

**Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Jad Smith (Oct. 2021)**

Jad Smith is a professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. He has written about Alfred Bester and John Brunner for the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series (University of Illinois Press).

John DeLaughter: In the Demolished Man, Bester posited that telepaths would speak in artistic patterns. In the Stars My Destination, the protagonist meets a group of nomads who use a language derived from manuals. And in Golem100, he has a woman using scent to communicate. What were Bester's personal beliefs about communication and how it might be accomplished?

In my book, I talk about Bester as a writer who moved language to the center of worldbuilding in order to place greater emphasis on psychology and culture. I would frame the examples you cite as instances of Bester focusing on language (or linguistic difference) to create more immersive worlds. Bester was strongly influenced by the modernist emphasis on psychological realism. While his use of nonstandard orthography and stream-of-consciousness narration often get labeled as mere verbal “pyrotechnics,” I think he endeavors to make linguistic realities and modes of communication just as central to worldbuilding as, say, the emergence of new technologies.

David Stuckey: Did Bester ever regret leaving the genre of SF after it gained in popularity?

In the late 1940s, when Bester first returned to the SF field, he did so because he felt hemmed in writing radio mysteries and sought creative freedom. He returned to SF again in the 1970s after spending about a decade as a contributing editor for *Holiday* magazine, a job that provided him the opportunity to interview celebrities such as Sir Laurence Olivier, Sophia Loren, and John Huston and to travel extensively. I haven't come across instances in which he expressed regret about his career path.

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

Despite his small overall output, the impact of Bester's fiction from the 1950s on the development of SF was arguably immense. Barry N. Malzberg, for instance, once suggested that Bester's importance rivaled that of legendary editor John W. Campbell. Bester started out writing for pulp SF magazines such as *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Astounding*. Then, he moved into comics, where he penned scripts for *Captain Marvel* and *Green Lantern*; and from there, he transitioned into radio mysteries, scripting episodes of *The Shadow* and *The Return of Nick Carter*, among other serials. Bester returned to SF in the late 1940s, and I was especially interested in how writing across mediums informed his fiction of the 1950s and made it different. I was also drawn to Bester because his work is often characterized as a forebear of New Wave SF and cyberpunk.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Bester grew up reading? Who are some writers that were Bester's contemporaries that he enjoyed/admired?

Bester described himself as a “renaissance kid,” and he read widely. He once indicated that the pile of books on his nightstand would typically include not only pulp science fiction magazines but works such as Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia*, Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, and Anatole France's *Penguin Island*. In college, he discovered the speculative fiction of Olaf Stapledon, citing *Last and First Men* and *Odd John* as particular influences, and he came to revere fin de siècle and modernist writers such as J. K.

Huysmans and James Joyce. Bester was a bit of a Joyce fanatic, and techniques borrowed from Joyce are used in a number of his stories and novels.

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

According to Charles Platt, Bester thought *Golem*¹⁰⁰ was his best work and was disappointed when it didn't receive the critical attention that he thought it deserved.

John Grayshaw- Harry Harrison said, "Alfred Bester was one of the handful of writers who invented modern science fiction." ... Does Bester deserve this praise? And why?

I do think that Bester deserves credit for helping to push the field in new directions during the postwar era and that his fiction encouraged experiments in craft that formed a bridge to vanguard movements such as New Wave and cyberpunk. At the time, there were perhaps more than a "handful" of writers whose work led in similar directions—newcomers such as Philip K. Dick, Walter M. Miller Jr., Robert Sheckley, and Judith Merril; midcareer standouts such as C. M. Kornbluth; and evolving veterans such as Theodore Sturgeon and Edgar Pangborn, to name just a few. However, Bester was firmly on the leading edge of change at a very significant moment in the field's development.

John Grayshaw: In Bester's autobiographical "My Affair With Science Fiction" he writes about when Campbell took Science Fiction out of the Pulp Era and into the Golden Age. "And then came Campbell, who rescued, elevated, gave meaning and importance to science fiction. It became a vehicle for ideas, daring, audacity." ... In what ways did Bester himself also do these things for the genre?

When he returned to SF in the late 1940s, Bester had a run-in with Campbell over a story (i.e., "Oddy and Id") and eschewed the *Astounding* market thereafter, preferring newer markets such as *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. He developed a style of SF that differed markedly from Campbell's brand. Whereas Campbellian SF tended to focus on rationale, problem-solving scientist heroes, Bester was more interested in craft possibilities. He once said: "To hell with the science if it can't produce fiction." Bester sometimes directly satirized Campbellian SF and its recurrent tropes, and he gained a reputation as an enfant terrible of the Golden Age, one whose idiosyncratic experiments opened up all kinds of avenues for more mature and varied themes.

John Grayshaw- Along those lines there is the Simpson's episode where nerdy Martin Prince says the ABC's of Science Fiction are Asimov, Bester, and Clarke and someone says what about Bradbury and Martin retorts "I'm familiar with his work." ... Was Bester ever a "household name" like Asimov, Clarke, and Bradbury? Why or why not?

No. Bester's output was small compared to the other writers you mention. Though Bester began and ended his career writing SF, he left the field twice, for significant periods of time. In the fifties, his works were not accepted for standalone hardback publication by major publishers in the U.S. *The Demolished Man* was published in hardcover by Shasta, a small press specializing in SF. The first standalone hardback publication of *The Stars My Destination* in the U.S. didn't occur until 1975. Bester's reputation probably reached its highest point in the 1970s, after a large swath of his fiction was reprinted (sometimes in conjunction with newer work); and even then, he didn't become a household name.

John Grayshaw: On Babylon 5, there was a character named Alfred Bester (played by Walter Koenig). He was a powerful telepathic cop and a recurring antagonist in the series. Series creator J. Michael Straczynski named him after Bester as “The Demolished Man” was an influence.... Was Bester aware that his works had such an impact on the genre? How did he feel about it?

Bester did know, especially in the final stages of his career. When he returned to the field in the 1970s, he was hailed as a germinal influence on the New Wave. Upon the release of a collection of Bester’s stories in the 1970s, one prominent critic, Richard E. Geis, said that Bester had been “post-New Wave” in the 1950s, implying that even the most cutting-edge writers in the field had yet to catch up with him. Around the same time, the inimitable John Clute said of Bester’s stories: “They define the genre they inhabit.” Toward the end of his life, Bester was also characterized by William Gibson, among others, as a progenitor of cyberpunk. Bester is also said to have learned that he was named a Grand Master before his death. The one comment I saw Bester make about the matter, in an interview with Paul Walker, suggested that he was happy to be aligned with writers who were writing experimental works and aiming to expand the boundaries of the field.

John Grayshaw: William Gibson said about *The Stars my Destination/Tiger, Tiger*. “It was, I saw in my twenties, a book that had absolutely ignored everything that science fiction had been doing when it was written. It was built on bones pilfered from Dumas and Dickens (steal only the best).” What was unique/different about Bester’s writing?

I would mention here that D. Harlan Wilson has an excellent new book coming out with Palgrave Macmillan that is focused entirely on *The Stars My Destination* and its place in SF history.

Bester would take tropes from pulp fiction that had become hackneyed, and he would recompile them in astonishing ways. I think that’s part of what Gibson is suggesting. For instance, in *Stars*, the novum or epochal change at the center of the novel is “jaunting”—humans learn how to teleport. Bester imagines and depicts a whole array of cultural changes that follow: economic disorder; emergent class distinctions that relate directly to jaunting ability; the rise of “jack-jaunting” or crime waves perpetrated by jaunting criminals; plagues and pandemics spread through jaunting; and so on. He cobbles together a variety of narrative modes to create an immersive sense of what it would be like—psychologically—to live in this new world. The narrative is at heart an exciting adventure story, but it drives toward a view of evolution that has remarkable philosophical depth and leaves the reader feeling conflicted and steeped in ambiguity at the end of the novel. Bester repeatedly took the “machinery” of SF and elevated it in these kinds of ways. His capacity for invention, both in terms of craft and content, made his SF distinctive.

John Grayshaw: Any interesting anecdotes about Bester going to conventions and/or meeting his fans?

Apparently, at an academic conference, while on a panel with Isaac Asimov, Ben Bova, and Charles L. Grant, Bester left his seat and moved in front of the table to be closer to the audience--much to the audience’s delight and much to chagrin of the other panelists. Carolyn Wendall, who tells this story in her book on Bester, says that Bester had a “larger-than-life” presence.

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

Bester regularly socialized with several SF authors, including James Blish and Theodore Sturgeon, who belonged to the Hydra Club in New York City.

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

Some of Bester's early stories, which are mostly forgotten, are pioneering experiments that are far in advance of the SF of their era in terms of craft. For instance, "The Probable Man" (1941) borrows the technique of parallax (i.e., the re-narration of an event from two points of view) from James Joyce's *Ulysses* and incorporates it seamlessly into a time-paradox story by having the same character experience the same event from two points of view—i.e., his proper and probable timelines. "Adam and No Eve," published the same year, is a dazzling re-complication of the cliched Adam-and-Eve-repopulate-the-earth trope, one that alludes to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and to the poetry of Baudelaire and Byron.

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

Both *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* have been under option at various points, but I am not sure if they are currently. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, both Oliver Stone and Brian De Palma had developed scripts for *The Demolished Man*, but a film was never made. I think there was a more recent attempt to adapt *The Stars My Destination*, but I'm not sure what became of it.

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

Bester left his estate, including his papers, to his bartender, so there are perhaps literary remains. Bester kept what he called "Gimmick Books," diaries in which he jotted down his story ideas, noted or pasted in various types of research, and recorded personal observations. Excerpts from one of these diaries were published online after his death.

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

Bester kept his "Gimmick Books" to allow his ideas to mature and cross-pollinate. He frequently engaged in self-pastiche, by which I mean that he engaged in adaptive borrowing of materials he wrote for other mediums such as comics and radio. For longer works, he used what he called a "mosaic" approach, mapping out and thinking about how to juxtapose specific scenes before deciding how they would fit into the overall plot. He placed a high value on thinking consciously and in advance about visualization, or about how verbal cues could help the reader to "see" specific scenes.

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

Bester had a longstanding interest in astronomy, and in the 1960s, he wrote a popular science book about satellites.

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

Bester once quoted Hungarian biologist Albert Szent-Györgyi, who said: "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought." Bester shook up and reimagined the protocols of the SF genre. He redefined what was possible and encouraged other writers to do the same. I think his legacy consists in the layers of self-awareness that he brought to the genre. His work, which so frequently reworked old tropes and plots to surprising effect, put SF into a productive dialogue with itself.