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

Paul Tomlinson compiled Harry Harrison: An Annotated Bibliography Annotated Bibliography. With fellow author Michael Carroll he created and maintains Harry Harrison – The Official Website and for many years he ran a Harry Harrison news blog. He also writes genre fiction and books about how to write genre fiction. He is a qualified librarian and before becoming a freelance writer he worked in academic libraries and the book trade. His website is www.paultomlinson.org

Antoine Tinnion: What did Harry Harrison think of the 2000AD comic version of the Stainless Steel Rat (which many of us Brits loved)

I loved it too, the artwork was great. The comics introduced a lot of people in the UK to Harry's stories and he definitely appreciated that. If anything, he felt the scripts stuck too closely to his books – he felt they should have cut more to keep the plot moving. He'd been a comics writer and artist himself and knew that too many words in a comic slowed things down and hampered the artist.

Eva Sable: Is there a particular work of his that fully embodies his strengths as a writer?

This is a good question and one I've thought about a few times. Harry wrote three kinds of story – fast-paced action-adventure stories or thrillers; humour, and serious science fiction. His best book would be one where he brought all of these things together. The *West of Eden* trilogy probably comes closest to achieving this, though there is only a limited amount of humour in it. The problem with humour is that people don't take it seriously so I think this caused him to keep it out of the books he wanted people to see as 'proper' science fiction.

Bill Rogers: Paul, Harry created a classic anti-SF-militarism and anti-war story in 'Bill the Galactic Hero'; do you know if writing the novel was his way of simply protesting against the militarism pervading science fiction, if he had the larger goal of voicing his hatred of war generally (the latter showing up more plainly in the anthology he edited, 'There Won't Be War'), or both?

Harry Harrison had an anti-authoritarian streak and loved to poke fun at the people in charge. He hated the tax man and he hated the military! He was drafted into the army on his eighteenth birthday and excelled as a technician, working on the analog computers that were used to control weapons. He felt that *Catch-22* was an accurate depiction of the chaos and incompetence that was military life. He ended up in Texas, teaching young men to shoot guns and I think he hated pretty much every minute of his time there. *The Stainless Steel Rat Gets Drafted* is probably based more on his own experiences with the army than *Bill.*

Harry didn't like the way some forms of science fiction glorified war and Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* was the main target for the humour in *Bill.* He took particular exception to Heinlein's suggestion that only men with military experience were fit to decide how things should be run.

I know Harry once challenged a well-known writer of military SF ('no names, no pack drill' to quote HH) to join him in a collaboration. The challenge was that Harry would write one side of the novel from a right-wing pro-military standpoint and the other writer was to write the opposite side from a left-wing liberal viewpoint. The challenge wasn't accepted.

During the Vietnam war, science fiction writers split into pro- and anti- groups and HH put his signature to the anti-war statement that was published.

SFBC Member: Do you have a story about the genesis of the Deathworld idea? I've always found its premise, a planet where there is literally no square inch that is not looking to bite you, fascinating.

I don't know what idea originally sparked the first Deathworld novel. Harry wanted to write for John W. Campbell and he definitely wanted the money that would come from a three-part *Astounding* serialization! The fact that the hero is somewhat psychic in the first one was included because Campbell had an interest in the possibility of psi abilities at the time. With hindsight, the idea of a planet's wildlife fighting back against human 'invaders' seems to support what we now call a 'green agenda', but I'm not sure to what extent this was deliberate on Harry's part back then.

Chris Sudall: How much of a hand did Harry have in the later Deathworld and Bill the Galactic Hero books? Was he a fan of them? (and the classic: will the later Deathworld books ever be translated?)

Harry was closely involved in the Bill series, he acted as editor and reviewed the manuscripts as they came in. I remember him saying to me at one point that he was rewriting one of them and 'putting some jokes in'. I assume the idea for the series came from a book packager – they were all the rage at the time – and I think it's fair to say Harry accepted because he was offered money to do it. From things he said much later I got the impression that he thought that series had been a mistake.

My understanding is that Harry had no input in the Deathworld books that were added to the series in Russia. Harry Harrison is an incredibly popular author in Russia and his books are printed in huge numbers. If I remember correctly, the print runs are listed at the back of the books and the numbers are significant. Harry was very proud of a couple of samizdat editions in his collection – bootlegged translations of his books published before the iron curtain came down. He was once told that he was the most pirated science fiction author in the former Soviet Union. After all of his available books had officially been published in Russia, his agent and publishers wanted more and so an agreement was made where new Deathworld books would be written by Russian authors.

If I had a dollar for every time I've been asked about those Russian books being translated…! Harry agreed to them being published as long as they were only issued within the countries that made up the former Soviet Union. The copyright is owned jointly by Harry Harrison's estate and the company of the Russian literary agent who commissioned them. I don't know if it will be possible for an agreement to be made for them to be translated into English. It would be ironic if 'samizdat' English translations began to circulate in the West, wouldn't it?

Blaine Savini: The obvious question...What did Mr. Harrison think of the changes they made in his novel when they made Soylent Green?

Harry Harrison used to tour the lecture circuit in the USA giving a talk on his experiences with this film – I would love to hear a tape recording of what he said! I've heard him talk at SF conventions and he wrote an essay titled 'A Cannibalized Novel Becomes Soylent Green' which was, I believe, based on his talk.

Harry's opinion of this project was coloured by the fact that he felt he had been cheated by the contract with the production company. He said their letterhead was a picture of a woodscrew and a large letter

'U'. If I understand correctly, the contract awarded him royalties after the movie went into profit, but the financing of the film was such that it never showed a profit. I may be wrong about that. And I don't want to get sued for stating it as a fact!

Harry wasn't impressed by the screenplay – he thought the addition of the cannibalism thing was stupid and unnecessary. Soylent Green isn't people and it isn't a 'miracle plankton food', it's soyabeans and lentils. The clue is in the name. My understanding is that he publicly mocked the screenwriter when they both received Nebula Awards in 1973. But I know he enjoyed meeting Edward G. Robinson and talking about his character – who Harry described as a future version of himself who felt guilty about not having done enough to protect the environment. And he was proud that, despite the inept script, much of the background of his story still ended up on the screen.

Damo Mac Choiligh: This may be an overly personal question… why did Harrison leave Dublin after his wife Joan died? Did he just not want to stay in the same house he had lived in with her? Or was the apartment in Brighton just more practical as he got older?

Mr. and Mrs. Harrison left Dublin and bought a house in Cork. They wanted to live in Ireland in a place that was close to an airport. During Mrs. Harrison's illness they spent more time in England to be near their family.

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

I first read Harry Harrison's *Spaceship Medic* when I was ten years old, my school had a copy in the library. A few weeks after that I got *The Stainless Steel Rat* from the public library, probably on my Dad's library card. After that I read everything by him that I could find. Later, when I became involved in SF fandom, I wrote to Harry and said I'd like to do a HH fanzine and he said he thought that was a great idea! I met him first in 1984 and probably saw him once a year after that, and then much more often in his later years when he stopped going to conventions and I started visiting him at home. He used to call me 'fan number one' and then later started introducing me as his friend, and that was pretty cool.

Obviously, I'm not going to be able to give you an objective opinion about his work. I'm not a proper critic and he was my mentor and my friend. If I had to pick one thing that, for me, made him unique and notable, it would be the fact that he could write a well-paced story with all the bright trappings of science fiction while still remaining true to his own values. He was a bit of a paradox – a 'Campbell writer' who wasn't a technocrat, a soldier who hated the military, a humorist who attacked serious targets, and an anti-authoritarian with a deep respect for the US constitution.

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

Make Room! Make Room! is a great book with an important message – the foreground story is a straightforward crime thriller but all the important stuff, what mankind has done to our planet, exists in the background and creeps up on you. It's a shame that the novel is overshadowed by a film adaptation that doesn't do it justice.

West of Eden is Harry Harrison at his peak – a deeply researched alternate world story that finally made him a bestseller. Humans and dinosaurs never existed together on Earth, despite what the movies show us – Harry created a world where they did and he made it work. Genius.

If you want to find out what Harry Harrison really cared about, you have to read his short stories. Some of those are very angry and quite bitter. The classic is 'The Streets of Ashkelon' where he explores the damage that a Christian missionary can do to a naïve and innocent race of people.

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

I'm a *Stainless Steel Rat* fan – that book lit the fire for me when I was a kid and I've read the first book dozens of times since. The hero thumbs his nose at authority, how could I not love that? *Make Room! Make Room!* I mentioned above. And Harry was writing the *West of Eden* trilogy when I first met him, so that remains a favourite too. I even did a little work for him, creating a list of all the characters and their relationships from the first two books in the trilogy before he wrote the last one.

John Grayshaw: What are some of Harrison's work that you feel should be better known than they are?

I think *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!* is a book that doesn't get the credit it deserves. It is one of the few times when he used humour in a 'proper' novel rather than in a spoof. It's written in the style of a Victorian novel, even though its set in an alternate universe version of the 1970s, and it's also an early version of what later became steampunk. Anthony Burgess sent Harry a note saying how much he enjoyed it, though Harry suspected that he liked it because he read it as a celebration of the British empire rather than a satire.

I have a nagging feeling that Harry Harrison and many other writers of his generation (and earlier) are gradually fading from public attention. The nature of the publishing industry now seems to demand that authors publish regularly to remain in the reader's eye. Authors of the past are going to disappear unless Netflix adapts one of their stories or a publisher makes a concerted effort to publicize their backlist.

There's also a danger that older fiction is going to appear quaint an old fashioned and ignored by younger people in much the same way that black and white movies are overlooked. I always thought that *The Stainless Steel Rat* was a timeless story, but looking at some of the reviews on Amazon maybe that's not the case. That makes me sad. Harry always said he'd do a rewrite and update the novel if it ever got made into a film, but unfortunately that didn't happen in his lifetime.

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

He definitely read E. E. 'Doc' Smith. Harry's novel *Starsmashers of the Galaxy Rangers* was an affectionate tribute to the Lensmen stories – and also a poke at the science fiction writers who were still writing that type of fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. I remember him saying that there was one story he particularly enjoyed as a boy – he cut out the instalments from the magazines and put them together as a book so he could keep it. He lent it to a friend whose mom threw it away. He fondly remembered this story for many years – until one day he got hold of a copy and found it unreadable. Harry quoted this as proof of the old saying that 'the Golden Age of science fiction is twelve.'

I know he also read the Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers comic strips and Edmund Hamilton's Captain Future stories.

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

Harry always spoke highly of Brian Aldiss's work and I think he approved of the fact that Aldiss was writing a more 'literary' type of science fiction. Generally, I think he liked writers who weren't just rehashing what had been done before. In the anthologies he edited he would promote the work of the next generation of writers, particularly those he felt were pushing the envelope. He encouraged James Tiptree, Jr. early in her writing career, and spoke highly of Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*.

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

If you asked him this question, he'd give you the writer's stock answer – You're asking me to say which of my children I like best. He liked the Stainless Steel Rat novels because they made him money and because he enjoyed writing them. He was proud of the *West of Eden* series and framed the page from *Locus* magazine with the chart that showed it was a bestseller. *Make Room! Make Room!* was an important novel to him as he'd put a lot of work into the research before he wrote it and he saw the theme as being important.

John Grayshaw: Back in 1984 Harrison said in an interview with Neil Gaiman that "I think maybe SF is all over. Maybe it's dead…the people writing now just don't know what they are doing." Do you think his opinion of modern science fiction and science fiction writers improved after this?

During the 1960s and early 70s Harry believed that science fiction as a genre would start to gain the reputation of being a serious genre in the same way that mystery and crime novels had. And he thought this would bring better writers to the genre. I think he was disappointed when this didn't seem to happen – at least not in the way he'd wanted it to. The British 'new wave' had seemed to offer some promise, but felt that some American writers then went off and wrote 'avant-garde' stuff just for the sake of it without bringing anything new to the table.

In the 1980s he saw a similar thing happening with the popularity of cyberpunk, which he thought was just a rehash of the new wave. I don't think he disliked the stories of William Gibson and co., but I think he resented the fact that cyberpunk was being heralded by the media as being something new and wonderful that revived the field.

I think Harry was happier when alternate histories became popular – because something new was being written and because it gave him something to explore himself. He'd written them before, but now they were read by an audience that included more than just science fiction readers.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research did Harrison do for his books? I know he researched for "Make Room! Make Room!" for six years, but was this typical?

No, *Make Room! Make Room!* was a one-off in that sense. It wasn't really until he came to write *West of Eden* that he felt he had the time and financial resources to be able to do that sort of research again. On the *Eden* trilogy he worked with a biologist, a linguist, an anthropologist, and later an expert in religions, who helped him to create the world of the story. He had something like 20,000 words of material before he began writing the first novel. He'd done something similar on *Stonehenge,* which he wrote with Leon E. Stover, who had proposed a new theory about why the monument was built, and he did it again later with the Hammer and the Cross series co-written with 'John Holm' (Tom Shippey). His Stars and Stripes

trilogy was also based on a fair amount of research into the origins of the US constitution, the history of that period, especially the relations between the USA and Britain, and the work of John Stuart Mill.

John Grayshaw: I didn't know until I was researching for this interview that Harrison had a career writing and illustrating comic books. What can you tell us about this time? And what can you tell us about his relationship with other comicbook artists especially Wally Wood that he partnered with? He went to art school with Ross Andru, Mike Esposito, John Severin, and Al Williamson. And he shared a studio with Frank Frazetta.

For many years, Harry didn't like to talk about his work in comics. If you asked him, he'd come out with a single anecdote. When he was editing comics he once asked another writer who'd left the comics field if he would write one more story for one of Harry's titles. The writer said. 'I'd like to Harry, but I sold my vomit-proof typewriter.' And that was how Harry felt about the comics world once he'd left it.

In later years he opened up a bit more about it. But this was a very difficult period for him personally. His partnership with Wally Wood wasn't easy – Wood was a much better artist but Harrison was the businessmen who had to go out and get them the jobs. Deadlines were impossibly short and the payments per page of finished artwork were very low. Harrison-Wood did a lot of bad romance comics and the peak of their partnership was when they worked on EC Comics titles. When the partnership ended, Harrison moved into editing and packaging comics for low-budget publishers, while yearning to be a proper writer.

There's a chapter on 'the comic book years' in Harry's autobiography that includes most of his best anecdotes from that time.

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about his writing for the Flash Gordon comic strips from 1959-1969? Did the strips have any of the humor or his later space opera parodies/homages?

These came about because Harry happened to be in the right place at the right time. He was living in Italy and Dan Barry was, I believe, living in Europe and so Harry offered his services. He had experience of writing comics as well as science fiction novels and short stories, so he was ideally qualified. And the money would come in handy for the Harrisons who were then living on Harry's income as a writer.

I've only read some of Harry's outlines for these stories and seen a few of the sketches he did to help the artist visualize his ideas. Some of them are straight-forward space opera stuff but some of them definitely have the Harrison touch, being weird and humorous without actually sending up Flash Gordon.

John Grayshaw: How would you describe works like Stainless Steel Rat and Bill the Galactic Hero? I've seen them described as a parody or homage to space operas. Satirical, knowing, subversive, unapologetic, anti-military, anti-authority, and anti-violence.

Harry described *Bill* as being satire, in the fashion of *Candide,* saying that some things are so horrible that you can only really write about them satirically. He saw firsthand, both during World War II and later, how military training, military life and warfare can destroy men's lives, especially their metal health. *Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers* is a parody and homage to the stories of E. E. 'Doc' Smith. The Stainless Steel Rat stories are subversive and anti-authority, which is probably why they appeal to

teenagers so much. But no matter how crazy the action, Harry Harrison's values are always there, often deep below the surface.

John Grayshaw: Why did Harrison move around so much? I know he lived in New York, Mexico, London, Denmark, Italy, Dublin, and California.

I don't know if Harry himself knew the answer to this. British literary editor Charles Monteith once described Harrison as 'the most peripatetic fellow I know' and Harry liked to quote this. I think he first left New York, heading for Mexico, because he wanted to escape life in the city. Both Harry and Joan had experiences there that they were happy to leave behind. South of the border the American dollar went a lot further in those days, making it easier for the Harrison's to live on the money Harry was making from his early stories.

Harry probably felt more at home in Europe, where the genre of science fiction wasn't quite as ghettoized as it seemed in New York. And Harry also had a family connection with Ireland – his family name was originally Dempsey and he traced his great grandmother back to, I believe, Tipperary.

He originally intended to title his autobiography *It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time,* which was often the only explanation he had for why he moved from one place to another.

John Grayshaw: Harrison was a member of sci-fi fandom from an early age. What can you tell us about the Queens Science Fiction League he was in during his teens? Meeting Ray Bradbury at the First World Congress? Or later being a member of the Hydra Club in the early 50s along with such people as Asimov, Bester, Blish, Merril, and Sturgeon?

Yes, Harry was a proud member of First Fandom. The first bit of 'fanac' I know of was a letter in the Fall 1940 issue if *Captain Future* and drawing of a robot he did for a fanzine in 1941. I included it in the old HH news blog here: https://harryharrison.wordpress.com/2007/11/30/harry-harrison-fan-artwork-1941/

Harry joined the Hydra Club when he was still best known as an artist – he'd moved from comics to illustrating magazines such as Damon Knight's *Worlds Beyond*. Harrison drew the members of the club in an illustration for the November 1951 issue of *Marvel Science Fiction*, to accompany text by Judith Merril. http://thatsmyskull.blogspot.com/2012/01/hydra-club.html

John Grayshaw: Harrison was known to be a popular figure in fandom for being amiable, outspoken, and endlessly amusing. What are some of your favorite stories about him attending conventions and interacting with fans and other authors?

I'll tell you one of Harry's favourite stories. Some years ago there was a *Star Trek* convention in New York. These were huge affairs with thousands of fans queueing to meet the stars of the show. Science fiction authors like Isaac Asimov and Harry Harrison were invited along to speak so that the fans would have something else to do besides queue. At some point during this one, Nichelle Nichols sat on Harry's knee, looked into his eyes and said, 'You not bad for a white boy.' Did this really happen? Who knows…

John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about Harrison's friendship and collaborations with Brian Aldiss?

Oddly, I never spoke to Harry about Brian Aldiss. I always hoped that one day I would get them both in a room and interview them together – their performances as a duo on stage at conventions were

legendary and I hoped to capture something like that with me and my tape recorder as the only audience. Sadly, this never happened.

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

Like a lot of science fiction writers, much of Harry's interaction with fellow writers occurred at conventions, either on stage in panels or behind the scenes in the green room. When Michael Carroll and I were putting together something to celebrate Harry's 75th birthday we received contributions from a number of writers who knew Harry – Anne McCaffrey, Michael Moorcock, Greg Bear, Robert Sheckley, Damon Knight, Joe Haldeman, and David Brin among others.

Harry and Joan also entertained many writers over the years at their home in Ireland. Joan had a collection of photographs of them, standing with Harry in front of a huge chunk of rock near the house. I don't remember who was in those photographs, but I do remember being impressed that Frank Herbert was one of them – I was a big *Dune* fan at the time.

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

Stories that Harry and Joan told me about people in the science fiction world that I'm sworn never to repeat! In 2010 Mark Twain's autobiography was published – he'd allegedly said he didn't want it published until 100 years after his death. Harry was working on his own memoir at the time and said that he should do an unexpurgated version that could only be published 100 years from then. Maybe he wrote that version and maybe he didn't…

One thing that I did learn was that no matter how unlikely one of Harry's anecdotes sounded, I would usually end up finding something that proved it to be true.

John Grayshaw: What was it like to meet and interview Harry Harrison?

They say that you should never meet your heroes. I'm glad I never took that advice. When I first met him, he was the gruff and slightly scary Harry Harrison that everyone met at conventions. Later I found out how much Harry (and Joan) cared about their friends, especially younger writers – they would go out of their way to support you, offer advice, and try to send opportunities your way. Harry read my first Sf novel and phone me to give me some notes. He also tried to get an agent friend of his to take me on. And later still, when he trusted me enough to let his guard down, I got to see a different side of him and learnt that he had many of the same doubts and insecurities that I and every other writer have.

Harry Harrison wasn't a saint, but he was a good man. I miss him very much.

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

I used to get excited when there was talk of a film based on a HH book, but they so often amounted to nothing that I don't give them much thought now. *The Stainless Steel Rat* has been under option for decades and there have been several screenplays adapted from it – when I saw how bad they were I even did one myself, just to prove it could be done. A Russian company wanted to do *Deathworld* and that was talked about for a long time, but it didn't happen.

I occasionally get e-mails to the blog e-mail address from producers and I pass them on to Harry's agents, but I'm not aware of any definite projects in the works. But given the volume of material now being produced for online subscription services, something may happen someday. The technology is there now to do something like *West of Eden,* and I'd love to see that.

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

There is a stack of unproduced screenplays that Harry wrote for various people over the years, including one he did for Roger Corman. There may be some early short stories that were never published. And there is a children's book somewhere, or at least an outline for one. I don't think there are any novels, though there are quite a few projects that were started and abandoned, including one co-written with Brian Aldiss – abandoned when they realized that their styles were just too different to be combined. Harry had also written some comics scripts for a project that didn't see the light of day.

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

As far as I know, Harry always typed his stories. His handwriting was pretty illegible, even to him. His typing wasn't always great either – his fingers couldn't keep up with how fast his brain came up with words. If you ever heard him speak, you'll know what I mean – his delivery has been compared to a machine-gun. In the 1970s he sent his drafts out to be retyped by a professional typist. When personal computers became available, he was an early-adopter. When I first met him, he used Wordstar on a computer running CP/M – he was very unhappy when he had to move to Windows, and even more unhappy to move to MS Word: the Wordstar shortcuts were burned into his brain from years of use.

Harry always had great hardware – computer, screen and printer. When I first visited him in Ireland there was a thunderous noise coming from the downstairs 'studio' – he was printing out the first draft of West of Eden 2 on a daisywheel printer. The house was much quieter after he got a laser printer – the first one I'd ever seen.

His workroom was always called 'the studio' – harking back to his days as an artist. The door to it was covered from top to bottom in 'Do Not Disturb' signs taken from hotels all over the world – and a big sign that said *F**k Off!* No one was allowed to disturb him when he was writing.

I don't know much about his writing process. I don't think he was big on outlining, preferring to tell himself the story as he wrote it. From his letters, where he'd give me an update on the progress of his latest project, I got the impression that he sometimes underwrote and had to go back and flesh out the story. But I think he would start at the beginning and write the first draft through to the end before beginning any serious editing.

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

Travelling the world and sampling the local food and drink was how he spent his time when he wasn't working.

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

Harry's stories are his main legacy and hopefully they'll find new audiences in years to come. He also encouraged new writers to write better stories, challenging them to do more than repeat what has gone before, and that's no bad thing. And he worked hard, through the magazines and anthologies he edited and the work of the World SF group, to demonstrate that science fiction was a world literature and not just a North American one.

Beyond that he served as an inspiration, showing us that we can write our own stories in accordance with our own values, and find an audience that will appreciate them. That's what I'm trying to do with my stories and I wouldn't be doing it if I hadn't read what Harry wrote.