

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Paul Kincaid (June 2021)

Paul Kincaid's book on Brian Aldiss, part of the Modern Master of Science Fiction series will be published in 2022. His writing has appeared in a wide range of publications including New Scientist, Times Literary Supplement, Literary Review, New York Review of Science Fiction, Foundation, Science Fiction Studies, Interzone and Strange Horizons. He is a former editor of Vector, the critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association.

Antoine Tinnion: Not all sci-fi authors are particularly good writers (although they may have great imaginations to compensate). Aldiss was. What impact did his literary ability have on his writing/popular success?

I would rephrase that slightly. Rather than saying he was a good writer, I'd say he could be. But he could also be careless, slapdash, rushed, crude and cliched, and to be honest when you read a whole load of his books one after the other it is not always clear that he could tell the difference. There were books of sheer brilliance immediately followed by books that are aching bad (most of them now, mercifully, forgotten). Also he suffered from being an experimentalist, and we all know that experiments can fail as often as they succeed. Let's face it, in a career of exactly 60 years, he wrote over 80 books, not counting the poetry books, the books he edited, the plays, and this and that and all the other stuff. Nobody can be brilliant all the time when keeping up that sort of work rate. So I think that if he had written less, but written more carefully, he might have had even more success than he achieved.

Richard Whyte: Billion Year Spree or Trillion Year Spree?

For me, *Billion Year Spree*. It reads like a passion project, full of individual quirky perceptions. Some of that quirkiness has been smoothed out in *Trillion Year Spree*, so it has a more corporate feel.

Andrew Frost: Aldiss was a hugely productive writer, with a long list of published works over several decades. What in Kincaid's view were the uniting themes of Aldiss's fiction?

There were three themes that can be traced throughout his entire career. They are interlinked in complex ways, but you can separate them out as follows:

- 1) The War. Aldiss joined the army straight from school, and in 1944 was sent to join the forgotten army in Burma. He served there, then in various places in the East, notably Sumatra and Hong Kong, until he was repatriated in 1947. The army provided the first comradeship he had known; he hid his public school background from his fellows so he was always one of the lads. But fighting in the jungles of Burma was frightening, and on the ground the war itself seemed futile. These confusing experiences fed into everything he wrote: the expedition through the ponics-choked corridors of the spaceship in *Non-Stop* is a reproduction of Burma, as is the jungle of *Hothouse*; while both *A Soldier Erect* and *Forgotten Lives* draw directly on these experiences.
- 2) Disillusion. When he returned home to Britain in 1947, in the middle of the austerity years, he found it colourless and diminished, and these characteristics keep cropping up. Colourless worlds and settings are everywhere, from *Greybeard* to *Helliconia*, while humans who have devolved into smaller beings are even more evident in *Non-Stop* and *Cryptozoic*, in *Enemies of the System* and *Moreau's Other Island*. These and various other ways of showing his disillusion with Britain are among the most consistent aspects of his work.

- 3) The East: For Aldiss, as he said in numerous places, the East he discovered in the army was warm, colourful and sexy; the West was cold, colourless and sexless. The East also represents nature – the setting of *Hothouse* is based on a banyan tree he saw in Calcutta – while the West is the denial of nature (see *The Dark Light Years* or *Earthworks*, for instance). The East was desire, the West was disillusion. Curiously, for all that the East dominated his emotions, he doesn't seem to have returned there often, and when he did (if we are to believe his autobiography, which isn't the most reliable of sources) he spent much of his time trying to relocate the prostitutes he had known when in the army.

Imre Bopp: Did Aldiss want to break out of science fiction, or did he just want more respect for the genre? At times it seems like he was drifting from SF, but always seemed to come back home.

To be honest, I think he was more interested in earning more respect for his own work rather than the genre in general. There's a quote from Deena Brown, "Let's get science fiction back in the gutter where it belongs", and Aldiss would repeat that with evident approval (I heard him do so on several occasions). But he would never want his own work to be cast into the gutter.

There is a curious if revealing passage in *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's*, in which he very carefully lists all of his establishment credentials: chair of this, member of that, and so on. Then, at the end, he adds: of course I'm not a member of the establishment because I'm interested in science. An interest in science never stopped anyone being a member of the establishment before. I think he liked his own status, but also liked the idea that science fiction was somehow rebellious, anti-establishment, a blow against conformity. Which meant there was a sort of kudos in being associated with sf, so long as his own status was unchallenged.

Jamie Smith: Solitude always seemed to be a feature of the main character in his books. What inspired that theme?

To an extent this goes back to what I said earlier about disillusion. It is not so much that his characters experience solitude (some do, but most of his central characters have companions of one sort or another), but that they are alienated from their society. Even in that supreme study in alienation, *Report on Probability A*, the three sad and lonely men who are watching the house have a support network. The cook in the house looks after them, and the owner of the café across the road feeds them, even Mr Mary's wife will sometimes talk to them. Their solitude, such as it is, is entirely of their own choosing.

Donovan S. Brain: BWA had a lot of side projects. He was also the author of the bawdy Horatio Stubbs trilogy (THE HAND-REARED BOY, A SOLDIER ERECT, and A RUDE AWAKENING), and the mainstream novels of the Squire Quartet. He wrote poetry and painted pictures and knew a lot of rude songs and limericks. Do you reckon he'd have been as famous without the SF novels?

A tricky question, and I'm not absolutely sure of the answer. We have to remember that he first made a name for himself with the Brightfount Diaries that appeared regularly in *The Bookseller*. There was quite a clamour among publishers for the rights to bring out the book of *The Brightfount Diaries*. So his initial fame came from his non-sf writing, and if he had continued along that route, writing lightly comic mainstream fiction along the lines of Kingsley Amis (whose first novel, *Lucky Jim*, appeared only a year before *The Brightfount Diaries*) I see no reason why he would not have enjoyed a similar career. And although he had difficulty at first getting a publisher to take *The Hand-Reared Boy* (more because of the

bawdiness than anything else, I suspect) it went on to sell well, so again the opportunity for a career outside science fiction opened, and there is no reason to assume he wouldn't have been equally successful. Though if you read the introduction to *Helliconia Spring*, you'll see he was disappointed with the reception for the first of the Squire novels, so maybe science fiction was a surer path to success.

On the other hand, I'm pretty sure that his poetry and plays enjoyed whatever attention they did receive because he had already made his name elsewhere.

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

Would opportunism be a reasonable answer? The thing is, there was a gap in the market. Three previous critical studies of Aldiss had been written, but the most recent of them was 35 years ago, and that was the only one of the three to give even a passing mention to *Helliconia*. Since then, silence; and I reckoned that Aldiss deserved better than that.

As for what drew me to his work, it was my ambiguity about him. Those three earlier books were, quite frankly, closer to hagiography than critical study. But that didn't ring true. I don't know anyone, even his friends, who adored everything that Aldiss wrote. Everyone I talked to about the book agreed that his work could seesaw from the brilliant to the abysmal. People would differ wildly about which books fell into which camp, but there was no arguing about the seesawing. I feel that any study of Aldiss that didn't recognize this was not being true to the work.

So, you have someone who is unquestionably one of the more important writers in science fiction, but who hasn't received anything like the attention he deserves. At the same time you have someone whose work demands a response that is both pro and anti, often at exactly the same time. How could anyone resist?

John Grayshaw: What do you feel are Aldiss' most significant works? And why?

John Grayshaw: Do you have personal favorites of his work? And why?

I'm going to treat these two as one question, because I'm not sure I feel comfortable distinguishing between significant and personal favourite (see my comments about ambiguity above). These are, in roughly chronological order, the works by Aldiss that I think deserve to stand the test of time:

Non-Stop – The war in Burma transposed into the stifling, overgrown corridors of a spaceship. But that's not the point of the story: what is important is the way that the inhabitants of the spaceship have been diminished, through no fault of their own, and because of that they can never go home again. In one bold work, Aldiss destroyed both the traditional Heinleinesque space adventure and the complacency of postwar Britain.

Hothouse – Probably the first and certainly one of the finest works of environmental science fiction. When in India, Aldiss had seen workers in the fields living a life in which nothing changed, and nothing had changed for centuries. Thereafter, stasis became one of the abiding images in his work, and here he carries off the extraordinary trick of using profuse organic growth as an image of stasis.

Greybeard – Perhaps the best novel he wrote. The picture of old people growing ever older in a world in which there is no future is powerful, vivid and incredibly moving. Also, so far as I can tell, this is his only

novel in which the central character is in a lifelong, companionable, happy marriage, and he wrote it just after his first marriage fell apart and he thought he would never see his children again.

“The Girl and the Robot with Flowers” – From the 1970s onwards, the quality of Aldiss’s short stories became decidedly hit and miss, but from the late-50s through to the early-70s he was peerless as a short story writer. Among those that stand out are “Old Hundredth” and “Who Can Replace A Man?”, but for me this is his best story. I would say it is one of my all-time favourite science fiction stories, except that it’s not really science fiction, although it is about science fiction, and in particular it is a wonderful account of the intellectual thinking behind the New Wave.

Report on Probability A – The first time I read this I thought it was terrible; the second time I thought it was brilliant. Now I consider it one of the essential works of science fiction (though, again, it’s not really science fiction). Other than that there’s nothing much I can say, except read it slowly and carefully and pay attention to the way he is describing a world in which there is no before and no after.

Barefoot in the Head – This is one of the books I would probably list as significant, but not as a favourite. The linguistic efflorescence loses me every time. But if you want a sense of what the New Wave was, this is where you probably need to start.

Billion Year Spree – Just because.

The Malacia Tapestry – Aldiss didn’t write much fantasy, but this is as masterful as any of his science fiction. The description of a world in absolute stasis is both gorgeous and terrifying. Descriptive writing really doesn’t come much better than this.

Helliconia Winter – I suppose you have to read the whole trilogy, if only to note the way the first book opens with a lone figure emerging from a whiteout, and the last book closes with a lone figure disappearing into a whiteout. But really this last volume is where it all came together. It also marks the exact mid-point of his career, while being the last science fiction book of any genuine worth that he wrote.

John Grayshaw: What are some of Aldiss’ work that you feel should be better known than they are?

See above.

John Grayshaw: What is the New Wave of Science Fiction? And what do you think is Aldiss’ part in it?

First of all, there were two New Waves, which overlapped but which were very different in character. The British New Wave, which came first, began in 1964 when Moorcock became editor of *New Worlds*. What characterized the British New Wave was a deliberate turning of the back on what were seen as tired and traditional forms of science fiction, the British catastrophe story, the American space adventure. Stories would typically concern the here and now, would explore what Ballard called “inner space”, that is, the mind, and would employ narrative techniques taken, belatedly, from literary modernism. That is, they might employ unreliable narrators, stream of consciousness, and avant garde experimentalism.

American New Wave came along a couple of years later and is typified by Harlan Ellison’s anthology, *Dangerous Visions*. The literary character of the British New Wave was ditched in favour of a

countercultural breaking of taboos. So the American New Wave was characterized by sex and drugs and politics, that had all been pretty well absent from American science fiction to that point.

As to Aldiss's role in all of this, would you understand if I said I thought he was integral to the New Wave without actually being a part of it? He was already over 40 when the New Wave really got going, someone with establishment friends, suits, short hair and a liking for classical music in an environment of young people in jeans and long hair playing pop all the time. He was never part of that, and famously played virtually no part in the free-for-all editorial sessions at Ladbrook Grove. But at the same time he was, with Ballard and Moorcock, part of the triumvirate that set the tone for the New Wave, loudly declaring his opposition to the old and tired forms of sf even while much of what he wrote was following exactly those forms.

John Grayshaw: How did Aldiss' miserable childhood effect his writing?

Ah, you know about the miserable childhood. For the benefit of those who don't, he was the grandson of the man who owned a large department store in East Dereham, Norfolk, and the family lived on the premises. The various outbuildings where the watchers live in *Report on Probability A* match the various outbuildings around the department store where he spent his childhood. His mother seems not to have been very happy there, which probably contributed to some unfortunate incidents. He had an older sister who died at birth, but his mother insisted that she had lived for six months and that she, the mother, wanted a girl more than she wanted Brian. When his younger sister was born, Brian was suffering from an illness that is trivial now but that at the time could kill a newborn infant. So he was immediately packed off to stay with his mother's parents. This lasted six weeks though he remembered it as being six months, and he felt like he was being exiled from the family. And afterwards his mother would regularly threaten to walk out on him, and on one occasion seems to have done just that.

Then his grandfather died, his father was ousted from his part in the family business. They moved, first to the coast then, after the outbreak of war, to Devon, which Aldiss interpreted as exile from the beloved family home. It didn't help that he was almost immediately sent away to boarding school, which he hated. On the plus side, his mother seems to have been happier in Devon, even though they were living in reduced circumstances, so family life was probably easier. Nevertheless, all of this must have contributed to his sense of alienation. And on the few occasions when Norfolk shows up in his fiction, in "The Saliva Tree", for instance, or *Brothers of the Head*, it tends to be a place of menace. And scenes from his childhood crop up, almost unchanged, in works like *The Hand-Reared Boy* and *Cryptozoic*.

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

Aldiss rarely named specific works, but there are clues. We know that the semi-pornographic stories he told in the school dorm tended to include sf elements. We know that he was very well versed in the American science fiction of the 1930s and 40s (just look at the number of stories from this period that he included in the various anthologies he edited, and at the time he was producing these anthologies the stories weren't readily available unless you actually had the original magazines to hand). So I think we can basically say that he was reading any sf magazine he could lay his hands on. Also his adoration for H.G. Wells suggests that he was reading Wells from a fairly early age.

John Grayshaw: Who are some writers that were Aldiss' contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired?

There's a moment, I think it's in *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's* but I can't offhand recall for sure, when he talks about how, in the 1950s, there was only one other British writer whose work he admired, and that was J.G. Ballard. There's only one problem with this: at the specific time he is talking about Ballard had only just published his very first short story. I think we can take it on trust that Aldiss despised every other British writer at that time, but we need to take his discovery of Ballard with a pinch of salt. Everything Aldiss wrote about his past was similarly unreliable. I know that he would like someone for a while, then go off them, then suddenly be all friendly again as if nothing had ever come between them. So identifying other writers he liked is not something you can place a great deal of reliance on.

The best guide is probably to look for those writers he referred to again and again. "The Girl and the Robot with Flowers" is a good example, because it is clearly autobiographical. And in that story the other writers the unnamed narrator admires include Harry Harrison, Frederik Pohl, Jimmy Ballard, and Mike Moorcock. We should also remember that Harrison and Kingsley Amis were his drinking buddies, so he probably liked their work also.

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

This is probably even more difficult to answer than which other writers he admired. He could be fiercely protective of his work. *White Mars*, for instance, which is when all is said and done not one of his best novels, was the subject of a generally favourable essay in *Foundation*. The next issue of the journal contained a long letter from Aldiss lambasting the author of the essay for not mentioning certain specific details about the novel, even though those particular details were completely irrelevant to the topic of the essay. And if there was an unfavourable review of one of Aldiss's books, the chances are that the next issue of the magazine would include a letter from one of his close associates, Harry Harrison or Brian Griffin, saying how wrong the reviewer was. And he would often take the slightest disagreement as a personal attack. More than once, when I have said in print something like I don't think that the cosy catastrophes are actually that cosy, I have received a postcard from Aldiss saying: "Why do you hate me so?" And I'm not alone in this.

At the same time, he set great store by his books until they disappointed him in some way. The brief preface to *Helliconia Spring*, for instance, which takes the form of a letter to his son Clive, is all about how much he had invested in *Life in the West*, the first of the Squire novels, but it hadn't performed as well as he expected, so he had shifted his efforts to Helliconia instead.

So, did Aldiss have favourites among his own works? Who knows!

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

Again, not an easy question. Some books, such as the Helliconia Trilogy, list a whole bunch of scientists who contributed to the work, which suggests an awful lot of research was involved in constructing the world. But I have a feeling this was an exception. I think the more common pattern was not that he would get an idea then research it, but rather that his wide reading would spark an idea that would then go straight into a story. Early in his career, two books had a profound impact on him, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and *Madkind* by Charles Berg, and ideas taken from these two books would show up continually in his work. And it can hardly be said to be research, but the novel *Frankenstein Unbound* was written at more or less the same time that he was writing the chapter on *Frankenstein* for *Billion Year Spree*. Given that the Aldiss avatar in the novel gets to take Mary Shelley to bed, and tell her all

about her novel before she has even started writing it, this seems less the product of research than a propagandist move to suggest that Aldiss himself was the actual father of science fiction. And there are times when what research he did was more *post hoc* justification for his invention, and rather careless at that. For *Brothers of the Head*, for instance, he had a nightmare about conjoined twins with an atrophied third head, did a little research and came up with the medical term *diprosopus tetrotus*, and thus he had scientific backing for his idea. But that's not what *diprosopus tetrotus* means (it actually refers to extra features on the one head, a second nose or another pair of eyes), so the research he conducted was hardly exhaustive.

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

Aldiss was a gossip, he liked nothing better than to sit in a large circle of acolytes (usually male), drinking and telling salacious stories about anyone who wasn't present. If you were happy to pay court to him, or tell him how good he was, then you were a genius. When Christopher Priest was a young, would-be writer, he wrote to Aldiss saying how much he liked his stuff and asking for information about the sf community. When the two met for the first time a couple of years later, Aldiss greeted him as "you're the young man who has such good taste."

I remember being in a circle around Aldiss at some convention or other while he regaled us with a story about a time when he and Arthur C. Clarke were both guests at a convention in Japan. For some reason the two were sharing a hotel room, it may have been the bridal suite, and the hotel provided colour-coded dressing gowns and slippers, blue for the man and pink for the woman. Aldiss, true to form, went straight down to the bar while Clarke retired to bed. When Aldiss returned to the room he found a note from Clarke: "I've taken the pink slippers, it seems appropriate." This was a time when Clarke's sexuality was still something of a secret.

All of this relates to male fans. If you were a woman, by all accounts, Aldiss could be a pest.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his correspondence, friendships, and/or collaborations with JG Ballard, Harry Harrison, and Michael Moorcock?

Not much. I know that from the moment Moorcock took over *New Worlds*, he and Ballard and Aldiss would get together and agree how much they hated the tired, worn out forms of science fiction (even though all three of them actually wrote things in those tired, worn-out forms. But after Aldiss died, Moorcock's obituary was rather ambiguous, calling him "generous, petty, tolerant, rude, gracious, charming and cruel."

Harrison was a different matter. They seem to have met sometime in the late-50s or early-60s (I'm not exactly clear on the circumstances) and found they had a real bond. They would frequently go galivanting off around Europe or, later, America, finding new places to drink, new foods to try, and, if their wives weren't with them, womanizing.

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

Aldiss collaborated with Harry Harrison in editing a string of anthologies, but the only person he openly collaborated with on his fiction was Roger Penrose, on *White Mars* (though Penrose never had anything

else to do with fiction in his entire career, and it isn't exactly clear how extensive his contribution was to this book). There are several short stories credited as being collaborations, including a couple of the pieces that make up *Barefoot in the Head*, but in each instance the collaborator is one of Aldiss's pseudonyms.

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

I think mostly I've found out how unreliable Aldiss is. It started in a small way. He was writing about his time in the bookshop in Oxford, and mentioned serving Evelyn Waugh when Waugh was in the middle of writing *Brideshead Revisited*. I knew that couldn't be the case, because *Brideshead* had been published while Aldiss was still in Sumatra. I started paying attention after that, and there were more and more things that didn't add up. There is a story that I came across in at least three different places, how he was staying in his girlfriend's flat in Oxford and one morning she found an odd package at the door. When they opened it, it turned out to be the Hugo Award for *Hothouse*, and he said, in every version of the story, that at the time he had no idea what a Hugo was. Except that a few years before that he had received a plaque when he was shortlisted for a Hugo Award for Best Newcomer. And at the time he was chairman of the BSFA, and contributing regularly to fanzines on both sides of the Atlantic. So it is inconceivable that he hadn't come across the Hugos before then. Another story that he repeated several times was that he wrote *Report on Probability A* as a thank you for all the people who voted to give *Hothouse* the Hugo. Except, again, the timing doesn't add up; the original version of *Report on Probability A*, then called *Garden With Figures*, was being rejected by publishers before *Hothouse* appeared, let alone before it won a Hugo. I think they were just stories he told so often that they became fixed in his mind, and he never bothered to check the dates.

John Grayshaw: What did Stanley Kubrick see in "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" that made him want to adapt it into a movie? And why didn't the project happen in his lifetime?

For that, you'll have to ask an expert on Kubrick. I've no idea.

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

The first Aldiss novel to be filmed was *Frankenstein Unbound* by Roger Corman. Aldiss was so excited by the film that he proposed a sequel to Corman, *Dracula Unbound*. But *Frankenstein Unbound* was a flop, and Corman quickly dropped the idea of a sequel, so Aldiss turned it into a novel instead. A pretty bad novel at that. The only other novel that was filmed was *Brothers of the Head*. Have you ever heard of it? No, neither had I until I did some research. Another flop. With that record, I don't suspect film makers will be queueing up to make more of his stuff. Though I do think *Greybeard* would make a great film.

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

No. Aldiss had announced his retirement before he died, so there wouldn't have been any unfinished work. Of the two novels he wrote before *The Brightfount Diaries*, one was abandoned unfinished, and the other was rejected. Both, I believe, are lost, and I don't think Aldiss would have wanted either of them to see the light of day.

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

From all I can gather, his routine was one that most writers follow, just make sure you write a certain number of words or for a certain number of hours each day. He had to be very disciplined, given the amount he turned out. His last collection of original stories, *The Invention of Happiness*, which came out in 2013 when he was already approaching 90, consisted of 33 stories that he wrote in the space of one month in 2012. You have to be disciplined to do that at that age.

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

He liked performing, and I suspect that most of the plays he wrote were to provide an excuse for him to perform. He also dabbled in painting. He liked travel. But mostly he wrote.

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

There was an issue of *Foundation* that came out just a year or two after Aldiss's death and it was devoted to essays about *Frankenstein* and its various reincarnations. When I read through it, I was horrified to realise there was not a single mention of Aldiss. Neither *Billion Year Spree* nor *Frankenstein Unbound* merited so much as a footnote. I hope that was an aberration, that he hasn't been forgotten, that his legacy lives on.

Why was his work significant? Because, quite simply, he changed science fiction. There aren't many writers you can say that about: Wells, his hero; his beloved Mary Shelley; John W. Campbell, and Aldiss was one of the founders of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. But Aldiss is certainly up there. His work in the late 50s and early 60s gave notice that something fresh was happening in sf, and then came the New Wave, and Aldiss was instrumental in providing its aesthetic and its impetus. Every single writer who emerged from the New Wave, and many of those who emerged in the aftermath of the New Wave, was influenced by Aldiss whether they know it or not. And then, with *Billion Year Spree*, he changed science fiction again, because he made science fiction self aware, conscious of its own history.

What's his legacy? Look around you! The science fiction we see today, still, owes a debt to Brian Aldiss.

Why is he still important? He wrote a lot of bad books, a lot that is forgettable. But he wrote 6 or 8 works that stand the test of time, that can be read today with pleasure and with benefit. And that is more than most. After all, H.G. Wells's legacy in science fiction rests on about five books, and that's a good average. If we don't read and remember Aldiss, we are forgetting what science fiction can do.