Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Michael Swanwick (Dec. 2021)

Michael Swanwick has received the Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, World Fantasy and Hugo Awards, and has the pleasant distinction of having been nominated for and lost more of these same awards than any other writer. His novels include Stations of the Tide, Bones of the Earth, two Darger and Surplus novels, and The Iron Dragon's Mother. He has also written over a hundred and fifty short stories and countless works of flash fiction.

Eva Sable: Who are some of your favorite books and authors? You don't have to confine yourself to science fiction for this one.

Tolkien, of course, though I doubt I'll ever travel through Middle-earth again. A. S. Byatt—a tie between *Possession* and *The Children's Book.* Vladimir Nabokov for almost everything he's written. In genre, I'd begin with Gene Wolfe, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Ursula K. Le Guin. *Chimera* John Barth and *The Maze Maker* by Michael Ayrton. Mary Stewart's Arthurian trilogy and T. H. White's series as well, *The Sword in the Stone* in particular. Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita.* That's just off the top of my head. I could go on for hundreds more.

Looking over the list, I see that these are all magisterial writers and ambitious books. I suppose that says something about me.

John Grayshaw: You've said before that it takes ten years for a writer to become an overnight success. Can you tell us about how you started out writing and at what point you felt like you had made it as a writer?

In 1967, my junior year of high school, I finished my homework at 11 p.m. and picked up *The Fellowship of the Ring,* meaning to read a chapter or two before bed. I stayed up all night and finished the last page just as the home room bell rang. That made me determined to become a writer. Twelve years later, Gardner Dozois and Jack Dann took apart an attempt at short fiction I'd made and showed me how to turn it into a real story. From then on, I sold everything I wrote. And ten or so years after that, I won a Nebula Award for *Stations of the Tide.* That convinced me I was getting somewhere as a writer at last.

John Grayshaw: What do you know about your novel when you start writing it?

I know how it begins and I know how it ends and I have some idea of what I hope to accomplish with it. Everything between the opening line and the closing paragraph, however, is a mystery to me.

John Grayshaw: What kind of research do you typically do for your writing?

Every kind there is. Tons of reading, of course, but also getting out into the world I'm writing about. For *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* I visited factories, clambered over steam locomotives, visited the sleaziest strip bar I could find. For *Bones of the Earth,* I interviewed paleontologists, attended conferences, drove to distant cities to look at fossils. And so on. It's always a race whether I can finish the research before the novel is complete.

John Grayshaw: Since I live and work in Middletown, PA close to the former Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, I am curious what kind of research you did for your book "In the Drift?" Did you ever visit the area?

Never. I live in Philadelphia and was there during the partial meltdown and, since my in-laws lived outside of Pittsburgh, I drove past Middletown many dozens of times. But somehow I never felt the urge to look at Three Mile Island close up. Fear, maybe? Superstition? I really have no answer.

John Grayshaw: You write novels and short stories. What do you like about each of them? How are they different?

Howard Waldrop once observed that a short story was about the single most important incident in its protagonist's life, while a novel was about the single most important period of time in its protagonist's life. To this I can add that you can hold the totality of a short story—a good one—in your mind. But you can only remember the voyage through a novel as a series of events or images. The short story can deliver a harp emotional or intellectual wallop in a way the novel cannot. But a good novel is a country that you can move into and inhabit for the duration of your reading.

It's possible—just barely, for a very small number of us—to make a living writing novels. Short fiction is the straightest path to poverty there is. The novel, structurally, is a big gallumphing shaggy beast; it's quite easy to love. The short story, at its best, can have the beauty and straightforward purity of a surgical laser. It's possible to write a perfect short story and I believe I have done so several times. Nobody has written a perfect novel. Ever.

John Grayshaw: Fantasy and Science Fiction, as someone who writes in both genres and often blends them, do you see a difference between them? Do you prefer to write one over the other?

By my reading, science fiction is about possible things and fantasy about the impossible. Science fiction is set in a knowable universe, while at the heart of fantasy lies mystery. I love both forms and it's possible to achieve wonders with each.

More and more, though, I'm favoring fantasy because I've watched the future swallow up too much exemplary SF and render it obsolete. Also, fantasy is a newer genre than science fiction, so more of its inherent possibilities remain to be discovered.

John Grayshaw: You've written several stories about the Age of Dinosaurs, what is it that interests you about that period?

When I was a toddler, I would sit in the sandbox and stages battles between a plastic *T. rex* in one hand and a plastic *Triceratops* in the other. I never lost that primal sense of wonder.

I could go on and on about the fascinations of the interaction of dinosaurs and their world and all of it would be true. But, at core, dinosaurs are cool. Children know that instinctively.

John Grayshaw: How did you become involved in writing several of these flash fiction series like "The Periodic Table of Science Fiction." What do you enjoy about writing these stories?

I had discovered that I had a knack for flash fiction and had published a couple of abecedaries in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and the like when Eileen Gunn asked me for a series for her online zine, *The Infinite Matrix.* I wanted something challenging, so I decided on an SF version of the Periodic

Table. Then, briefly, it looked like the magazine would close after one issue, so Eileen suggested to Ellen Datlow that she pick it up for *Omni Online*, which she was editing. And *then,* after the series got going, Eileen's funding returned. Because then she wanted a new series, I came up with *The Sleep of Reason,* eighty-six short fictions, one for each etching in Goya's *Los Caprichos.*

For a long time, I was publishing a story a week in each series and one a month on my blog. Other writers turned pale with superstitious awe in my presence.

A flash fiction is very simple—most jokes are flash fictions, though the form doesn't require that the story be funny. But when you have a series, something interesting happens. Characters recur. Stories comment upon one another. Themes develop. Longer plots emerge and the series as a whole attains the complexity of more serious fiction. I find that fascinating because it's all emergent. I didn't start either series with that in mind.

Also, I like the form because I'm able to write flash fiction in the evening, while watching TV, so it doesn't cut into my writing time.

John Grayshaw: You've talked about writing Science Fiction in terms of "Seeing everything in terms of Economics." Can you tell us what this means?

In its simplest form, it's who benefits and who gets hurt. Larry Niven's teleportation series is a good example. Who gets hurt? Auto manufacturers. Who benefits? Etc. Motorcycle manufacturers, because the roads still remain, only now they're empty and thus more fun for bikers. If you look at a classic Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, it can all be reduced to economic motives. But if you allow that, metaphorically, human emotions, negative and positive, are the mental equivalent of debt and wealth, then you can shoehorn writers like Theodore Sturgeon in there as well.

John Grayshaw: Your story "Ginungagap" was seen as a forerunner to the cyberpunk genre. Do you think of yourself as having been a part of that movement?

At the very beginning of the genre (or movement as they called it then), it was made very clear to me that I was a class enemy. If you look at Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology, which was meant to be definitive in both senses of the word, you'll notice I wasn't there.

My personal belief is that the writers' generation of the time, though divided into two camps, Cyberpunk and Humanist, really was one thing, one set of individuals with common influences and beliefs. But I really don't have much of a say in this question. More and more, I'm seeing myself grandfathered into the Cyberpunk camp. If it makes people happy… sure, go ahead

Eva Sable: For a reader unfamiliar with your work, where would you suggest they start to get a sense of who you are as a writer?

It depends. If you like short fiction as much as I do, you can pick up pretty much any of my collections. The most recent one, *Not So Much Said the Cat*, is probably the strongest. If you prefer novels and favor science fiction, you should read *Stations of the Tide.* But if you favor fantasy, it's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter.* The former is fantasy flavored science fiction and the latter is science fiction flavored fantasy, so either one should give you an idea if you'd like the other.

John Grayshaw: Can you tell us what it was like to collaborate with Gardiner Dozois and William Gibson?

Gardner was highly respected as a writer long before he became an editor, and I was in awe of his work. So he had final say. We'd be talking about writing and an idea would spontaneously arise, so we'd hash out the plot over the space of an hour or so, me taking notes all the way. Waving our arms and talking over each other in great excitement until we had an entire, well-shaped plot. Sometimes Jack Dann was there, too. I'd take the notes home and, when next I stalled out on whatever I was writing, come up with a first draft. If Jack was involved, I'd mail it to him and he'd do second draft. If he wasn't, it went direct to Gardner who did the second draft. Then, in either case, Gardner would do the final polish, placing the story in a single unified voice—his. Jack and I were both down with this. I learned a great deal from the experience.

For "Dogfight," I'd heard of an image Bill Gibson had for a story and happened to have a story structure that needed exactly such an image. I met him for the first time at a convention and with typical generosity he offered to let me have his idea. "Or," he said, "we can write it together."

We were both new writers at the time and roughly equals. But there was a lot of buzz about Gibson and I wanted to see his chops. So I took him up on the latter offer. We used the "hot typewriter method." One of us had the story for a month, during which he could do as much or as little as he wanted, but after thirty days he had to mail it to the other. Who was free to make any changes whatsoever to the story before sending it back, along with a letter explaining what had been done and why and any new ideas that hadn't yet made it into the text.

I found that Gibson was a very fine writer on the sentence-by-sentence level. I paid a lot of attention to what he was doing and I learned from him as well.

John Grayshaw: Any other science fiction writers that you might collaborate with or have just developed a friendship with?

A good half of my friends are fantasy or SF writers and I have a great many friends, so that's a lot! It's been a long time since I've done any collaborations so I may or may not (see later) ever do any more.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them? Or have you gotten any interesting reader feedback from your works in general?

I enjoy them enormously, in part because the only place I encounter many, many friends I care deeply about. Also, I enjoy talking.

Here's a story: I was on a panel on Steampunk with Nisi Shawl, who criticized it for its barely concealed nostalgia for colonialism. She declared that it would be possible to write an anti-colonial steampunk novel set in the Belgian Congo. I made horrified noises because… the Belgian Congo? That's not fun. It's the opposite of fun. Stung, she declared, "I am going to write that novel and Michael Swanwick is going to beg me to let him read it!" Not long after, as these things go, *Everfair* came out, which I honestly believe is a landmark addition to the Utopia genre. I hear that she's written a sequel and I am begging her to let me read it.

Interesting feedback? Well, at one convention where I was guest of honor, a fan told me that he'd really hated one of my books. So I smiled and said, "Thank you." That's what one does. Then an hour later, he

sought me out to apologize, saying, “I’m sure you’re a very great writer. I just wish I’d never read your book.” And throughout the rest of the convention, he kept hunting me down to apologize for our last encounter and berate me for how horrible my writing was.

At another guest-of-honor gig, a fan told me that he was very knowledgeable about science fiction and demanded that I tell him why, despite my many awards and honors, he’d never heard of me. I said I didn’t know. But I lied.

I’ve also had very pleasant encounters with fans. But, admit it, those two were pretty funny.

Eva Sable/John Grayshaw: What did you think about how your story “Ice Age” turned out in “Love, Death and Robots”? Are there any movie/TV adaptions of your writings in the works?

I thought that Tim Miller was astonishingly faithful to the story. He made a couple of small changes, but they were all improvements. “Too early” was his.

Another animation is coming out in Season Three, but I’m not supposed to tell you which story it’s based it. It’s quite different from “Ice Age.” And there are various options simmering away.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick to?

I have breakfast, I go up to my office, come downstairs for lunch, I spend the rest of the afternoon at my desk, and then I come downstairs around suppertime to reconnect with Marianne. Sometimes I play hooky.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies other than writing?

I like to do things and go places. I like most new experiences. But the only hobbies I have in the commonly accepted sense of the word involve writing. I write non-fiction, mostly criticism and reviews. I conduct the occasional interview. Once a year, Marianne and I go to various forests and cemeteries, where I write a Halloween story on leaves, one word a time, photograph the leaves, and serialize the story online during the month of October. Occasionally I used to write a piece of flash fiction, seal it in a bottle which I then signed with a diamond tipped pen. After which, I would destroy every copy and draft, both physical and electronic, so the bottled story was unique, and either give it away or donate it to a charity auction. None of these things, and others like them, bring in any real money, so they have to count as hobbies rather than part of my business as a manufacturer of prose in bulk.

John Grayshaw: I love how you dedicate your books to your wife as “the M.C. Porter Endowment for the Arts.” Is she the secret to your success?

She is the secret to my happiness and to my joy in life. I try not to consider her a part of my career because that would diminish her.

Of course Marianne, who has her own nano-imprint, Dragonstairs Press, is under no such compunction. She creates small, beautifully-made chapbooks, usually in editions of 100 or less, which commonly sell out immediately. Every now and then, she says “Swanwick! I want you to write me…” and then gives me a theme for one of her publications. I am in thrall to her. I can do naught but obey.

John Grayshaw: What is the significance of your earring that I see in many pictures of you?

A shark has to keep moving or it will die. The same thing for any artist. I wear it to remind myself that my fiction has to keep changing to stay alive.

Also, it's my brand. I only wear it on science fiction/fantasy occasions. If it's not in my ear, I'm off duty. But you can still come up and say hi.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on currently?

Stories, stories, stories. Also, currently, a lot of related chores like introductions to books and this interview, which are worth doing but periodically (they come in surges; many months can go by without them) do suck up time. I've got 18 Post-It notes on the side of the bookshelf by my desk with the titles of stories I'm theoretically currently working on. Also, I may or may not be working on a collaborative novel. I haven't told the other writer about this. I'm going to write a chapter or two before bringing it up.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

I plan to write something so wonderful that it will be remembered forever. We'll see how that works out.