

**Science Fiction Book Club  
Interview with Robert Crossley (July 2021)**

*Robert Crossley is Professor Emeritus in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He has written extensively on the subjects of science fiction and utopia, and he specializes in the writings of Olaf Stapledon and H.G. Wells. He wrote a biography titled "Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future." He also edited collections called "An Olaf Stapledon Reader" and "Talking Across the World: The Love Letters of Olaf Stapledon and Agnes Miller, 1913-1919."*

**Bill Rogers: Robert, who were some of Stapledon's literary, philosophical, and scientific influences/inspirations for his novels (I'm thinking particularly of 'Last and First Men' and 'Star Maker')? I ask because the likes of H.G. Wells, J.B.S. Haldane, and J.D. Bernal seem right up his alley.**

Yes, yes, and yes to Wells, Haldane, and Bernal. Wells's utopian/political writings mattered more to Stapledon than the scientific romances. Stapledon owned a copy of Haldane's *Possible Worlds*, and the essay "The Last Judgment" was a rich source of ideas that Stapledon ran with in *Last and First Men*. But he wrote to Haldane's sister Naomi Mitchison in early 1931 to say that he disagreed with many of Haldane's projections about the future that he thought were "unjustified." He received a copy of Bernal's *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* as a gift in February 1936—in time for it to have an impact on *Star Maker* which was in progress by then. Other important influences? Definitely James Jeans. Stapledon was greatly stimulated by Jeans's 1926 essay "Recent Developments of Cosmical Physics"; Stapledon left a note with an abandoned sequence of poems titled "Metaphysical Posters," saying they were inspired by Jeans's essay. Stapledon regularly read the journal *Nature*, and some of the manuscripts and drafts in his study were in a folder with cuttings of articles from *Nature*.

**Kev Smith: Seeing science fiction and fact owe a debt to Stapledon, I am thinking of Dyson Spheres, terraforming and hive minds (Last and First Man). Do you think there is still more to learn from his works?**

One of the first things that springs to mind is the development (and the risks) of Artificial Intelligence, which the "Great Brains" episode of *Last and First Men* seems to anticipate. I'd also add genetic engineering; Stapledon was always interested in the ethical implications and consequences of scientific experimentation, and of course *Sirius* is the great example from his fictional works. Wells is often credited with anticipating the atomic bomb in *The World Set Free* (1912) but I don't think Stapledon has gotten enough credit for his prophetic handling of atomic power in *Last and First Men*, including his depiction of a global apocalypse from an *accidental* atomic chain reaction.

**Steve Towsley: What elements of Stapledon's own nature and experience likely contributed to his unique construction of Odd John?**

I find *Odd John* the most difficult of Stapledon's major works to pin down. There was a copy of J. D. Beresford's 1911 novel about a "boy wonder" in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* in Stapledon's personal library and that was certainly an influence on *Odd John*. I have a vague memory—which I can't confirm because I don't have access to the materials—of reading in Stapledon's youthful diaries in the first decade of the twentieth century that he was interested in Barrie's *Peter Pan*. But the direct origin of the novel seems to be in stories he made up to tell his children in the late 1920s. His daughter Mary told me that he used to tell the "John Stories" to her and her brother. He made elaborate maps so that they

could follow John's adventures. The maps haven't survived and the stories were not written down, but Stapledon's son John (it always intrigued me that his son's name and his hero's name were the same) had in his possession a beautiful colored drawing of Odd John as Stapledon imagined him (reproduced on p. 231 of my biography of Stapledon). I've often thought that there are some autobiographical projections in the portrait of Odd John as a social outsider since Stapledon did think of himself as a provincial and an outsider in the literary community.

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

I backed into my appreciation for Stapledon. In 1978 I made my first visit to the H. G. Wells archive at the University of Illinois when I was writing my short introduction to Wells's science fiction. At that time the vast Wells archive had not been fully explored and I came upon a packet of correspondence between Stapledon and Wells. At the time I think I had read only *Star Maker*, but as I read through the correspondence I found myself drawn more to Stapledon's personality than to Wells's. I xeroxed the letters and sat on them for a couple of years, but in 1980 I decided to give a presentation on the letters at a meeting of the Science Fiction Research Association. By the time it came for me to speak there were only seven people left in the audience, but fortunately one of them was Patrick McCarthy who was finishing what would be the first serious—and excellent—critical book on Stapledon. He asked me if I realized that Stapledon's widow Agnes was still alive (I didn't) and gave me her address. I sent her copies of the letters I had found in Illinois and she wrote back to say that she had gone through Olaf's desk and found about half a dozen more letters, which she sent on to me. As Agnes Stapledon and I corresponded she asked if I would be interested in writing a biography and invited me to visit her. When I did I discovered that she had kept her husband's study intact since his death in 1950, waiting for the day that someone would write his life. Almost everything was there in that small room: his library, his manuscripts, his diaries, lecture notes, correspondence—the works. And she gave me unrestricted access to everything. It was the most extraordinary gift I ever received in my academic career.

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

Even though many readers now find it tough going, *Last and First Men* really does stand out because I think it really changed the history of science fiction. The boldness of his plan for the book, its scope, its discarding of plot in any usual sense of that term, its subordination of character to history, its imagining of future mutations of *homo sapiens*, its elevation of time itself as the "hero" of its narrative—all these were revolutionary developments. *Last and First Men* is the first work of epic science fiction and therefore the grandfather to the epic works of Asimov, Stan Robinson, Dan Simmons, and others. I know that Brian Aldiss called *Star Maker* "the great grey holy book" of science fiction. And that designation captures something of the almost biblical quality of that book. And yet you cannot imagine *Star Maker* without *Last and First Men* preceding it.

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

If I had been asked that question forty years ago when I first started working on the Stapledon biography I would have unhesitatingly said *Star Maker*. But over time I have been influenced by how my students responded to *Sirius*. Many of my students, both undergraduate and graduate students, were not shy about telling me how much they hated the reading experience of *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*—but they glommed onto *Sirius* and many of them wrote feelingly about that novel. And I've

come to embrace *Sirius* as the Stapledon novel I most enjoy re-reading. It is brilliantly inventive (as Stapledon at his best always is) but it is his most successful effort at actual *storytelling*, and, while it is often funny, it fully engages the feelings and ultimately is powerfully tragic.

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

I'd point to two: his 1947 novella *The Flames*, his last great work as his powers and reputation as a writer were starting to decline. And his short story, "The Man Who Became a Tree," a wild effort to get inside another organic, sentient being—something he'd been toying with his whole life (there are passages in his World War I letters in *Talking Across the World* where you can see him playing with such possibilities long before he became an established writer).

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

Much of his early reading is what you'd expect of an upper middle-class boy in the late nineteenth century. He read Walter Scott and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; he memorized Psalms; and he devoured books about astronomy (he acquired a telescope as a child and continued star-gazing, with a telescope in his attic, during adulthood and his years as a writer). Among works with at least a vaguely science-fictional cast, we know that he enjoyed *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and "The Star" (the only two of the scientific romances that he acknowledged having read in his first letter to Wells in 1931). Among poets, Wordsworth and Robert Browning were particularly important to him.

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

Many of the writers he enjoyed reading we would regard as "minor" figures. He read the fiction of his friends L. F. Myers, Naomi Mitchison, and John Glogag. He knew about the work of the great modernists of his own time, but he had relatively little to say about people like D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. He did read a lot of T. S. Eliot's poetry and, perhaps surprisingly, he greatly admired Virginia Woolf's fiction. (And there was mutual admiration: she sent him a fan letter about *Star Maker*.) In one strikingly forthright passage in an essay titled "Thoughts on the Modern Spirit" he struck out, without naming names, at what he saw as the modernists' fixation on disillusion as "a sort of spiritual vomiting up of matter repugnant to our nature, of a whole universe, perhaps apprehended as nauseating." Stapledon never published this essay, but it appears in my collection, *An Olaf Stapledon Reader*.

**John Grayshaw: Did Stapledon have favorites of his own works?**

I suspect that like many other writers his favorite was whatever book he was working on at the moment. But it is interesting that when his daughter was in her early twenties he wrote her a letter in which he said, "I think it's time that you read my *Last and First Men*." Some of his notes for his adult-education lectures suggest that he considered *Star Maker* his greatest achievement and the most comprehensive treatment he ever gave to the subject of spiritual quest.

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

His books usually started with an idea; the exception was *Last and First Men* which he always claimed began with a vision of the future he had while walking along the seaside cliffs of North Wales. Once he

had the idea he then would read voraciously, mostly in scientific books and journals, because he wanted his developments of and extrapolations from the idea to be credible. He had a loose association with the University of Liverpool throughout the 1920s and 1930s and developed a network of scientific, psychological, and philosophical colleagues at the university on whom he would try out fictional possibilities and get their advice.

**John Grayshaw: Cyberspace, genetic engineering, terraforming, androids, hive mind, Dyson spheres. How did Stapledon create so many concepts that have become integral to the genre?**

This may seem a corny response, but a genius is somebody who can look beyond the boundaries of his own time and place and the conditions of knowledge of his age and see what has not been seen before. I think Stapledon had that kind of genius. People may criticize him, with some justice, for having a plodding style or a deficit in the storyteller's ability, but in the generation of revolutionary images, concepts, and technologies, and in his ability to imagine and articulate the moral implications of scientific advances I do believe he was a genius.

**John Grayshaw: What has Stapledon's influence on the genre been? I know that many authors cite him as an influence.**

As I said earlier, I believe he changed the genre by opening up its epic possibilities. He also influenced specific works by later writers. I think there is a clear impact of *Odd John* on Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human*. And Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* strikes me as an unacknowledged ripoff of *Odd John*. Lessing did acknowledge the early impact of Stapledon on her when she was growing up in Rhodesia and she began reading his fiction; that impact is most evident in her outer space series of novels *Canopus in Argos*. Many other writers have claimed Stapledon as an inspiration, including Brian Aldiss, Ursula LeGuin, and Kim Stanley Robinson.

**John Grayshaw: What can you tell us about Stapledon's correspondence with H.G. Wells?**

The correspondence began with Stapledon playing the humble acolyte in his first letter to Wells. He mentioned that many reviewers had compared *Last and First Men* to Wells's fiction and that Wells must have wondered why Stapledon didn't acknowledge his influence. There is a kind of boyish charm to the final, flattering sentence in that letter: "A man does not record his debt to the air he breathes in common with everyone else." Wells was having none of it. He enjoyed Stapledon's first work of fiction but he didn't think it was anything like his own scientific romances. Gruffly, he wrote back to Stapledon and like many other people for the past ninety years he got Stapledon's title wrong: "It is all balls to suggest *First & Last Men* (which I found a very exciting book) owes anything to my writings. I wish it did." The correspondence went on for a dozen years, and Stapledon increasingly held his own against the pontificating Wells. If you can find a copy of my edition of the Wells-Stapledon correspondence in Gary Wolfe's *Science Fiction Dialogues* you will see a witty cartoon that Stapledon drew for one of his letters in which he resists Wells's assigning him to either the cage of the religious zealots or the cage of the socialist zealots. He draws himself as a blackbird flying between the cages: "I am the jackdaw, free but uncertain." By the way, if you look in my edition of the correspondence for the letter I just quoted in which Wells denies any debt Stapledon owes him, you won't find it. That's because I didn't discover that letter until a couple of years later.

**John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of Stapledon corresponding/meeting with fans?**

There is one such meeting, and it occurred early in 1949, the year before Stapledon died, when he made his one and only trip to the U.S. to attend a peace conference. Because the US government was suspicious of a conference being supported by the Communist party, entry to the US was made difficult and when Stapledon arrived in New York his funds were frozen. The name of Olaf Stapledon meant nothing to most Americans (although it meant something to the FBI who tailed him throughout his week-long travels on the east coast and compiled a substantial dossier on him). But his name was recognized by science fiction fans, and Frederik Pohl learned about Stapledon's financial dilemma and provided help, asking only in exchange that he try to find some room in his schedule to meet with some of his fans. Afterwards he got a phone call at the Waldorf Astoria from Theodore Sturgeon inviting him to meet with other fans and young writers. So Stapledon ended up at a meeting of the Hydra Club at the apartment of Fletcher Pratt, along with Sturgeon and Pohl and other members of the club who included Lester del Rey, Basil Davenport, Judith Merrill, and others. They spent the evening in enthusiastic discussion of *Last and First Men*, *Odd John*, and *Sirius*. It was the only time during his stay in the US that Stapledon's status as a writer was recognized.

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

Well, I'll start with the usual scandalmongering in celebrity biographies: my discovery of his two extramarital affairs—one with a political activist named Evelyn Gibson and the other with his painting teacher Diana Gurney. (By the way, I am naming the latter for the first time here; in my biography I refer to her by the misleading initial "N"—a concession to her embarrassment and her anger that I had found out about her. She has now died and I no longer feel bound to keep her name secret.) More interestingly, I was shown by Evelyn Gibson's brother a pencil first draft of *Sirius* that Stapledon had given her because he considered the story of Plaxy and Sirius' forbidden love as, in part, an allegory of the Evelyn and Olaf affair. Interestingly, that pencil draft (whose whereabouts I no longer know) included scenes that were regarded as obscene and Stapledon's usual publisher declined to print *Sirius*. The publisher he did manage to find still censored a few words from *Sirius* out of concern for a public outcry. Stapledon was infuriated by the publishers' timidity.

Something else I didn't know about until I began digging into Stapledon's life is that in his later years he became seriously interested in civil rights. He went to Liverpool to hear Paul Robeson speak, he asked friends to get information for him about the case of the Scottsboro boys, he and his wife hosted young people from India who were active in the independence movement, and in the year before he died he began participating in early protests against South African apartheid. Although he was always cosmopolitan in his views, I attribute this late-in-life activism to his own family situation: his son married a woman from Sicily and his daughter married an Anglo-Indian doctor.

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

Not to my knowledge. For over 20 years I held an informal, voluntary position as literary executor for the Stapledon estate. During that time several people asked for and got from me one-year options to produce a screenplay (in most cases, for *Sirius*); none of those efforts came to fruition. In the late 1960s George Pal negotiated an exclusive option on *Odd John* with Mrs. Stapledon. Nothing came of that either, but the rights to *Odd John*, so far as I know, are still tied up in the George Pal estate.

**John Grayshaw: Are there any unpublished Stapledon works in the University of Liverpool archive or is everything published?**

Yes, there are a few things, but little that has any likelihood of publication. I published his manuscript “Letters to the Future” in Patrick McCarthy’s *The Legacy of Olaf Stapledon* (1989). And some previously unpublished essays, letters, poems, and fiction appear in my *Olaf Stapledon Reader*.

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

In the house he and his family lived in from 1920 to 1939 in the town of West Kirby there was a secluded attic room where he kept his telescope and his writing desk. This space was sacrosanct, his sister-in-law told me, and he would write there all morning until he finally emerged for lunch. Later, there was a tiny balcony off his study at the house he built in the village of Caldy in 1939. One of his neighbors told me that he liked to sit out there naked to write, keeping a blanket nearby in case of an unexpected visitor.

**John Grayshaw: What were some of Stapledon’s hobbies other than writing?**

He was very athletic. He had been on the rowing team as a student at Oxford. He loved rock-climbing (see a photo on p. 223 of my biography). His son said he was “the Original Jogger” since he remembered him often running the nine miles or so from his house in West Kirby to Birkenhead where he would catch the ferry across the River Mersey to Liverpool. And of course astronomy and amateur stargazing was also a hobby—almost more a vocation than a hobby.

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

In the 1930s Stapledon had a brief period of real literary fame. Reading the reviews of *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* in English newspapers and periodicals (his fiction was rarely reviewed in the US) is a revelation. Those reviews were extravagant in their praise, comparing him to Michelangelo, Milton, and Dante—and some reviewers even said out loud that he was better than Wells. When the first Pelican paperback series was issued in the late 30s *Last and First Men* was among the first ten titles. But the favorable press didn’t translate into high sales, and by the forties, during the wartime paper shortage, he found it difficult to get large runs of his new work printed or to get any of the masterpieces of the 1930s reprinted.

On the question of his legacy and his importance today I’m not sure how much can be added to what I’ve already said earlier in the interview. I had hoped that my biography and my editorial work would enlarge Stapledon’s audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but unfortunately I don’t think that has happened. It may be that Stapledon is always going to be an acquired taste for a small body of readers. And I think maybe it makes sense to think of him as a writer’s writer—someone from whom future science fiction writers will learn and draw inspiration. I think he cannot be ignored in the history of science fiction. I’d like to say that he should not be ignored in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Thanks to all of you for these wonderful questions!