

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Robert Charles Wilson (May 2021)

Robert Charles Wilson has written many science fiction novels that have won awards including “Spin” (the Hugo Award for Best Novel); “The Chronoliths” (the John W. Campbell Memorial Award); “Blind Lake” and “Darwinia,” (Prix Aurora Awards); “Mysterium” (Philip K. Dick Award). “Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America” was a 2010 Hugo Award nominee. Wilson’s latest novel, “Last Year,” was published in 2016.

Richard Davis: When will you publish *The Cure*, I think you finished it 3 or 4 years ago?

That’s a novel I wasn’t happy with, and after a few exchanges with my editors I’ve basically put it in a drawer. I may or may not go back to some version of it, eventually.

Bill Rogers: Robert, I love how you place much more emphasis on prose style, and on the emotional depth of your characters and the story overall, than is usual in SF (not to minimize your SFnal ideas; they’re brilliant and mind-boggling!); did you, seeing the general trend in the genre, set out to do this deliberately or did it simply grow organically out of the way you enjoy writing?

I think it reflects the kind of fiction (in general) and science fiction (in particular) that I loved to read and wanted to write. It wasn’t a calculated strategy. One of the classic pieces of advice for beginning writers is to write the books you want to read but can’t find on the shelves, and that’s more or less what I was trying to do.

Richard Davis: My favorite RCW books are *The Harvest*, *Mysterium*, *Blind Lake*, maybe *Burning Paradise*, read *The Chronoliths* twice, which of your books do you like the most?

I don’t like going back to my published work—for one thing, I tend to find mistakes I can’t correct—and I don’t think I’ve ever completely re-read any of my novels once they were set in print. Books that felt like they had some extra depth and complexity as I was writing and revising them would be *Spin*, *Julian Comstock*, maybe *Blind Lake* and *The Chronoliths*. My short fiction isn’t as well known, and I’m not prolific at shorter lengths, but there are a few stories (“Divided By Infinity,” “The Cartesian Theater”) that please me as much or more than my novels.

Richard Davis: You have called *Bios* your only hard scifi novel, do you have any ideas for more hard scifi?

I think most of my work is at least hard-science-adjacent—it might bend conventional science beyond recognition, but it usually stops short of outright fantasy. (To say this in a different way, my fiction generally operates within a scientific ontology even when it skirts, bypasses, or strategically ignores particular laws of nature.) I admire writers who can take contemporary scientific discoveries—say, of specific exoplanets orbiting known stars—and make fiction out of that, but it’s a little beyond my skill set.

Seth A. Milman: If a reader has never heard of you, which of your works would you recommend they read and why?

I would have to go with the verdict of readers and recommend *Spin*.

John Grayshaw: Who are the Science Fiction authors you grew up reading?

I first started reading science fiction seriously when I was a young teenager—the mid-1960s and onward—and none of the authors I can name will surprise you. I scoured the local library for Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, H.G. Wells; I hoarded my allowance for paperback copies of books by Robert A. Heinlein, Andre Norton, John Wyndham. The sf magazines introduced me to writers like Avram Davidson, Phyllis Gotlieb, J.G. Ballard, Roger Zelazny, Samuel Delany.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of your favorite current science fiction authors?

I have to confess that I don't follow the field as closely as I once did. Or maybe the field is so broad now that it's impossible to follow it in detail. The novels I've read most recently have been by Kim Stanley Robinson, Charlie Jane Anders, and Andy Weir.

John Grayshaw: How did you become a science fiction writer?

How does anyone become any kind of writer? Some combination of talent, luck, and persistence, in most cases. There were moments in my life, before my first novel saw print and even after, when any sensible person probably would have abandoned the idea of making a career as a writer. But no one's ever accused me of being sensible.

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

A couple of published novels constituted evidence that I could do this thing more than once. And looking back from where I stand, it does seem as if I managed to have a reasonably successful career. But at no point in time did that ever seem obvious or inevitable.

John Grayshaw: What do you know about a novel when you start writing it?

I like to know at least approximately where it's headed and what it means, in a thematic sense. I usually have a detailed outline that gets serially revised during the writing process.

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

Depends on the project. I read relatively heavily in popular science, and sometimes the "research" precedes the inspiration for a story. Curiosity is a writer's best friend.

John Grayshaw: Robert Sawyer said you made a point on a radio documentary that SF has become so inbred and so reliant on assumed familiarity with its core texts, that it has set up an insurmountable barrier to newcomers?... What did you mean by this and more importantly, what's the solution?

I wonder if that's still true, actually. Science fiction has become such a pervasive cultural presence—at the bookstore, in the Cineplex, on the small screen—that it's no longer necessary to explain or decode concepts like "interstellar travel" or "temporal paradoxes" for popular audiences. Science fiction publishing once had a kind of proprietary interest in those ideas, but that monopoly has long since lapsed.

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

As I said, I'm much less prolific at shorter lengths. I like the expansiveness of the novel, but certain ideas seem to require the sharpness and concision of the short story.

John Grayshaw: You've been compared to many other sci-fi writers (Sturgeon, Bradbury, Stapledon, Egan, etc). Which sci-fi writers do you consider your largest influences? And why?

That's such a difficult question to answer. Influences change and evolve over the course of a lifetime. I occasionally reread the novels and stories that inspired me when I was much younger, only to find that—for better or worse—they aren't the texts I once imagined they were.

John Grayshaw: Tell us about how you got married at a science fiction bookstore?

It was a second marriage for both Sharry and me, and we both had kids, and we wanted to do something that would be informal and fun and entirely purely secular. Sharry had the idea of holding the event at a neighborhood venue that combined a science fiction bookstore and a SF-themed restaurant. (It no longer exists, but we still point out the location to visitors: "That fishing-equipment store? That's where we got married!") The ceremony was small-scale and ad-hoc, but it seems to have worked—we've been happily married for more than twenty years now.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about your friendship with Robert Sawyer? Any fun stories about times you've spent together?

We were paired for a couple of book tours, sometimes billed as the Rob & Bob Show. I don't know about "fun"—Rob loves touring and promoting his books, whereas I'm the kind of writer who would rather gargle battery acid than stand up in front of an audience—but I think we managed to play off our differences in an entertaining way. What I admire about Rob is his detailed knowledge and his easy fluency concerning his work. He was all, "In my novel I explore the possibility that another hominin species might over thirty thousand years have evolved a profoundly different sentient culture," while I was more like, "In my book a space thing comes and does stuff."

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

You're probably asking the wrong guy. See the answer to the next question.

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 don't want to medicalize my aversion to crowds, but if you wanted to call it a social phobia I wouldn't argue with you. I probably attended more science fiction conventions before I was professionally published than after. Is it a handicap not to have a presence on the convention circuit? Almost certainly it is; moreover, I haven't connected with very many colleagues or made many close friends in the profession. You pay a price for that, but I was fortunately able to forge a career in spite of it. I'm grateful to not be trying to break into the field today, at a time when competition can be searing, the market for fiction is uncertain, and a social media presence is almost obligatory.

John Grayshaw: I know you've said you have "the common prejudice against media SF in that it seldom represents what I love about the written work." However, would you ever consider movie/TV adaptations of your works?

Sure. Many of my books have been optioned, and *Spin* came close to a series deal before it folded at the final hurdle. And I don't want to sound snobbish about "media SF"—my love affair has always been with science fiction *as a literature*, but there's plenty of screen SF I appreciate and enjoy.

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

I used to enjoy playing around with vacuum tube audio electronics, not because I believe "tubes sound better" but because I enjoyed the retro vibe of the technology—dangerously high-voltage, but otherwise DIY-friendly. But a decline in my hearing has made that pursuit a little redundant. I still have my soldering iron and my bag of resistors and capacitors in the basement, but these days I seldom use them.

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

Not anymore. For the past few years I've been writing pretty sporadically. (I've had these fallow periods at other times in my career, too.) But as a younger writer, yeah, I was more disciplined—you have to be.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on currently?

A couple of projects in the works, but it would be premature to talk about them.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

Growing old gracefully is probably the best I can hope for.