

**Science Fiction Book Club**  
**Interview with Lech Keller (July 2021)**

*Lech Keller is a professor of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. He has written several books about Stanislaw Lem including "Introduction to Lemology," "Contribution to Biography of Stanislaw Lem," "Visions of the future in the writings of Stanislaw Lem," and "Annotated and Cross-Referenced Primary and Secondary Bibliography of Stanislaw Lem"*

**Andrzej Wieckowski: What influences did his wartime experiences have on his writing?**

I think a lot. See his "Time not lost" trilogy - but he was always hiding his true war-time experiences. In order to survive, he had to collaborate somehow with both the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, and it is understood that he was later ashamed of this collaboration and had a "Holocaust survivor guilt", like Simon Wiesenthal and many other survivors of the Shoah - prominent and not so prominent.

**Andrew Frost: What was Lem's position within the Soviet sphere of influence, as an artist and thinker? It seemed from the number of adaptations of his work into film he had an official approval that few other Soviet sf writers had. Was that the case?**

The truth is that he is known in the former Soviet Union mostly as a SF writer. I do not think that more than say few thousand of former "Soviet people" seriously regard him as a deep thinker. As to the adaptations of his works - only "Solaris" by Tarkovsky was an artistic success, but Lem did not like it - for details see Создание фильма «СОЛЯРИС» Андрея Тарковского – архивные материалы - Creation of the film "SOLARIS" by Andrei Tarkovsky - archival materials (15 May 2020) - <https://www.mosfilm.ru/news>. And yes - he had an official approval that few other Soviet SF writers had. Up to the late 1950s he was an orthodox Marxist-Leninist, a Bolshevik, although not belonging to the communist party. This changed in time, but the fact is that he was never openly acting against the communist government of Poland. Even while in exile in Austria, he officially pronounced that he was not an emigrant, but "only" an expat, temporary living and working abroad.

**Jon Zeiderman: Mine is not a specific question, but a request for Mr. Keller to share any interesting anecdotes relating to Stanislaw Lem and Andrei Tarkovsky.**

I can only say that according to Lem, he called Tarkovsky a "durak" ("дурак" i.e. a fool). Lem even went so far as to say that Tarkovsky made "Crime and Punishment", not "Solaris", ignoring the epistemological and cognitive aspects of his book ("he did not film 'Solaris', but 'Crime and Punishment') - Stanislaw Bereś "Tako rzecze... Lem" ("Thus Spake... Lem") Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002 pp. 154-155.

**Gökhan Karagül: I have always admired the sarcastic style that Lem brought to science fiction. What were the sources of Lem's sarcastic style?**

I think that Lem was always a misanthrope. In the "Eighth Voyage" Tichy was the Earth's delegate to the United Planet Organisation, pleading in the name of humanity for admission to the community of civilised species. To his horror he discovered that life on Earth was created by two crooked space hands, Gorrd and Lod (in Polish Bann and Pug), from the spoiled content of a malfunctioning refrigerator. Those drunkards polluted the virgin planet with "a biological evolution the likes of which the world had never seen before", thus creating "a breeding ground for freaks, a cosmic side show, a panopticon, an exhibit of grisly prodigies and curios, a display whose living specimens would one day become the butt of jokes even in the outermost Nebulae". The result of their silly practical joke, the race *Artefactum Abhorrens* which call themselves *Homo Sapiens* "purely out of simple-minded ignorance", should thus

receive from their creators cosmic alimony, as they are obviously unable to take proper care of themselves (translation by Michael Kandel).

According to Lem, humanity belongs thus to species *Monstroteratum Furiosum* (Ohydek Szalej, the Stinking Meemy): "In accordance with the accepted systems of taxonomy and nomenclature, all anomalous forms found in our Galaxy are contained within the phylum *Aberrantia* (Deviates, Freaks), which is divided into the subphyla *Debilitales* (Boobs) and *Antisapientinales* (Screwheads). To the latter subphylum belong the classes *Canaliacaea* (Thuglies) and *Necroludentia* (Corpse-lovers). Among the Corpse-lovers we distinguish, in turn, the orders *Patricidiaceae* (Fatherbeaters), *Matriphagideae* (Mothereaters) and *Lasciviaceae* (Abominites, or Scumberbutts). The Abominites, highly degenerate forms, we divide into the *Cretininae* (Clenchpoops, viz. *Cadaverium Mordans* or the Chewcarcass Addlepate) and *Horrosrissimae* (Howlmouths, with the classic example of the Outchested Backshouldered Dullard, *Idiontus Erectus Gzeemsi*). A few of the Howlmouths have actually been known to create their own pseudo-cultures; among these are such species as *Anophilus Belligerens*, the Bungfond Tuff, which calls itself *Genius Pulcherrimus Mundanus*, or that most curious specimen, possessing an entirely bald body and observed by Grampluss in the darkest corner of our Galaxy - *Monstroteratum Furiosum* (the Stinking Meemy), which has given itself the name of *Homo Sapiens*" - Stanisław Lem „The Eight Voyage” in “The Star Diaries” San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1985 p.27 (translated by Michael Kandel).

One of the *Homo Sapiens* specimens caught by the Cybercount Cyberhazy of “Prince Ferrix and the Princess Crystal” is described in “The Cyberiad” (tale titled “O królewiczu Ferrycym i królownie Krystalii” - “Prince Ferrix and the Princess Crystal”) as:... a genuine monstrosity: its every step was like the overflowing of marshy vats, its face was like a scummy well; from its rotten breath the mirrors were all covered over by a blind mist, and some nearby iron was seized with rust.

And so on...

**Bart Borgmans: Do you have any idea whether the translation of “Solaris” by Bill Johnston will be released in print? Right now, it is only available as a Kindle edition and an audiobook**

Not at all. It is a question to the lawyers and professional politicians. Personally, I think that the Western copyright laws are contrary to the interest of the Humanity.

**Brittanie Ricciuti: What inspired the tone of “The Cyberiad?”**

I think that Lem wanted to write something new in the borders of broadly understood SF, and also he had a child in 1968 (now his son lives from the fame of his father, although he has formal university education as a physicist).

**Bill Rogers: Lem was very pessimistic about humanity and an extraterrestrial civilization ever comprehending each other; where did that pessimism stem from?**

I think that from his experiences in poor and backward pre-war Poland, during the Soviet and Nazi Germany occupation of Lvov and from the times of the Cold War, he has spent mostly in ‘communist’ Poland. However, he has quickly returned to this, still ‘communist’ Poland he hated so much, after just few years of emigration spent in a nice house in beautiful, but hostile to him Vienna, although Vienna was hostile to him only because he was hostile to the city and its inhabitants. Please ask Dr Rottensteiner for more details.

**Carl Rosenberg: What writers (science fiction or otherwise) did Lem admire, or was he influenced by, apart from Philip K. Dick?**

I think that Verne, Wells and Stapledon. I regret that Mr. Cixin Liu was unknown to Lem, for obvious reasons (time gap). Others are Sienkiewicz (in my opinion a scribbler and falsifier of history), maybe Gombrowicz. On the positive side, he has admired Leo Tolstoy and Hašek, especially his immortal "The Fate of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War".

**Molly Smith: I read that Lem had criticism of most of science fiction and modern technology such as the Internet why was this?**

Partly, because he knew the limits of human technology, partly because he had no idea what the Internet really is and how it works, so he did not use it directly, but only via his son and secretary.

**John Grayshaw: For those that are not familiar with any of Lem's works, where should they start?**

Apart from obvious choice such as "Solaris", the real scientists should probably start from "His Master's Voice", while younger people maybe from "The Invincible" or "Pilot Pirx" series.

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

His mastery of style and ability to tell the story. I was drawn by his "hard" SF, such as "Solaris" and by the first story of the "Pirx" cycle, which was about AI and VR i.e. by "The Test", that I read first time long time ago in Polish in the "Młody Technik" ("Young Technician") monthly.

**John Grayshaw: Did Lem have favourites of his own works?**

I think that it was "Solaris", although most likely it was "Hospital of the Transfiguration", as he always wanted to be a "mainstream" writer, but circumstances and his love for money "forced" him to be a master of SF.

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

Very briefly, it was mostly reading (browsing?) SF and popular science magazines. Dr. Franz Rottensteiner can tell a lot on this subject. Generally, Lem had no good idea about scientific research, about the need to do a serious "literature research" before writing a scientific book or paper etc. etc. So, the real scientists do not recognise him as a scientist, which hurt Lem very strong. Unfortunately, his scientific knowledge was very shallow, superficial, in contrast to, for example, Asimov, Clarke or especially Hoyle.

**John Grayshaw: In 1976 Theodore Sturgeon wrote that Lem was the most widely read science fiction writer in the world...Do you find a big difference in how he is regarded in places like US and UK compared to other countries?**

It was because of huge, government (i.e. taxpayers) sponsored prints run in the USSR, Poland or East Germany. In the West he was widely read only in West Germany, maybe in Austria and Switzerland (German speaking part). In the UK and the US he was and is regarded as a rather elitist writer, in contrast to Europe, especially to the former Soviet Bloc.

**John Grayshaw: I know this is a complicated answer, but how did censorship affect his writing?**

Quite contrary - I think that it is very simple question, as he had to think in order to "smuggle" some content, which could not be expressed openly because of the censorship. It is also true for the whole Polish post-war literature - abolishment of censorship did not cause any "explosion" of good books - quite contrary, together with "communist" Poland, ended also the golden era of Polish culture, including literature, as the communists sponsored "highbrow" culture, while the bourgeoisie governments ruling Poland since year 1989 are orientated only on keeping power and interested only in short term financial gains, so they are not really interested in promoting the "highbrow" culture.

**John Grayshaw: Lem said "I wrote a few poor science fiction novels in my youth. After realizing this fact I started to move towards other regions, however all critics push me back into that 's-f pit.' My reaction to science fiction resembles that of my body with respect to pollen (I suffer from hay fever)." ...Did Lem consider himself a science fiction writer at all?**

If you write a lot, you have to write some things better and some worse. Lem always wanted to be a "mainstream" writer, but circumstances, like his love for money, "forced" him to be a master of SF. However, he frequently wanted to make an impression that he was a mainstream writer and even a philosopher. After some second-grade German academic philosopher named Bernd Gräfrath wrote book "Lems Golem: Parerga und Paralipomena" (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1996), Lem considered himself a mainstream, professional philosopher, which, of course, was not a truth at all.

**John Grayshaw: Lem seemed to think that technology was moving too fast. He compared it to a man falling off a building and said "We are unaware of the speed that captured us. The technology moves forward, however the control of its direction is very weak." ...Did he have any ideas how we could slow technology down?**

I think that technology is now in a kind of standstill, as all that "progress" is in fact only marketing tricks, like electric cars known since late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the fact, that presently we send people to the border of space using the technology from the 1960s - see X15 space airplanes and Alan Shepard suborbital flight using Mercury-Redstone Launch Vehicle, which was only a slightly modified A4 German rocket from the 1940s. Even computers we use every day are based on the ideas from the Second World War - they are 'only' smaller, faster and more reliable (maybe also more user-friendly).

**John Grayshaw: Lem said 99% of science fiction writers "have joined forces and created artificial frames of reference, thereby falsifying the entire cosmos, basic law as of physics and trampled evolutionary biology along the way. This gave birth to a treasure house of nonsense that a typical science fiction writer makes use of." ...Did he get into specifics of what sci-fi ideas he considered nonsense?**

Saying this, Lem probably did not understand properly the differences between science and literature. Author of fantastic literature is limited only by the rules of language he or she uses, which are arbitrary, while scientist is limited by the laws of nature, which are NOT arbitrary. Lem considered practically whole American SF as a nonsense and rubbish - see his "Fantastyka i futurologia" - parts translated to English in "Microworlds", and was to a large extent right. It is hard to say what he thought about Soviet and Polish SF writers, as there was the censorship from the one side and the civil law on the other.

**John Grayshaw: Lem said "Without knowledge of science one cannot comment on my works. How is such an ignoramus to know whether the presented concept is my idea, an extrapolation, or a final conclusions from the actual, scientifically established facts." ...Are Lem's works accessible to the average reader or is it necessary to be familiar with the science as well as Iron Curtain politics? And what is the best way for readers to gain the understanding needed?**

Lem was here “a pot calling the kettle”, as he had really no any deep idea about science and mathematics - the language of the hard and not so hard sciences. He was only good in making an impression, that he knew something about the science. I have found it immediately, during a conversation in 1996 and was very unpleasantly surprised, that he was such a shallow man, contrary to the image of him, I made on the basis of his best writings. Sometimes I think, that Lem was either directly helped by some real scientists or that he employed some ghost writers. However, I met a senile Lem, so I can be very wrong.

I also think that Lem’s works are accessible to the average reader i.e. not scientifically educated above the high school level. Of course, knowledge of Iron Curtain politics helps to better understand some of his works, but is not absolutely necessary.

**John Grayshaw: I understand that there are good translations of Lem’s work and not so great translations. What is the easiest way to navigate this so you read the best translations possible?**

I think that generally it is very difficult to translate from Polish to English, so I recommend translations by Michael Kandel, especially as he has translated Lem with the direct help from the author.

**John Grayshaw: Lem said, “there are thus two kinds of my humour: the first is a camouflage painting, the second are some microrevenge, that the author can take on the surrounding reality.”...Can you talk about how humour was a key element in Lem’s writing?**

Young and mature Lem had some obvious talent to satire, as can be found in, for example, “The Star Diaries”, but the older Lem, i.e. after year 1990, generally lost this talent.

**John Grayshaw: Are there any interesting anecdotes about Lem corresponding with his fans and/or other science fiction writers?**

According to Rottensteiner, Lem as a writer was characterized by amazing ingenuity, but he did not have a developed sense of observation, as evidenced by the episode discovered by Jacek Rzeszotnik from the University of Wrocław in “Erinnerungen. Zu Gast in drei Welten” (“Memories. A Guest in Three Worlds” - Stuttgart und München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt DVA, 2000). Christian Graf von Krockow tells the following short anecdote: From 1982 to 1983, I spent a year with Stanisław Lem at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. But shortly after arriving, he came to me and said: “Herr von Krockow, I’m sorry, I have to leave again”. “For God’s sake, Mr. Lem, why?” “Because a pig lived here before me. Yes, a pig, a pig. I need my bathtub, otherwise I can’t think of anything. But I can’t use it”. “And what is stopping you?” “The dark rim of dirt in the tub. This guy didn’t remove it, and now it’s eaten in. I’ve been scrubbing for three days, with the sharpest means I could find in town, and I can’t get him off”. I promised to deal with the matter immediately and called the caretaker. We entered the bathroom together. “Look there, that dark edge - that pig!” Lem said with disgrace once more. The caretaker and I looked at each other and I said: “Will you, Mr. Lem, allow me to push the lamp?” She rocked - and with her the shadow of the darkness in the tub. For three days, the famous science fiction writer had scraped a shadow.

Władysław Bartoszewski, in turn, told the following anecdotes (Paweł Goźliński i Jarosław Kurski „Bartoszewski: tajemnice Lema” - „Bartoszewski: Lem’s secrets” in “Duży Format” of 1 January 2009): Once, in Vienna, where the Lem family lived in a rented villa for several years, Staszek was supposed to take my wife to the airport. He got into his green Mercedes, which he bought when he was in our joint scholarship days with some exorbitant money from Western fees, and here a driver starts honking at him. So Staszek opens the window and starts screaming: - And you are a fascist, millions of ours (i.e. Jews - LK) were killed by those such as you, and now you will be honking at me! The other one opens his eyes more and more, shows something there, and Staszek is doing the same with more and more

anger, until it finally turned out that this Austrian just wanted to show that the trunk in Staszek's Mercedes was not closed.

Another time, my wife and I leave Vienna for Bavaria, the taxi driver is supposed to drive us to the railway station. An Austrian, older in age, arrives, and Staszek goes outside in his shirt, because it was the end of summer. He suddenly raises his hand in a fascist greeting and begins to sing the Nazi hymn in a false voice: "Die Fahne hoch! Die Reihen fest geschlossen!" (Banners go up! Our ranks are tight!). This is the beginning of "Horst-Wessel-Lied" ("Horst Wessel Song") - the anthem of the Nazi SA militias!<sup>1</sup> The taxi driver was stunned. He looks at Staszek, at me, and says - in German - gentlemen, this cannot be sung. And Staszek - in German - says: I'm allowed. Then this driver, when he finally took us to the station, didn't say a word.

**John Grayshaw: Did you ever meet Stanislaw Lem?**

Yes, in his house in Cracow in 1996. It was very enlightening and eyes opening, as I met a totally different Lem to a person I knew from his books - very artificial and shallow man, but he was then in his mental and physical decline. So, I had very mixed feelings about this encounter.

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

The gaps in his biography, especially this total mess in his relations from the period of German and Soviet occupation of Lvov. Also - his real image as a man interested mostly in money, a person with no respect to other people, even those very friendly to him and to whom he owed so much (for example Dr. Rottensteiner). But this is not a subject I prefer to discuss.

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

Yes, he used to spend early hours in the morning writing, at least during his best years, i.e. the 1950s to the 1970s.

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

Cars, cars and cars. Fast, reckless driving... And earlier, mostly in the 1950s and the 1960s, alpine skiing in the Tatra Mountains.

**John Grayshaw: Lem said "So what if my books were translated into forty languages and the total print- run reached 27 million copies? They will all vanish, since streams of new books are flooding everything, washing down what had been written earlier."...Do you think Lem is wrong here? What is Lem's legacy? Why was his work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?**

He was wrong in this case, as he is still read, while he was right in this that the present day SF, with few exceptions confirming the rule, such as works of Cixin Liu, is 100% pure rubbish, especially so called fantasy i.e. the better spells and wands always win over inferior spells and wands.

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<sup>1</sup> The lyrics to "Horst-Wessel-Lied" were written in 1929 by Sturmführer (Sargeant) Horst Wessel, the local commander of the Nazi paramilitary "Brownshirts" (Sturmabteilung or SA) in the Friedrichshain district of Berlin. Wessel wrote songs for the SA in conscious imitation of the Communist paramilitary, the Red Front Fighters' League, to provoke them into attacking his troops, and to keep up the spirits of his men. "Horst-Wessel-Lied" was from 1933 to 1945 the co-national anthem of Germany, along with the first stanza of the "Deutschlandlied" ("Song of Germany") i.e. "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, Über alles in der Welt" („Germany, Germany above all, Above all in the world"). "Horst-Wessel-Lied" has been banned in Germany and Austria since the end of World War II.

Lem's positive legacy are his best works from the 1950s to the 1970s. Today he is less significant than, say, 50 years before, but he is a classic of the genre, together with Verne, Wells, Clarke, Asimov and the Strugatskys. As a classic, he is hated by the schoolchildren but revered by the experts, so I think that he is important today, but within some obvious limits.