The Sheep Look Up* is another near-future, topical novel that's at once experimental, stylistically speaking, and a conscious attempt to blend SF and horror. Some of Brunner's SF thrillers are excellent, including *Quicksand*, though I'd caution that that novel has a very bleak and ambiguous ending (more on *Quicksand* below). If you like fantasy, *The Compleat Traveler in Black* is one of Brunner's most popular works in that vein.

Bill Rogers: Was Brunner as pessimistic in real life as were his novels from the late 60s and early 70s?

JS: When I talk about Brunner's novels from that period, I describe them as expressing a sense of "frustrated optimism." Developments in the real world had not fulfilled SF's once high hopes for the future, and Brunner acknowledged that in his work. He wrote against the grain of the optimistic tradition in SF, but he did not abandon it entirely. For instance, two major works from this period, *The Jagged Orbit* and *The Shockwave Rider*, end on a note of guarded optimism. In real life, Brunner fought for political causes he believed in. For instance, he worked on behalf of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and even wrote "The H-Bombs' Thunder," the song that became the anthem of the organization's Aldermaston antiwar marches. I think Brunner hoped for a better future but saw red flags all around him and used his fiction as a vehicle to tell cautionary tales about real problems.

John DeLaughter: The various ecological and social crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s strongly influenced his writing. What did he think about the ways we overcame those obstacles (e.g., the "green revolution," Nixon's executive order creating the EPA)?

JS: I am not aware of Brunner commenting directly on either of these developments. My sense—from *The Sheep Look Up*—is that Brunner was deeply skeptical of the type of industrial agriculture associated with the "green revolution," seeing it as a possible source of further environmental degradation. Based on the same novel, I would suppose that Brunner applauded the creation of the EPA because the novel points to a need for additional regulatory measures and oversight—but that's just conjecture.

John DeLaughter and John Grayshaw: I see on Wikipedia that Brunner wrote 2 books labeled pornography and that you verified one of them. Were these isolated incidents? Or did he write more that haven't been confirmed?

JS: I haven't verified any additional publications of this type. As I note in my book, one of these books was written under the pseudonym "Ellis Quick," which is an anagram of "I sell quick." Brunner spent longer than usual writing *Stand on Zanzibar* and had difficulty placing it with a publisher. Even though it became a phenomenal success, he earned very little from it for three years, and my sense is that he wrote these erotic novels during a period that he was experiencing financial difficulties.

Carl Rosenberg: Brunner was an admirer of Philip K. Dick, and wrote an introduction to *The Best of Philip K. Dick* (1977). Did Dick's writing have much influence on Brunner's, and did Brunner regard him as an influence?

JS: In 1960, two of Dick's novels, *Dr. Futurity* and *Vulcan's Hammer*, appeared in *Ace Doubles* alongside novels by Brunner. At the time, Brunner was arguably the more established writer. I think of them as contemporaries who probably read and appreciated each other's work. Dick once described writing SF as dreaming "with one eye open, coldly appraising what is actually going on" (in the essay "Who Is an SF Writer?"). As I note in my book, I think Brunner shared this sensibility, even though his work is distinct from Dick's.

Kenny Martens: I have a specific question about *The Crucible of Time*. The solar system described in that book has a number of similarities to our own. Is there any strong evidence, one way or the other, that John Brunner intended that solar system to be our solar system in the far-distant future, or perhaps our own solar system in an alternate timeline?

JS: My interpretation is that the "folk" occupy Earth in the far-distant future. To my knowledge, Gary Westfahl first pointed out this possibility, noting that one of the characters in the novel directly references a long extinct civilization of vertebrates, presumably humans. This reading also fits with Brunner's thinking at the time. In a speech given the same year that *Crucible* appeared, Brunner concluded—with regret—that if the inhabitants of earth ever reached the stars it would be not from "our 'civilization' . . . but a very different one" (*ConStellation Program*). Additionally, Brunner admired J. B. S. Haldane, one of the first thinkers to suggest in earnest that another species might become intelligent and end up succeeding humans.

Alan Ziebarth: I would like to hear of Jad Smith's views on the use of satire in the *Club of Rome* books. I recently read *The Sheep Look Up* and I was amazed at how accurate his predictions were and also how satirical the book was

JS: Forgive me for going off topic for a second to explain why I don't like the designation "Club of Rome Quartet" for Brunner's near-future novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though the "Club of Rome" was formed in 1968, it didn't gain particular attention until 1972, with a publication on overpopulation that made a splash internationally. Three of Brunner's books had already been written by that time, and there's far more evidence that he was influenced by thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis (both of whom are referenced directly in *SoZ*), Rachel Carson (i.e., *Silent Spring*), and Alvin Toffler (Brunner mentioned Toffler's *Future Shock* quite specifically as an influence on *The Shockwave Rider*). Second, Brunner expressed disapproval when people made overtures toward lumping together these works—which differ significantly in style and theme--as a "series." I think it is a shame that this problematic designation has been picked up in the Wikipedia article on Brunner, but I'm happy to see that the Internet Speculative Fiction Database--perhaps the best bibliographic resource in existence for readers and scholars of SF--has not grouped the novels in this way.

As for satire, it is all over the place in these novels at the level of both form and content. For instance, it has long been noted that *The Hipcrime Vocab* is a Bierce-like fake dictionary dripping with topical social satire. And yes, the predictions are uncanny in *The Sheep Look Up*—the one that gets me is that in 1972, he predicted the widespread decline of bee populations.

Jamie Smith: What is the strangest inspiration Brunner had for something within the plot of one of his stories?

JS: When he wrote *Stand on Zanzibar* and his other near-future novels, Brunner extrapolated in very particular fashion, taking two current trends and crosspollinating them to think about how they might play out in coming years. This method inspired many of his most accurate predictions but also resulted in some of his strangest and most chilling ideas. As Brunner described it, for instance, he combined the notion of Peter Pan Syndrome, popularized in the 1960s and 1970s, with accounts of teenagers engaging in vandalism for fun, and came up with *SoZ*'s "hobby saboteurs," adults who carry out horrifying acts of violence not for political reasons--but for recreation.

Blaine Savini: Are novels such as *The Sheep Look Up* and *Shockwave Rider* meant as warnings or did Brunner see these kinds of futures as inevitable?

JS: See above. My view is that Brunner intended these novels as cautionary tales about possible—but not inevitable—futures.

Damo Mac Choiligh: In discussion here in the group, more than a few members have drawn attention to apparent racism in *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Jagged Orbit*. I did not see this myself; I always felt that *SoZ* was anti-colonial in intent, something that is a requirement for me as an Irish person. What do you think of this?

JS: In his life, Brunner advocated for racial justice—and from early in his career, he suggested there was a need for more inclusive representation in SF. I've suggested that in *SoZ*, Brunner attempted to address the problem of racism in a complex—and international—way, but I think whether or not he succeeded is up to readers to decide.

Bryan Stewart: If a sci-fi book club was going to read one of Brunner's works, which would you recommend and why? Any questions you'd hope they would explore while reading that specific story?

JS: *The Shockwave Rider* would be an interesting choice. In the novel, Brunner grapples with questions about living in an information age—that is, about the relationship between media consumption and identity, and the possible effects of information overload. He imagines a network akin to the Internet, coins the term "worm" for viruses, and portrays corporate data collection as a threat to both individual privacy and democratic norms.

John Grayshaw: What makes Brunner interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to his work?

JS: I personally think Brunner is interesting because he aimed to retain the best elements of "pulp" SF while writing in an elevated style. His work challenged the distinction that is often made between so-called "genre" literature and the literary mainstream. I first read Brunner's *Ace Doubles*—long after their initial publication—and I loved Brunner's restless inventiveness and edgy handling of common plots and themes in those early novels.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Brunner grew up reading?

JS: Brunner indicated that he had read H. G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon at a very early age, but he also read the pulp magazines and, in that context, mentioned everything from Edmond Hamilton's Captain Future stories to appearances by Ray Bradbury, C. M. Kornbluth, Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, and many others.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers that were Brunner's contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired and how did they influence his work?

JS: In the 1960s, when Brunner talked about writers he admired, he mentioned Cordwainer Smith, Samuel R. Delany, Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard. I think what is significant about this list is that they are all very different writers, from both sides of the Atlantic. For me, it indicates that Brunner valued a wide range of approaches, even as he carved out his own distinctive one.

John Grayshaw: Did Brunner have favorites of his own works?

JS: Brunner considered *Quicksand* one of his best works, even though it didn't garner much attention, and he once identified it as his personal favorite. In the novel, an SF thriller of sorts, a psychologist at a rural hospital discovers a woman wandering alone in forest and slowly becomes convinced that she is from the future. The plot hinges on whether this is true or whether the doctor is being drawn into his patient's delusional reality.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did Brunner do for his books?

JS: According to Brunner, for *Stand on Zanzibar*, he started by reading Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and working from McLuhan's account of Harold Innis, he developed the idea of an SF novel that would predict how culture might develop in the near future by juxtaposing and extrapolating current trends. For a couple of years, he clipped news articles in an effort to think about such trends. Then, he decided he wanted to write the novel in a style resembling Jon Dos Passos's pastiche, documentary style in the USA Trilogy, so he reread *Midcentury*. Then, he put all his research aside and started writing, working from memory and viewing the novel as a thought experiment that would allow elements of his research to mix and marry.

John Grayshaw: What is your opinion of the around 40 novels he wrote for Ace Double? What are the best ones? Any that are not so great?

JS: I mentioned above that I am very fond of many of Brunner's Ace Doubles, though I would note that some are much better than others. My favorite Brunner novel published in a Double is *The 100th Millennium*, which was later beneficially revised and enlarged as an Ace standalone novel titled *Catch a Falling Star*. The novel is set on a far-future Earth, where advanced technology and nature seem indistinguishable, merged to the point of grotesqueness. After the novel's protagonist undertakes a long journey through this uncanny landscape, the truth behind this strange reality is unveiled. The novel is a moody and lyrical hybridization of SF and fantasy that is some ways reminiscent of Jack Vance.

John Grayshaw: What is the importance and impact of *Stand on Zanzibar* on the sci-fi genre?

JS: It impacted the genre in a number of ways but one of the most important was that it demonstrated that ambitious stylistic experiments could also win popular acclaim. In my opinion, it changed how many writers thought about what was possible in the SF publishing marketplace.

John Grayshaw: What is the importance and impact of “The Jagged Orbit,” “The Sheep Look Up,” and “The Shockwave Rider” on the sci-fi genre?

JS: Like *SoZ*, these works engaged with topical, near-future scenarios in realistic ways. They had an international flavor; mingled aspects of hard and soft SF; and reworked popular SF themes while embracing an elevated style. *The Shockwave Rider*, in particular, is touted as an early example of cyberpunk—or is at least seen as a precursor to its emergence.

John Grayshaw: I just asked about the Club of Rome Quartet, but what are some of his other works that should be highlighted? And why?

JS: I’m always intrigued by *The Squares of the City*, an SF political thriller based on a Steinitz-Chigorin chess match, in which class warfare is carried out through urban planning. *The Crucible of Time* is a far-future history, which features no human characters and chronicles the long-term efforts of a species to develop and implement (bio)technologies that will help its members escape their planet, which is destined for destruction. *The Whole Man* (published in the UK as *Telepathist*) is a unique take on the theme of telepathy that won Brunner quite a bit of praise when it appeared in 1964.

John Grayshaw: What are some interesting anecdotes about Brunner going to conventions and meeting his fans?

JS: At the 1970 WorldCon in Heidelberg, Brunner is reported to have surprised his colleagues and the crowd alike by conducting the Hugo Ceremony in fluent German—when no one realized that he spoke German.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the other science fiction writers he had correspondence, friendships, and/or collaborations with?

JS: Brunner seemed to have had relatively close friendships, at least at certain stages of his career, with Samuel R. Delany, Ian Watson, and Christopher Priest.

John Grayshaw: I read that Brunner had an uneasy relationship with British new wave writers? Why was this the case?

JS: Brunner published some work in the “new” *New Worlds*, the main publication venue for the New Wave. He associated with New Wave writers, and his work in some respects resembled New Wave SF. However, when there started to be discussions about who belonged to the New Wave, there was always disagreement about Brunner, even on the part of the “main” New Wave writers. Brunner’s major works of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the culmination of a long series of idiosyncratic experiments Brunner began conducting before the New Wave arrived on the scene, but people associated them with the New Wave because they were experimental. My sense is that Brunner’s work was distinctive but got caught up in the crosstalk about the New Wave.

John Grayshaw: Did you know Brunner personally?

JS: No.

John Grayshaw: Christopher Priest described Brunner as a passionate political liberal who gave up most of his non-writing life to causes. Can you talk about this activism?

JS: To what I've said about Brunner's activism above, I'd add that he was an advocate for environmental causes.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Brunner?

JS: Brunner contributed extensively to fanzines throughout his career, and many of his letters, columns, and convention speeches are fascinating because he talked shop about writing or detailed circumstances related to his career. I found out through one of Brunner's letters, for instance, that *Stand on Zanzibar* was summarily rejected by the publisher that had commissioned it. After it was published, even as Brunner's reputation as a writer was growing exponentially, the resulting gap in his income caused him to struggle financially for several years.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Brunner's works under option for movies or TV?

JS: I'm not aware of any.

John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Brunner works in drawers or archives somewhere or is everything published?

JS: Brunner is known to have started and left unfinished during the 1980s a novel titled "Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls." Most of Brunner's papers are at the University of Liverpool Library. I would guess that if unpublished manuscripts do exist, they are there.

John Grayshaw: Did Brunner have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

JS: One piece of Brunner's advice that I've always remembered—and this is paraphrase—is to know what you'll start writing tomorrow before you stop writing today.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Brunner's hobbies other than writing?

JS: Brunner was deeply interested in folk music and jazz, and wrote many folk songs. By all accounts, he was an accomplished cook, and some of his recipes are available in Anne McCaffrey's *Cooking Out of this World*.

John Grayshaw: What is Brunner's legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

JS: Brunner is a writer who, in many ways, defied easy categorization, complicating the distinction between "genre" writing and the literary mainstream, and between hard and soft SF. He also blended aspects of the British and American SF traditions, and developed a distinctive strand of SF that had an international, cosmopolitan feel to it. I think of him as an idea merchant of the highest order whose idiosyncratic experiments and unique trajectory left a lasting impact on the field.