

**Science Fiction Book Club  
Interview with Ann Leckie (March 2021)**

*Ann Leckie's 2013 debut novel Ancillary Justice, in part about artificial consciousness and gender-blindness, won the 2014 Hugo Award and Nebula Award for "Best Novel. The sequels, Ancillary Sword and Ancillary Mercy, each won the Locus Award and were nominated for the Nebula Award. Provenance, published in 2017, is also set in the Imperial Radch universe. Leckie's first fantasy novel, The Raven Tower, was published in February 2019.*

**Jamie Langan: How soon till we see more from the Ancillary universe?**

I'm not sure! I do think I'll revisit that universe some time, though.

**Jamie Langan: Who do you think is currently writing the best SF**

There are so many wonderful writers out there. We're really living in a golden age. And I'm sure if I tried to list everyone who's doing great work right now I'd miss so many. Off the top of my head, definitely check out Arkady Martine, Martha Wells, J.Y. (Neon) Yang, Yoon Ha Lee, Tade Thompson, N.K. Jemisin, Kate Elliot, I know there are more.

**Gary Bunker: Is the TV adaptation of Ancillary Justice truly dead, or is there hope for it yet?**

There's hope! It's not a hundred percent dead—yet. More than that I can't say, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

**SFBC Member: SF authors who most inspired you?**

I owe a huge debt to writers like Andre Norton, who I read way more of when I was a kid than could possibly have been healthy. I've also been a huge fan of C.J. Cherryh—the stamp of her *Foreigner* books, in particular, is indelibly marked on the *Ancillary* books. And I've loved Jack Vance ever since I ran across his work in an anthology when I was about thirteen.

**SFBC Member: Favourite non-SF authors?**

Probably unsurprisingly, I enjoy a lot of mystery and historical fiction, as well as just older work. I'm a fan of Lindsey Davis' Marcus Didius Falco novels, as well as the ones that feature his daughter Flavia Albia. If you haven't tried them, I highly recommend Patrick O'Brien's series (the basis for the movie *Master and Commander*). John LeCarre was an amazing writer, and you can't go wrong with Dorothy Sayers, or Jane Austen or George Eliot.

**Melody Friedenthal: How did you work out the balance between ship-mind and human?**

Honestly I do a lot by feel, just kind of writing a bit and then seeing if it seems right.

**Johnna Ferguson: I love the worlds you created in the Ancillary series, and they make me believe you are a world traveler. Are there countries you traveled to that you especially enjoyed visiting or have changed how you see the world?**

Travel is an amazing experience. You see how different people can be and also how similar. Most of my travel has actually happened after I wrote the books—I received lots of amazing invitations, and I

accepted all the ones I could. I've been to Spain, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Norway, Sweden—they were all amazing.

**Molly Smith: What kind of research did you do for *Ancillary Justice*?**

I generally start with history and anthropology, but eventually I have to dig into particular subjects. For *Ancillary Justice* I needed to learn things about Human physiology and about basic, Newtonian physics (which I got slightly wrong when I needed to put it on the page! Ah, well, live and learn) as well as odd little details like the kinds of clothes or dishes people have worn and used throughout history.

**Bryan Stewart: If a sci-fi book club was going to explore *Ancillary Justice*, what's a central question you would recommend the moderator should ask the group?**

I think there are a lot of interesting places to start, but if I had to choose one, it might be, who is any of us, really?

**Bryan Stewart: My biggest takeaway from *Ancillary Justice* was that I feel like you do a masterful job of describing/highlighting body language. Is this something you consciously think about while writing?**

To a certain extent, yes. I'm not a very visual writer, so I have to pay careful attention to making sure visuals and scenery get onto the page. Using character to do that helps a lot.

**Molly Smith: In *Ancillary Justice*, you talk about genders and the ships. Is there a reason why you focus on this?**

Probably, but I don't know why that is. I think a lot of a writer's work happens backstage, in the subconscious, and I'm not sure if any of us knows why particular things interest us more than others.

**Molly Smith: Do you prefer to write fiction or fantasy? Are there unique techniques and skills for each?**

I'm equally at home in either Fantasy or Science Fiction. I feel like I approach them both in similar ways, though that does mean that there are some kinds of Fantasy I'm not particularly likely to write.

**Cynthia McGowan: What do you know about your novel when you start writing it?**

I know who the main character is, I know a few of the important supporting characters, I know more or less where I want the story to end up, and usually I have a few mileposts along the way (important moments or scenes, where I know more or less what needs to happen to move toward the ending). Everything else is a mystery to me until I write it.

**Jay Alan Babcock: You said you used an online name generator for writing character names and I wanted to ask you why you used it?**

For most of the things I've written—certainly the things at novel length—I've been working in settings where it doesn't make sense to use "familiar" names. No one ten thousand years into the future, or in some alternate Fantasy version of Earth with a very different history, is likely to be named John or Jane or Susan or what have you. Names are very much part of a particular history and culture and come from a particular set of languages. Of course, the cultures I write about are made up and so I don't have a stock of existing names to draw from. But I still want that as part of the worldbuilding, so I use the name generator to supply me with a big pile of raw material to play with.

**Gusse Farkas: I loved Provenance and wondered if you can tell us who might have inspired the character Ingray Aughskold?**

Oh, everyone of us who's far more competent than we think we are! Honestly, I love a stoic, strong-jawed hero as much as the next person, but I felt like someone more everyday deserved to be the hero for once.

**John Grayshaw: Were you surprised by the success of Ancillary Justice?**

Very much so! I was surprised to get an agent on the strength of the manuscript, I was surprised when the publisher offered for it, and I was surprised when more than a dozen or so people liked it. I was beyond surprise when it started winning awards, well into "I am in a coma in the hospital and hallucinating all this because it can't actually be real" territory.

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

To the extent that I have—there's no question that a shelf full of awards will bolster your confidence. That said, I'm a writer, and self-doubt is basically a built-in feature.

**John Grayshaw: You participated in NaNoWriMo. What did you learn from the experience?**

Some very important things! I learned what it felt like to sit down and spit words out on a regular basis. I learned that if I did that, the result wouldn't be quite as bad as I feared. (Don't get me wrong, the result was not great, or publishable, but still it was better than I'd been afraid it would be.) I learned that the secret to starting was...to just start. Which sounds flippant, but anyone out there who's been wanting to write and isn't sure where to start will know that it's a much more fraught and complicated thing than I make it sound here.

**John Grayshaw: You're a Clarion Graduation. What did you learn from the experience?**

So, so much. But there are two important things I got from it. One was just the importance of being around people who take your work seriously, who just assume you're serious about writing. That was invaluable, and did a huge amount to help me as a writer.

The second was something I learned from Michael Swanwick. He was our week 6 instructor, and he put a huge amount of energy into his job as our teacher. He read all of our stories so far and made notes on them—that's a HUGE amount of work. I had written a story for that week that was a really messy, horrible first draft that I called "Help, I Need a Title." Michael very kindly gave me a title and told me how to fix the draft. I carefully noted down all his remarks. Because when someone like Michael Swanwick gives you all of that help, you don't throw it away, right?

Except when I sat down to revise the draft, I realized that all his advice was wrong. He'd misread my story. My job wasn't to make it into the story he thought I was writing. My job was to rewrite it so that he would never in a million years mistake my intention. So, I looked over his comments, decided where I'd gone wrong, and went on to take absolutely none of his advice.

That story became my first professional SF sale and appeared in Rich Horton's year's best anthology. And I realized that I'd learned a super important, somewhat ironic lesson—you can learn a lot from mistaken advice, and in the end you're the writer, it's your story, and you get to decide what to do.

**John Grayshaw: Broq's singing, why did you want to incorporate that? What sort of music do you like?**

When I was thinking about the character of One Esk, I thought to myself, "What would I do if I had twenty bodies?" and one of the first things that came to mind was, I could sing choral music all by myself! I love choral singing, it's an activity I enjoy a lot. I resisted giving that to the character for a while because I find, as a reader, that writing about music and musicians is often very unsatisfying to me. It's got a tendency to romanticize that I find distasteful, and of course it's very difficult to write about music to begin with.

But the thought wouldn't leave me, so I decided to lean into it.

I like all sorts of music—my taste is fairly eclectic.

**John Grayshaw: Left Hand of Darkness is our Classic Group Read this month. How was it an influence on the Ancillary series?**

Oh, what a wonderful book! It's very famous, of course, and I knew a lot about it even before I read it. But I didn't read it until I was well into the first draft of Ancillary Justice. At some point I thought "You know, it's ridiculous that I haven't read this, considering what I'm working on."

I knew long before I read tLHoD that LeGuin had made a particular choice about pronouns, and later been not entirely satisfied with it. Knowing that had been part of my thinking about how to use pronouns in AJ--all while I hadn't yet read it! I should have read it long before, it's an amazing book.

**John Grayshaw: You write novels and short stories. What do you like about each of them? How are they different?**

I feel more comfortable working in longer forms. There's room for digression and detail, room for a long build to get your effects. That said, short stories don't take anywhere near as long to write (though they can take just as much preparation and research) and let you sketch a world, a character, a situation, without the investment of time a novel demands of a reader.

Short stories are very, very different from novels in their structure and the way they're put together. You need to be efficient in a short story in a way that's not necessary in a novel (though it's still a skill that comes in handy when you want it).

**John Grayshaw: How about the importance of tea in the Ancillary Justice series? Where did that idea come from?**

Tea is there as a deliberate nod to C.J. Cherryh's *Foreigner* books. And also, I like tea!

**John Grayshaw: How difficult is it to portray the characters in Ancillary in gender neutral terms? Do you ever find gender creeping in?**

Not once I settled on a pronoun! It was gender creeping in that made me try using "she" as the default pronoun for everyone. I'd been trying to portray a culture that cared nothing about gender, and it wasn't working. Gender still creeps in when I use "she" but it does so in a way that (for English speakers, anyway) is kind of strange and always reminding you that it's there. If I'd used "he" gender would have definitely crept in, but it wouldn't have been visible, and that would have defeated my purpose, I think.

**John Grayshaw: How difficult is it to portray that the characters in Ancillary are speaking a different language? Do colloquialisms slip in if you aren't careful?**

Oh, definitely! This is another trick I learned from Cherryh—how to make it plain on the page without saying it that characters were speaking one language or another. A lot of it is with careful control of diction, and yes, paying close attention to colloquialisms is a big part of that.

**John Grayshaw: Do you know how many more books you'll set in the world of the Ancillary series? Is it one you'll continue returning to or will there be a limit?**

I honestly don't know.

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

Oh, gosh, the SF writing community is very small, and while we don't exactly all know each other, we're usually only one or two steps away from each other. A lot of my friends are other SF writers!

**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?**

I do enjoy going to conventions. I'm really missing them, this past year. I always enjoy meeting my readers. I have amazing readers.

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

Oh, I don't think I have an answer to that question. They all have particular places in my heart.

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

Depending on my mood and available material—I like to knit and crochet. I also enjoy doing beadwork. And I've recently taken up jewelry metalwork. It's amazingly therapeutic to bang on a sheet of copper with a hammer, and I find working with a jewelers saw to be a kind of meditative experience.

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

In theory, I write at least a thousand words every morning. In reality, sometimes that isn't going to happen, or the work really needs me to read or daydream, or what have you.

**Neil Raines: So, tell us a little (or a lot!) about your next book**

I can't! It's way too early in the process.

**John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?**

Well, near term, I'm planning to get vaccinated and be able to hang with my friends who I haven't seen for a year! Beyond that, who knows?