

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Michael Croteau (Nov. 2021)

*Michael Croteau created and runs the Official Philip Jose Farmer website <http://www.pjfarmer.com/>. He was the publisher of *Farmerphile: The Magazine of Philip José Farmer*. He wrote "Collecting Philip Jose Farmer the Illustrated Guide vol. 1". And he edited Farmer collections "Pearls From Peoria" and "The Best of Philip Jose Farmer."*

Robert Matthew Knuckles: Reading his Riverworld novels and also being familiar with his Wold Newton books, I'm astonished by the level of Encyclopedic details in his stories both historical and literary. How big of a personal library did he have, or was he just blessed with an extraordinary memory that he could keep all the details straight? I can only imagine what his notebooks were like.

Phil had a very large library and a very wide selection of books. Everything from *The White Goddess* to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to books on history, mythologies, and religious texts from around the world. Books of poetry, biographies, archaeology, linguistics, and science, to name a few categories. He also loved the classics, some of his favorites being: Blake, Burroughs, Carrol, Dostoevsky, Doyle, London, Miller, Twain and Verne. He also had many books by his science fiction contemporaries and mystery novels from throughout the twentieth century.

As far as I can tell, Phil never just pulled a name out of the air. The name of every character, every planet, spaceship, country, town, building, whatever, had a lot of thought put into it and is a clue if you can decipher it.

His notes were a bit of a mess. In many cases combinations of typed and handwritten notes as well as newspaper and magazine articles and pages copied out of books.

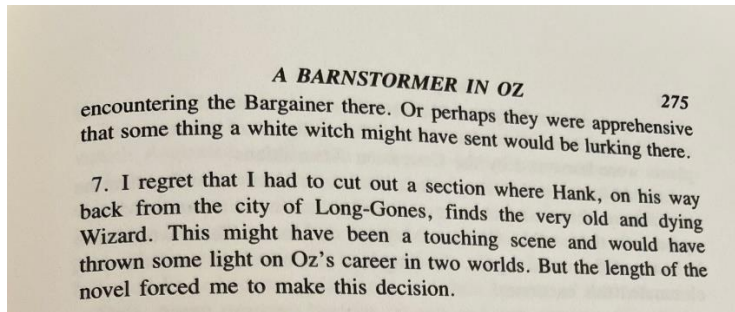
I never asked Phil this, but it's my belief he remembered almost everything he read.

Wing Fu Fing: I've always enjoyed Farmer's takes on other writer's styles and worlds - Venus on a Half Shell, The Wind Whales of Ishmael, Tarzan books, Barnstormers of Oz - I'm curious if Farmer ever expressed which he preferred to write, his own worlds or others' creations?

That's an interesting question, but one I never asked him. Phil loved to write about anyone and anything and especially enjoyed blurring lines between genres, or even between fiction and reality. Who else wrote science fiction stories populated with real living and historical figures, and then also wrote biographies of fictional characters as if they were people?

Other than some of his early Tarzan pastiches, a lot of the stories you mentioned were written in the early 1970s, in the long gap between the second and third Riverworld novels, and between the fourth and fifth World of Tiers novels. I believe Phil was experiencing writers block when it came to those series, but he had no problem writing about other author's characters during that time. He continued that trend with his series of "fictional author" short stories as well.

Alexey Timakov: I have just finished reading *Barnstormer in Oz* (published by Phantasia Press in 1982) and in the author's notes there was this note (picture attached) so I wonder if there is any info about that section that was cut out.



I have gone through Phil's files many times and have not come across a missing chapter from *A Barnstormer in Oz*. However, we do call it "The Magic Filing Cabinet" because anytime we (myself, Christopher Paul Carey, Win Scott Eckert, Paul Spiteri, and artist Keith Howell) go through it, we inevitably find things we missed before. I'll keep an eye out for this.

Alexey Timakov: As far as I know Farmer was a big fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and he created his own stories/extrapolations about Tarzan and lost city Opar, but so far, I have seen nothing about John Carter and Barsoom. So, my question would be why Tarzan and not John Carter?

To say Phil was a big fan of Burroughs is a bit of an understatement. Phil loved all of Burroughs characters, including John Carter, in fact I'll quote him talking about his childhood:

"...I spent far more time playing John Carter than I did anything else. I "was" John Carter, late of the C.S.A., and the woods and creekbanks not too far from my house was the dying planet Mars. Armed with a lath for a rapier, I slashed through hordes of big green "dumb Warhoons" and rescued the lovely red-skinned Dejah Thoris (whom I thought of as being literally, scarlet-skinned) from various lustful Jeddaks.

When I had exhausted Mars for the time being, I shifted into Tarzan's "valence," swung through the trees and dropped in on lions and mad gorillas and Ay-rabs and broke their necks or slit their gullets. So proficient did I become in this, I was soon called "Tarzan" by all my classmates."

However, I can't say why he never wrote about John Carter.

Alexey Timakov: There is a book with title 'Pearls from Peoria' published by Subterranean Press in 2006, the book assembles over sixty previously uncollected pieces of fiction, nonfiction, poetry and autobiography by Philip Jose Farmer. As I understood from the afterwords written by Michael Croteau it took him several years to find and collect all those pieces. After 15 years that passed since then are there any recent editions of new collections of previously unpublished works?

Great question! You could have also asked, "So Mike, what have you guys been doing for the last fifteen years?" *Pearls from Peoria* came out in 2006, but we had worked on it for a couple of years, and then it took a while to get published. After *Pearls* went to print, we kept finding more unpublished stories in Phil's "Magic Filing Cabinet." Since Phil had been active in fandom his whole career, and had had a fanzine produced about him in the past (*Farmerage*: three issues from 1978 to 1979), we went old

school and started *Farmerphile: the Magazine of Philip José Farmer* in 2005. This was a quarterly print fanzine and the first ten issues all contained a previously unpublished story¹ (most of them not science fiction). We also serialized the novel *Up from the Bottomless Pit* over those first ten issues. *Farmerphile* ran for 15 issues and wrapped up in January 2009, just a month before Phil passed away. A year later, believe it or not, we had found more unpublished stories and we started Meteor House, our own Farmercentric small publishing company with our first book being *The Worlds of Philip José Farmer Volume 1*. We did four volumes of this series and have published many other collections, novels, collaborations, and licensed fiction since.

John Grayshaw: How did you get involved with the Farmer website and the collecting of his unpublished works?

When I first got online in the early 1990s, a handful of science fiction authors had webpages dedicated to them. Phil didn't have one, so I started one in 1996. I actually knew very little about Phil then, but another fan contacted me and got me a printed bibliography of his works. There were several novels and dozens of short stories I didn't even know existed. Over time I started collecting his books, and anthologies, magazines, and fanzines where his work first appeared. Phil was very prolific and had written a lot of stories and articles that did not make it into his collections. Bringing those, sometimes really hard to find, items together in one place was the genesis of *Pearls from Peoria*. We joked about giving it the subtitle, "A Short Cut to Collecting PJF"

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

The first obvious answer is the Riverworld series. What a grand concept! Everyone who ever lived is resurrected on a planet that is a giant river valley and you can have historical figures from any era interact.

However, I enjoyed his World of Tiers series more as I think Phil was more creative and really had fun with it. "Lords" with superior technology (they mostly no longer understand) live for thousands of years and can create their own "pocket" universes to play in.

But it may turn out that his most enduring work will be the "Wold Newton family." In his biography of Tarzan, *Tarzan Alive*, Phil claimed that the Wold Newton Meteorite (a real historical event) irradiated fourteen people who were passing by in coaches when it fell. Their descendants became almost super human (smarter, stronger, more driven) and became some of the most extraordinary people written about: Lord Peter Wimsey, Solomon Kane, Captain Blood, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Professor Moriarty, Phileas Fogg, Allan Quatermain, A. J. Raffles, Professor Challenger, Bulldog Drummond, Sam Spade, Nero Wolfe, Travis McGee, Philip Marlowe, James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, Doc Savage, and Tarzan among them. The Wold Netwon Family has grown into the Wold Newton Universe online and it's one of the biggest factions of Farmer fandom.

¹ "The Face that Launched a Thousand Eggs," "The Unnaturals," "That Great Spanish Author, Ernesto," "The Essence of the Poison," "The Doll Game," "Keep Your Mouth Shut," "The Frames," "The Light-Hog Incident," "A Spy in the U.S. of Gonococcia," "The Rebels Unthawed," and "A Peoria Night."

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

Science fiction writers obviously need very good imaginations, but among them, Phil's imagination really stands out. In addition to the series I just mentioned (Riverworld, World of Tiers, and Wold Newton), there is the Dayworld series: Earth is so overpopulated that 6/7ths of the population is "stoned," frozen in suspended animation six days a week and only allowed to live one day a week. This greatly cuts down on the need for housing (homes have different occupants each day) and food, cuts down on pollution, etc. His Secrets of the Nine series about a group of immortal beings that secretly run the world. His Khokarsa series set in Edgar Rice Burroughs' ancient Opar, his fictional author stories which started out with the novel *Venus on the Half-Shell* which was supposedly written by Kurt Vonnegut's character Kilgore Trout. Phil found ideas *everywhere*.

And he was a great instigator of thought. I can't tell you how many times I read something by Phil that made me want to go read something else to better understand where he got the idea.

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

Some of my favorites include the World of Tiers series, which I've already mentioned. *Lord Tyger*: of all his takes on Tarzan this is my favorite. *Time's Last Gift*: Phil doing archeology with a surprise twist. *The Stone God Awakens*: Phil goes wild imagining Earth millions of years in the future.

I also love a lot of his shorter fiction. "Sail On! Sail On!" from 1952 is brilliant. "Night of Light" was later expanded into a novel and includes the phrase that inspired Jimi Hendrix, "Purple Haze." The world he created in "The Sliced-Crosswise Only-On-Tuesday World" was later expanded into the Dayworld Series. In the Sherlock Holmes story, "The Problem of the Thor Bridge," Watson rattles off a short list of cases that Sherlock was not able to solve. In "The Problem of the Sore Bridge—Among Others," Phil has amateur cracksman A. J. Raffles solve all the cases in one neat package. "The Face that Launched a Thousand Eggs" was one of the first things by Phil I was privileged to publish in *Farmerphile* volume 1 and it's a funny (mostly) autobiographical story.

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

All of them. It's a shame that he's being forgotten, but the same is true of most of his contemporaries. When I started collecting his books in the 1990s, the local Barnes & Noble or Borders, would have whole shelves of books by Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, and Robert Heinlein. Now you might only find one or two books by Asimov, Clarke, or Heinlein at B&N. Philip K. Dick has had a renaissance but he is the exception.

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

Before discovering the pulps when he was eleven, Phil was already a prolific reader having devoured *Gulliver's Travels*, Carroll's Alice books, much of Mark Twain, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *The Arabian Nights*, the Oz books, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, much of Jack London, Greek and Norse mythology, *Robin Hood*, *Peter Pan*, and Doyle's *The Lost World* and Sherlock Holmes stories to name a few. When he started reading the pulps he loved those stories just as much as the "classics."

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

There were many. Phil was very active about going to conventions all the way back to 1952. So he met and became friends with many authors. Off the top of my head I can think of Bob Block, Harlan Ellison, Randall Garrett, Frederick Brown, Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, Frank Herbert, and Roger Zelazny. Of course he read them all.

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

Phil was very fond of *The Unreasoning Mask* and was surprised it didn't sell better. *Venus on the Half-Shell* was a favorite because he had so much fun writing it. It was his lifelong dream to write authorized Tarzan, Doc Savage, and Oz novels, so *The Dark Heart of Time*, *Escape from Loki*, and *A Barnstormer in Oz* were favorites. *Lord Tyger* was a favorite. He was also very proud of the short story, "Riders of the Purple Wage" which he won one of his three Hugo Awards for.

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

Phil never stopped reading and learning. Phil was more interested in the softer sciences like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and theology, than in the harder sciences like chemistry and physics. He was much more interested in speculating on what people would do in certain situations, and less interested in technology. I've recently read where he said he spent two years working on *Tarzan Alive*. Here is something you probably didn't know. After Isaac Asimov did the novelization for the movie, *Fantastic Voyage*, they wanted to do a sequel but Asimov wasn't interested. Phil got the gig, wrote a novel called *Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain*, based on a screen treatment he was given. After Phil spent over a year researching the human body and writing the novel, the movie people backed out, said they'd only do it with Asimov and threw a bunch more money at him. Phil was paid, but only a fraction of what it would have been if the movie had been made. That was a bummer, but shows how much time he would put into research.

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

Again, off the top of my head, Randall Garrett lived with Phil and his family for a couple of years. Phil and Bob Bloch were close when Phil lived in California, and then corresponded regularly until Bob's death. Harlan Ellison absolutely loved Phil and Bette Farmer. Robert Heinlein dedicated *Stranger in a Strange Land* to Phil. He was close with Joe Haldeman. Joe R. Lansdale and Spider Robinson both wrote articles for *Farmerphile* about meeting Phil at conventions. I have pictures on the website of Phil hanging out with Frank Robinson, Isaac Asimov, Charles Beaumont, Anthony Boucher, A.E. van Vogt, Brian Aldiss, Robert Schekley, J. G. Ballard, Harry Harrison, Sam Lundwall, Damon Knight, Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Gordon Dickson, and Piers Anthony, among others.

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

Yes, Phil had quite a few fan letters in his files. He answered a lot of fan mail. Doing his website dozens of people have written to me over the years telling me about their correspondence with him. In fact, in the novel Meteor House is about to publish, *The Monster on Hold* (started by Phil and finished by Win Scott Eckert), on the dedication page two people are listed in the acknowledgements because they wrote letters to Phil suggesting something similar to what happens in the novel. In fact, myself,

Christopher Paul Carey, Win Scott Eckert, Paul Spiteri, and Keith Howell all started out as “just fans” and twelve years after Phil’s death we’re still doing what we can to keep his legacy alive.

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

Very intimidating the first time, I was glad to have another collector and fan, Craig Kimber, there with me. I had no idea at that time just how much I didn’t know about his life and career. But Phil was very kind and gracious throughout. You can read that interview, “Pilgrimage to Peoria” on the pjfarmer.com website.

After that first interview I continued to visit him in Peoria, IL once or twice a year and he started letting me go through his files. I’ve already mentioned how this led to *Farmerphile*, but it also led to some of his most talented fans completing his unfinished novels: Christopher Paul Carey finished the third Opar novel, *The Song of Kwasin*, Win Scott Eckert finished the gothic novel *The Evil in Pemberley House* (in addition to the aforementioned *The Monster on Hold*), and Phil’s grand-nephew Danny Adams finished two books, *The City Beyond Play*, and a prequel to Phil’s Dayworld series, *A Hole in Wednesday*. And this all came about because Phil was very welcoming and gracious to his fans.

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

How involved he was with fandom. How many letters he wrote to fans, fanzines, and magazines. How many articles he wrote for a really wide variety of fanzines. And as Robert Matthew Knuckles pointed out, the sheer level of detail he put into everything he wrote. Another book we have coming out this year is *The Man Who Met Tarzan*, which collects just about everything Phil ever wrote about Tarzan, including articles he wrote for fanzines while doing research for his biography, *Tarzan Alive*.

Also, how many stories, mostly not science fiction, he had in his files that had been rejected. Most of that has now been published but who knows what still awaits discovery in his files.

John Grayshaw: Are any of Farmer’s works under option for movies or TV?

Yes, although I don’t know which ones and if I did know I probably couldn’t say. Doing Phil’s official website I get several inquiries a year about rights and I forward them to the agent for Phil’s estate. I also talk with Phil’s heirs several times a year and they will sometimes mention media options. You’re probably aware the Syfy Channel has done two Riverworld movies. There have been rumors about TV shows and movies since the 1970s.

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

Not that I am aware of. He did have an office set aside in his basement where he would sit and type, on a typewriter for most of his career, but he did use a computer for the last decade or so. As I said though, he was always reading, and always learning.

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

He loved planes and lighter-than-air aircraft. He collected art, much of it cover paintings from his books. He and his wife Bette liked to travel and attend a lot of conventions throughout the years.

He was interested in local history and enjoyed walking around the ancient Native American sites that surround Peoria. He was a member of the local Sherlock Holmes society. He enjoyed watching British TV, particularly Sitcoms.

Phil loved genealogy and researching it. He could trace his family tree back to the Vikings (every character in his Riverworld story "Coda" in *Quest to Riverworld* was an ancestor of his). One time he asked me if I had any interesting ancestors and I told him there was a rumor that my great grandfather was Machine Gun Kelly (the bank robber, not the rapper). When I saw him a year later he had done enough research to verify that my mother's mother's father (who no one in the family had seen since the 1930s) was named George Kelly and had been arrested and spent time in prison for bank robbery. But he wasn't Machine Gun Kelly.

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

Phil's imagination and daring set him apart early on in his career. He burst onto the scene in 1952 because he dared to write about sex, using the word "orgasm" in "The Lovers" (*Startling Stories*, August 1952). He continued to write about sex if the story warranted it. He also wrote a lot about religion, a subject many science fiction writers tried to avoid.

His total disregard for boundaries, between genres and between fiction and reality also set him apart and has influenced many writers like Alan Moore (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) and Kim Newman (*Anno Dracula* series)

So far three different authors have completed some of Phil's unfinished works. Hopefully this will continue and bring in a new generation of fans.

Just about every year at FarmerCon (a mini-convention of Farmer fans that is currently held in conjunction with PulpFest) we meet some new young fans who have recently discovered Farmer and want to plunge all the way down the rabbit hole. We're always very happy to welcome them into Farmer fandom and encourage them to keep reading his works.

However, because of COVID FarmerCon was virtual in 2020 and in 2021. In fact, this year's convention just happened November 19/20. If you visit the Meteor House facebook page you'll find links to prerecorded videos (panels and readings): <https://www.facebook.com/MeteorHouse>