

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Donna Emerson and Kenneth Biggle (May 2021)

Donna Emerson and Kenneth Biggle are the children of Lloyd Biggle, Jr. who not only used genuine science in his books, but also emphasized human and cultural elements, including art and music (he earned a Ph.D. in Musicology). Some of his most famous novels are "Monument," "The Still, Small Voice of Trumpets," and "All the Colors of Darkness." Biggle was the founding Secretary-Treasurer of Science Fiction Writers of America and served as Chairman of its trustees for many years. In the 1970s, he founded the Science Fiction Oral History Association, which built archives containing hundreds of cassette tapes of science fiction notables making speeches and discussing aspects of their craft.

Jan van den Berg: Did your father have a favorite among his novels?

Donna: I think Monument was special to him because it got him the most recognition. It was nominated for a Hugo award as a short story and a Nebula as a novel and optioned for a film. I think he was more attached to the characters he created like Jan Darzek and Lady Sara Varney. He had a lot of fun researching and writing the two Sherlock Holmes mysteries (The Glendower Conspiracy and The Quallsford Inheritance). He also enjoyed writing about The Interplanetary Relations Bureau (Still, Small Voice of Trumpets) and its motto: DEMOCRACY IMPOSED FROM WITHOUT IS THE SEVEREST FORM OF TYRANNY. He really believed that.

Kenneth: I don't know. I know that he was the only science fiction writer with a doctor's degree in musicology in the world.

Jan van den Berg: Did he base the document of "Monument" on existing legislation he knew about or was it just an idea he had?

Donna: Nothing existing but everything ongoing. He knew the possibilities were out there. He was a champion for the underdog always. I have a scathing letter he wrote to Nelson Rockefeller on incompetence in the VA Hospitals long before anyone else acknowledged a problem (he had first-hand experience as they told him he had allergies when it was cancer...). He and Damon Knight took on a major publishing company when the company pulled out of a science fiction anthology they were preparing for high schools. Authors were supposed to shut up and take that stuff but they sued and won (court records sealed). Something not particularly known is that when he was president of Science Fiction Writers of America the Tolkein books were just being published in paperback in this country. Ballantine had the contract with Tolkien but Ace published the books and offered them for less without paying Tolkien a cent. There were no international copyright agreements so it was legal but not ethical. My father rallied some big-name SF writers in support of Tolkien and Ace discontinued their publications and may have even paid a little—can't remember. The Sherlock Holmes character is public domain but

the estate trolls publications and threatens lawsuits so most publishers still pay them. My father got permission to legally use the character in *The Glendower Conspiracy* and *The Quallsford Inheritance* but had to publish a “thank you thank you” in the front of each book. That certainly did not go over well with him so he decided to use all the background info he had accumulated and create his own detective (Lady Sara Varney). Incidentally, those two books will never be in e-format because the Doyle estate demands we give a portion of sales to them and, well, we are Biggles, after all...

Kenneth: That I don’t know but the frustration with bureaucracy would be some of it.

John Grayshaw: Was your father frustrated with bureaucracy? I’ve always thought that’s what inspired ‘Monument’?

Donna: Oh yeah. He actively disliked those who lorded their power—political, economic, whatever—over others.

Kenneth: See above.

Eva Sable: Do you read your father's work, and if so, do you have a favorite?

Donna: Monument and Still, Small Voice of Trumpets in SF but I also really like his mysteries. He created strong women characters in Lady Sara Varney and Raina Lambert (*Where Dead Soldiers Walk*, *Murder Jambalaya*, etc.) and those appealed to me. I love his Sherlock Holmes novel *The Glendower Conspiracy* because I went to England and Wales with him to research it and it was such fun to see how he worked things we discovered into the plot. It is also the only book dedicated to me... The same with *Murder Jambalaya*—it’s special to me because I went to New Orleans with him for research.

Kenneth: Again, Monument. I’ve not read everything but the majority I have.

Eva Sable: What are your favorite memories of your father?

Donna: He was absolutely brilliant--he lived in his own world and was completely comfortable there especially towards the end of his life when he was in so much pain. He would sing snatches of classical music, talk to himself—not really be aware of his family around him. He was passionate about a lot of things and didn’t understand why others didn’t share his passions. His gifts to me are a love of books and reading, a love of animals and the importance of sharing what you have. And having a passion. He read to me every night and it wasn’t the usual kiddie stuff. He read plays like, “*The Importance of Being Ernest*” and lots of long novels, especially classics like *Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Peterkin Papers*, *Heidi*,

and Bambi (which made me cry). As a grown-up, he told me his criteria for reading to me was that he had to like the book. Ken was too active to sit still and listen until the Tolkien books. By then I felt I was too old to be read to and I wanted to read those books myself so that's a memory Ken has. My father was caring and respectful of all animals. He rescued a mouse from the neighborhood stray cat and built a cage so it could recover from its injuries. He stopped his mother from drowning baby rabbits she found in her garden in Iowa and we carted them back to Michigan, bottle-feeding them. When they bloodied their noses trying to get out of the cage, he explained to me how they would always be wild and we had to give them their freedom. He brought a baby opossum home when its life was threatened and gave it a chance to grow up and go free. That compassion extended to people, also. My parents were the first to give to needs in the neighborhood, attend funerals, give money. The widows on both sides of us had their lawns mowed and sidewalks shoveled. My mom baked and we delivered gifts at Christmas and baskets on May Day. The vegetables in the garden were freely given. That is just how we lived and that is a powerful lesson for a child.

Kenneth: He had a mind that was continuously whirling with bits and thoughts. It was sometimes hard to get his attention. In general he was a good father. We weren't rich but we got by.

John Grayshaw: What made him write novels? Was he a storyteller at heart? How did he become involved in writing science fiction?

Donna: He received a national writing award when he was in high school (and also one for music composition) so I think he enjoyed writing and did it well early on. He loved other people's stories—and he knew everyone has a story waiting to be told. He was a good listener and asked the right questions to draw people out. When he decided to write for the short story market he went to the store and there were a lot of science fiction magazines being published then (early 1950's on). He decided to try science fiction because there appeared to be a good market for it.

Kenneth: Somewhere is a comment, maybe his but at age 9 he knew that he wanted to write stories.

John Grayshaw: How did his interests in art and music influence his writing?

Donna: Music flowed through his blood. It wasn't just an interest but a way of living. He taught at University of Michigan and then at Eastern Michigan University, played in quartets, etc. There was always classical music playing on the radio. We didn't live too far from the Detroit Art Institute and I remember being taken to traveling exhibits there often. A friend of his wrote to me at his death that his

fellow high school students in Waterloo, Iowa always knew he would be famous but couldn't decide if it would be as a writer or as a musician/composer.

Kenneth: With a degree in Musicology one can understand how music would influence his stories.

John Grayshaw: Did his time in the military influence his life and writing? Did your father have permanent injuries from that experience?

Donna: I am quoting from his obituary (which he wrote himself, except for the final paragraph which was my responsibility): "During WWII he served as Communications Sergeant in a rifle company of the 102nd Infantry Division and was wounded in action twice. He received a shrapnel wound in his leg near the Elbe River at the end of the war, which left him disabled for life".

The wounds were not only physical. He boxed in his emotions, I think for his own protection.

Kenneth: He was in the European theatre and was wounded twice. That left him with some lifelong medical issues.

John Grayshaw: Did your dad tell you stories? What were they about? Did he read books with you? Which were his favorites?

Donna: I don't remember him telling me anything about his military experience except the countries he served in. I have a pair of wooden shoes, Belgium marble picture frames and some other memorabilia he brought back. He did tell stories about his dog, Muggs. He taught that dog a lot of tricks and that was fascinating to me. We didn't have a dog because my father didn't think it was fair to tie them up and we couldn't let them roam in our subdivision. After a few goldfish and a long-lived turtle, we settled on guinea pigs for pets and adored them. My father's guinea pig was named Schopenhauer after a German philosopher. He trained that guinea pig to sit on his shoulder while he read. He read a lot of different genres and, as I have mentioned, read widely to me. I remember a couple of his favorite children's books were The Jungle Books and Kim by Rudyard Kipling. I know they were favorites because I couldn't find my copies as an adult and he was rereading them. When I pointed out that they were children's books, he told me, "A good book is a good book."

Kenneth: He was quite quiet about his military experiences, telling very few stories. He read me the entire Tolkien book series. I still have those books.

John Grayshaw: What was it like when you were growing up? Was your dad talking about his writing at the dinner table?

Donna: About junior high, I became his proof-reader. In high school and college I read the long galley proofs for novels. He always read them first and caught any mistakes so I don't remember finding errors. I got too caught up in the stories, anyway. I also got the mail and always could tell when a manuscript had been rejected and returned. It really bothered me because I thought everything he wrote was great. Of course my father had the ability, most of the time, to shrug rejection off and try again. Which is why I never became a writer—I lack that gift...

Kenneth: Not that I remember. I'm sure his career and what was going on would have been brought up.

John Grayshaw: I see in the blurb for "The Glendower Conspiracy" that your father spent months researching the setting and background including on-site research in Wales and the British Isles? Did he typically do that level of research for his novels?

Donna: He was meticulous to the point of obsession. He had a whole rolodex file with the names of experts he could call on about anything. If he could travel to locations, he did. When we were in England, we went to the used bookstores and bought old maps, train time tables, etc. He had a whole book on gypsy caravans, which were a small part of a Lady Sara short story. He sent anything English to his friend Bill Temple. Bill and his wife went over the manuscripts painstakingly (I found seven pages of suggested changes in one of them). That was much appreciated by my father. He did not want to make mistakes.

Kenneth: Yes, he did. In his book "Hazard of Losers" which takes place in Las Vegas, every street mentioned and turn made were actually there. He did not like to get letters telling him that he got something wrong in a story.

John Grayshaw: What did he enjoy about the Jan Darzek series?

Donna: He really enjoyed the Jan Darzek character and of course there are some pretty quirky supporting characters, too.

Kenneth: I think that it was a problem solving on a galactic scale that started the series; saving planets from destruction.

John Grayshaw: Did he prefer to write short stories or novels?

Donna: Novels took a lot out of him physically and emotionally—he really invested time and energy in the research, etc. Short stories not so much. At the end of his life, he wrote short stories. He would go out on the back porch with his pipe and plot the whole thing out in his head. He didn't have the stamina for novels with his medical problems. And he wrote literally up to the end. At home, the pain controlled with morphine (which pretty well knocked him out), he was struggling to get up and go downstairs to his office. When told he was too weak for that, he said, "But I was just down there yesterday." That was true.

Kenneth: I don't know for sure. Even Monument started as a novella that was expanded (and might well I might add.)

John Grayshaw: In addition to Science Fiction he also wrote many mysteries. Did he prefer one over the other?

Donna: He enjoyed challenges and I think he saw changing to mysteries as a new challenge. He went back to SF short stories at the end of his life.

Kenneth: I don't think he preferred one over the other but he moved on to mysteries and finally then back to science fiction at the end of his life.

John Grayshaw: What is it about his short story "The Tunesmith" that resonated with people? Orson Scott Card said that story is what made him a writer.

Donna: It is about a very principled person—maybe we long for more of those.

Kenneth: I've heard that from many sources. It's a good short. I should read it again.

John Grayshaw: How did he get involved in the Oral History project? Why was he so passionate about it?

Donna: My father treasured people and their stories. He corresponded to the end of his life with friends from high school. He wrote regularly to somewhat distant relatives. When he started losing them to illnesses it impressed on him how easily pieces of history can just disappear. As with anything he did, when it became a passion to preserve SF history he went in 150 percent. He started the Science Fiction Oral History Association with a handful of people but he was the mover and the primary worker—and it

was a lot of work. At the end, I think it was pretty much him and that was disappointing to him because he just didn't have the strength to carry on. But he had helped preserve a lot of what could have been lost.

Kenneth: I think that at some point it became apparent to him that these famous authors had very few of their speaking sessions historically preserved, and once gone.....well they would be gone. No cell phones then and recording equipment was cumbersome.

John Grayshaw: What science fiction authors did your dad enjoy reading?

Donna: If he wasn't writing, he was reading. I don't remember a particular author but he sure owned a lot of books.

Kenneth: Everything and everybody's. I estimate that when he passed, his book collection was over 5,000 books. Donna believes that estimate might be low. She might be right.

Donna: I am right. It was thousands more. Many in boxes. In the attic.

John Grayshaw: Who within the writing profession did he correspond with? Any stories about those relationships?

Donna: My father had a very interesting variety of friends from a young lady my mom met at the Ann Arbor farmer's market who began showing up at our home during the holidays to Ben Bova and Joe Haldeman who stayed with my parents when they were in the area. Every month he went to dinner with a group of people he really enjoyed. I remember some of the regulars were Allen Hayes, an attorney, Howard Devore, SF fan extraordinaire and postal worker, Tom Sherrred, SF writer. Others came and went including Elmore "Dutch" Leonard who finally took off for the greener fields of Hollywood. Close friends in the SF world were Damon Knight and his wife Kate Wilhelm. We went to Pennsylvania to visit them and my parents later visited Poul and Karen Anderson in California. Dean McLaughlin and Tom Sherrred were also special to-the-end friends. When Tom had his stroke, my father worked on Alien Main to get it publishable and published. He wrote a tribute to Isaac Asimov for Analog Magazine and continued correspondence with Asimov's widow, Janet. He tried to bring SF writers to the SF desert that was Ypsilanti, Michigan, usually in connection with Eastern Michigan University or one of the writing groups. That led to extensive correspondence with a number of writers. I particularly remember a letter from L. Ron Hubbard begging off coming to a convention because, "this Scientology thing is really taking off".

Kenneth: Damon Knight, Poul Anderson, Dean McLaughlin, Tom Sherrred.....the list is long.

John Grayshaw: Did you go with your father to science fiction conventions? Any memories of these?

Donna: I went to a couple of local conferences but moved out of the area after college graduation. My work prevented much involvement.

Kenneth: I went with him to a Sci-Fi convention in Long Beach, California. It was my graduation present. We then toured northern California.

John Grayshaw: A fan of your father's work named Bill Plott has shared almost 40 letters your father wrote him over the course of more than 20 years. Did your father keep in touch with many of his fans to this degree?

Donna: He took letters he received very seriously and respectfully. He believed if someone took the time to write, they were entitled to a reply. I have several from fans who wrote back saying, in essence "I can't believe you wrote back to me." I remember trying to get him to consider the Internet for correspondence and he was horrified that he might actually have more correspondence with fans. He couldn't keep up with the letters he was getting, especially at the end of his life, and it bothered him.

Kenneth: I think that he personally replied to any fan that wrote him. Remember we are talking snail mail. And long-distance phone calls were expensive.

John Grayshaw: Do you know of any future adaptations of your father's works in TV or movies?

Donna: At one point Monument came very close to being made into a film. My father wrote the screen play and there were costume designs, some animation, etc. Filming was supposed to be in the Philippines but there was a change in government and then John Flory, the mover behind it all, died unexpectedly. It was sad because it would have made a great film.

Kenneth: I'm working on it, but it takes tons of money to make a movie.

John Grayshaw: Your family published several of his works after his death. Has everything been published now?

Donna: Because I enjoy the Lady Sara short stories so much, I would love to do a collection of them. However, they have to be put into electronic format or edited in the format they are in. Ken did an amazing job on The World that Death Made. It had to be put into Word and it is a LOOONNNNGGG novel.

Kenneth: Donna and I have published almost everything.

John Grayshaw: What were some of your father's hobbies other than writing? Was he a good artist and musician?

Donna: He loved music and had professional status. He enjoyed his walks every morning when health allowed and was a keen observer of our neighborhood. He read voraciously. He enjoyed the wildlife in his sub-division backyard and built and filled bird feeders and became an expert on identifying birds and bird calls and on war tactics for squirrels. He put a nine room addition onto our home. Although that wasn't a hobby, it sure took a lot of time. He did the blueprints and everything else—plumbing, wiring, building—except pouring the foundation and he supervised that. It was pretty amazing. If he wanted something done, he got a book and learned to do it. Except cars. There, he deferred to Ken. When we were kids, we played board games with him regularly. He would have really enjoyed knowing that he was included in Star Traders, an SF game published by Panda Games. There is a nice bio of him (and other writers) which concludes with, "Biggle's work is fun but not as well-known as some of the other authors here. I'm glad I ran across him." I think this is a very accurate summary. The story featured is "Petty Larceny" from Rule of the Door and Other Fanciful Regulations. I love that story and really appreciate its inclusion. Also, the game is fun to play. Wish he were here to play it. He and my mom enjoyed traveling. Every year, as adults, we all had a family vacation together. They were meticulously planned and a lot of fun. My parents' favorite place to vacation was Las Vegas. My mom said that they could forget their health issues and other problems and just "play". They went twice a year and the money they gambled was "found" money. My father took long walks and would find bottles to return, money dropped in the drive-through at MacDonald's, left in pay phones, etc. My mother saved all that, which surprisingly was a decent amount, and that it what they gambled.

Kenneth: He enjoyed art, but he was a great musician. His instrument of choice was the clarinet, although I've heard him play the piano, and oboe.

John Grayshaw: Did your father have a writing routine he stuck to?

Donna: He went down to his office every day and was working on something—correspondence, research, writing—all the time. Sometimes he was playing Solitaire which freed up his mind to think. And being Lloyd Biggle, he kept a ledger of all his games and scores...

Kenneth: He spent a LOT of time writing. I would say almost daily.

John Grayshaw: What is your father's legacy?

Donna: Bringing a more humane and cultural face to Science Fiction. Even the oddest characters and their surroundings are treated with respect. He also influenced a lot of people—how many we will never know—by encouraging them and sharing his time and talents with them. Erik Leif Davin has written a couple of wonderful pieces on my father's influence on his life as well as Orson Scott Card's intro to Tunesmith. He was a generous man.

Kenneth: I would guess the blending of the musical arts with his talent to put it on paper.

I still miss him.

Donna: Last winter a couple of opossums moved into the heated cat houses on my back deck (there were still enough houses for the cats). I observed some very interesting aspects of opossum behavior and wanted to tell him about it so badly. He would have been fastinated and then contacted one of his experts on opossum behavior and given me the answers to my questions. I literally ached missing him.



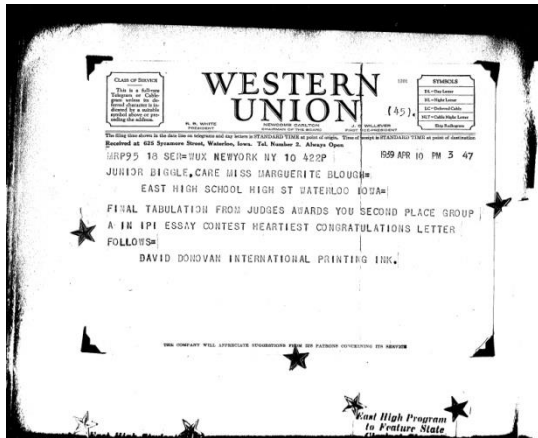
Dust jacket photo from *Fury Out of Time*



My father and his dog, Muggs—legendary for the tricks he was taught



National first place quartet—my father is top left



Announcement of second place national writing award when my father was in high school



Announcement of first place music composition award, high school