Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Elizabeth Hand (July 2022)

Elizabeth Hand is the author of more than nineteen cross-genre novels and five collections of short fiction. Her work has received the Shirley Jackson Award (three times), the World Fantasy Award (four times), the Nebula Award (twice), as well as Comicon's prestigious Inkpot Award for lifetime achievement, James M. Tiptree Jr. and Mythopoeic Society Awards. She is on the faculty of the Stonecoast MFA Program in Creative Writing. She's a longtime critic and contributor of essays for the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Salon, Boston Review, and the Village Voice, among many others. She divides her time between the Maine coast and North London. Her latest novel "Hokuloa Road" comes out this month.

Bill Rogers: Liz, 'Waking the Moon' is my favorite story of yours; any chance you'd return to that universe?

Thanks, Bill — I have such fond memories of writing that book, (and living through the experiences that inspired it). I've often thought of doing so over the last decades, and a few years ago I even started on a novel set in the present day, with Sweeney and Dylan's daughter as the protagonist. I set the book aside to write what became Curious Toys, but I may go back to it someday.

Bill Rogers: 'Icarus Descending' was your last science fiction novel (that I know of); do you have any interest in returning to SF and, if so, do you think a new novel would incorporate the dark, surreal aspect of most of your fiction?

Glimmering (published in 1997, a revised edition came out about ten years ago) is a SF novel — the UK critic Graham Sleight told me it now reads like an alternate history (it's set in 2000). I'd write another if I felt compelled to, but at the moment our own world is so insanely dystopic, I'm not sure I'd enjoy the process. It was more fun imagining the end of the world than it is living through it.

Dan Hawkins: You are my favorite living writer.

I've read most of the novels and story collections (I still need to read the early scifi trilogy and a couple or three others). I love the genre hopping. There is a mood that transfers nicely across them, as does your prose style.

Many of your books regardless of genre share bohemian artist characters/settings. This is one of the many things I love about your work. What about this milieu draws you back?

Thank you so much, Dan! I'm just perpetually fascinated by artists, especially self-taught or visionary artists — to me, the process of artistic creation is just so mysterious and even eerie, despite the fact that it relies on technique, hard work, and all the nuts and bolts stuff that goes into being a painter or poet or actor or musician or dancer. I'm fascinated by that aspect of it too. I think that art and the act of creation are the closest we can come to accessing, in our world, the sense of transcendent wonder that we encounter in the best fantasika (SF, fantasy, horror, magical realist, supernatural fiction, etc.). Plus, artists are just really interesting people. They're trying to do the impossible — bring their own individual vision to life in some way, with very small prospects of an audience for it. Yet, even if they fail, they keep trying. Why? It's certainly not for the money, or fame. There are far more accessible ways to do

that, especially these days with ubiquitous social media. I just find them intensely interesting. The book I'm working on now is about theater people in a haunted house, so I'm obviously still trying, too!

Dwight Menorah: Do you consider yourself a genre writer? The reason I ask is because your work is very hard to define by any other word than: excellent. It appeals to me as a fan of sci fi, horror, fantasy, and simply great literature.

Thank you, Dwight. I honestly don't think about genre when I'm writing. I know my publisher does, but I don't. I just write in whatever mode seems to best suit the story I'm trying to tell. Sometimes I try multiple modes until I hit on the right one. Generation Loss started as a dark fantasy like Waking the Moon, and briefly morphed into a horror novel before it became noir (with flickers of the supernatural). Wylding Hall started as a YA riff on DuMaurier's Rebecca, set at a theater camp. I fail all the time before I finally get something right. It's not a time- or energy- or cost-effective process, but it's just the way I work.

John Grayshaw: Since a lot of your works cross genres what do you think about the division between genres? How are the labels useful and when are they not?

As noted above, I don't think about the labels. I leave that to the suits and algorithims!

Anastasia Hilvers: I am finding there are a few SF works which combine genres - say mystery and SF, for example. As someone who is new to your work, could you direct me to any of your writings that would merge SF with something else? If not, any plans?

Well, it's been some years since I've written any full-length works in SF mode. The revised edition of Glimmering might fit your remit (I prefer it over the 1997 original). The Cass Neary novels — Generation Loss, Available Dark, Hard Light and The Book of Lamps and Banners — have elements of different genres, and Lamps & Banners definitely has some SF elements (an app that alters brain chemistry). I do have a novella I want to write that might qualify as SF, but it will probably be a year or so until I get to it.

Damo Mac Choiligh: I understand that you live in a very rural part of Maine and also in Camden Town in London. Do these two very differing locales influence your work in any way? By that I mean both inspiration for settings and backgrounds and so on, but also how the mood you might experience in either place shows up in your writing. I would imagine a 'rural idyll' has different trials and tribulations compared to living in London.

The atmospheres of different places influence my works for sure, but, oddly, not when I'm actually working there. I tend to write more effectively about a place when I'm recalling it and not actually inhabiting it. So Mortal Love, set in London, was mostly written in Maine. But most of my books are written here — I have a ridiculously conducive workspace, a tiny lakefront cottage that I bought as a near teardown 32 years ago. When I'm traveling I try to absorb as much information and atmosphere as I can, then discharge it into a story once I'm back in Maine, where there are fewer distractions.

Damo Mac Choiligh: Many writers talk about how reading the work of others does or does not influence their own work. You are a noted reviewer and critic so you have read more than most and done so in a pretty detailed and analytical way, so has this influenced your work?

I think it's probably helped me to be a better critical thinker and teacher and editor of other people's work. When it comes to my own work, though, I don't work analytically — I definitely wander around in

the metaphorical wilderness for months or even years before I find my way to a story. I don't know why. Probably it's just the way my brain is wired.

Kev Smith: Having read some of your work both collaborative and solo across genres and some of your tie in novels (Star Wars and X-Files). What is your favourite genre to write?

When I first came across the term 'folk horror,' I thought, well, that encompasses a lot of what I write. So probably folk horror.

Kev Smith: Do you prefer to write a story alone or with others and how does the experience differ?

Years ago, I collaborated on two stories and a comic series for DC Comics with my dear friend Paul Witcover, and I'd work with him again, but I'm kind of a loner. I don't workshop stories or novels. I do have a small group of writer/editor/reader friends who I ask to read my work before publication, and I've used sensitivity readers to help me as well. My partner, John Clute, is the only person who regularly reads anything in its early stages. Writing is a delicate process for me, and I worry about getting derailed.

Kev Smith: We all have our own favourites but if you had to recommend only one of your own novels or stories to this group what would it be and why?

My favorite of my books is probably Illyria. It was a very personal story I'd been trying and failing to write since I was seventeen — there are flickers of it throughout my fiction. When I completed it, I knew I'd finally nailed it.

Katie Polley: What has been your favorite tie-in world to explore as a writer, and is it different than how you would answer the question as a fan? (For example, was Star Wars the most fun to write in, but your fannish heart belongs to the X-Files?)

I loved writing the Boba Fett books! So much fun to write and geek out on, and I had a wonderful editor in David Levithan, and great support from the Lucas Licensing people. They were all a dream to work with. For years I got the best fan mail from third grade boys who were fans. And this past year I got a delightful message on Twitter from someone who'd grown up reading the books in his school library — I sent him signed copies of what I had on hand. Those books went out of print, which is a shame. I loved them.

Molly Smith: 12 Monkeys deals with issues of madness. What kind research did you do for this subject? What guidelines were you given on writing for the movie? What did think of the 12 Monkeys tv series? What are views on how movie turned out?

12 Monkeys had a brilliant screenplay by Dave and Jan Peoples, so it was very easy to work from what they'd already done. I was and am a huge fan of "La Jetée," the iconic Chris Marker film that inspired 12 Monkeys, so when I was asked to do the novelization I almost dropped the phone. Dave and Jan were very happy with the book — they didn't give me any suggestions, just let me follow my own instincts. I only saw the movie once when it first came out. I enjoyed it, but I thought their screenplay was stronger than the film version. Gilliam is a genius who sometimes gets in his own way. I haven't seen the TV series so can't comment on that.

John Grayshaw: What was your job at the Air and Space Museum?

Ha! I started there as a GS 1, the lowest pay scale for government work. My job was to operate a Link Trainer Cessna flight simulator in NASM's General Aviation Gallery. So, me and the other GAT (General Aviation Trainer) aides were trained in basic flight instruction, but basically, we had to deal with thousands upon thousands of idiotic tourists who treated these incredibly expensive, sophisticated pieces of equipment like they were Tinker Toys. As a result, the GATs broke down constantly and had to be repaired. I developed a real loathing for American tourists — you saw mind-numbing rudeness and stupidity every day for hours on end. On a few occasions I witnessed the reverse, real kindness and some interesting conversation with professional pilots or men who'd been in the military. They were always respectful of the GATs and of us, too. I eventually got promoted to being a floor supervisor (still a really minor position) in the planetarium, before getting a more interesting job upstairs in the museum's archives, where I worked on what was at the time a groundbreaking project — putting NASM's photographic collection on videodisc. Today you'd just scan or photograph the images on your phone: it took me and my late colleague and dear friend Greg Bryant years to do it, in concert with colleagues from NASM Records Management and the Smithsonian photo division. The actual work was kind of mind-shredding, but as a card-carrying Smithsonian employee I had the run of all the museums, which was fantastic. And I loved my NASM colleagues and friends, some of whom I'm still in touch with. I left in 1986 and still have dreams about it.

John Grayshaw: Can you talk about moving to Tooley Cottage in Maine and some of your struggles? That is just such a fascinating story.

In 1990 I bought a tiny, run-down lakefront camp for not very much money. I'd gotten a small advance for the UK edition of my first novel and used that for the down payment. The camp was 300 square feet, with no indoor plumbing or running water. Holes in the floor and no insulation and just a tiny parlor stove for heat. I was eight months pregnant when I moved in with my then-partner. My friends, most of them plumbers and carpenters, all tried to talk me out of it — without me knowing it, they'd gotten together and discussed what a horrible idea this was. But I went through with it and ended up hiring them over the years to fix it up.

If I'd known what I was getting into, I would never have had the nerve to do it. My parents gave me a little money and I had a tiny addition added (about 90 square feet) with a sleeping loft and a tiny bedroom for the baby and a bathroom. It was years before I had running water, so the bathroom was just a closet. We had an outhouse, not fun when it's minus fifteen degrees. That first winter I would lie awake in the middle of the night and listen to a porcupine under the structure, loudly gnawing at the floor. The place was in such rough shape I seriously worried the porcupine would be what brought it down. So, I'd put on my LL Bean boots and parka and grab a baseball bat and go outside in the snow at 3 AM and bash at the exterior wall with the baseball bat until I scared off the porcupine. It took a few nights but it finally stayed away.

I could go on and on. I keep telling myself I should write a memoir about the cottage — it was a wild experience. None of it would have happened without the help of friends, who worked so tirelessly for years — I paid them, but it was still a huge amount of effort, way above and beyond. I wish I had taken Before pictures, because now it's just beautiful, but then it was not much better than a teardown. One of my best friends here, Bruce Bouldry, was a boatbuilder and master carpenter., and also an artist and woodcarver. Every time I had a little money, I'd hire him to do work on the cottage. Like me, he was a

huge Tolkien fan, so he designed everything in Middle-earth terms. He once told me, "If you think of this as a house, it's a really small house. But if you think of it as a boat, it's a good-sized boat." So Tooley Cottage combines a sort of Bag End vibe, with beautiful hand-carved features. Bruce died a few years ago quite suddenly of cancer, and I still miss him more than I can say. He was working on a coat cupboard for me, inspired by the one where the dwarves hung their cloaks in The Hobbit. Everywhere I look at Tooley Cottage I see his work.

John Grayshaw: When did you start to feel like you'd made it as a writer?

Well, in commercial terms, I still haven't quote-unquote 'made it' — I've written so many novels that were supposed to be breakout books, and none of them ever broke out. But that keeps me honest, I think. Rust never sleeps — I can't afford to not work. And I'm incredibly fortunate that my fiction continues to get published and read, despite never having reached a mass audience — that fact humbles me. I still feel very lucky that anyone reads me at all.

John Grayshaw: You said in an interview, "A lot of my work over the past 15 years has been an ongoing exploration of what it's like to be an artist." Do you consider yourself to be a writer or an artist? Or is there really no difference?

I think a writer is a kind of artist, so in that sense, I'm an artist. Or someone who struggles to be an artist, anyway.

John Grayshaw: I know that you were very into the punk scene. Can you talk a little bit about that and tell us how it has influenced your writing too?

I was really lucky to have been young and in NYC and DC in the early and mid-1970s, when punk was born. I'd been a rock and roll fan since I was a kid — AM radio was magic back then. So, I was fortunate enough to witness punk emerge out of glam and the Velvets and garage rock and psychedelia and folk and funk and every other damn thing you could hear in those days. I really wanted to be a rock critic — I read Creem and Crawdaddy and Rolling Stone and later Punk and New York Rocker and the Soho Weekly News, Vintage Violence and Trouser Press, Who Put the Bomp and all those other magazines and zines. I wanted to be Lester Bangs. I've talked often about how hearing Patti Smith in 1975 (after first reading about her) really changed my life. Up until then, I hadn't realized a woman could seize and wield the same creative power that I mostly associated with men, like the Beats.

I pretty much spent the next three years totally immersed in the punk scene (as a fan not an artist), also constantly going to plays, movies, museums and any kind of performance I could. I was a playwriting major shuttling, between DC and NYC to absorb everything I could, including a lot of drugs and alcohol. In 1978 I flunked out of college — that's when I first started working at NASM. I had to rein myself in a bit to hold down a full-time job. I also decided I needed to focus more on writing, which I'd always done but usually with a pack of cigarettes and a drink in hand and Iggy Pop blasting from the stereo. At 20, that's what I thought it took to be a writer. At one point I'd work three 12-hour NASM shifts in a row, so I could take four days off to go to the Atlantis, later the 930 Club, to see whatever was playing that night, along with any other interesting music or film I could find. My parents weren't happy about it but it was the best education I could ever have had. After two years I did go back to university. I spent several years getting a Bachelor's of Science in Cultural Anthropology while I worked at NASM. Most of

my courses were geared for grad students, as those were the only classes offered at night after I got off from work.

I always thought I'd been an excellent student, but when I looked at my transcript a few years back, I saw that a lot of my grades were outstandingly mediocre if not outright bad. I like to think I got straight As in Punk. But I'm not sure it influenced my fiction much until I finally got round to first writing Generation Loss around 2005, when I really did channel my own life and experiences into a novel.

John Grayshaw: Do you listen to music while you write? Who are some of the artists you're listening to lately?

I used to work to music a lot more than I do now. I still have playlists, but they don't tend to feature as much new music because they're stored on an ancient desktop at the cottage. We do have a great local radio station here, WERU, so I listen to my favorite DJs there and that's how I find out about new stuff. My favorite new artist is an amazing young folksinger from Vermont, Fern Maddie. Her album Ghost Story was named Album of the Month by the Guardian, which is how I first heard of her. She does a version of "Hares on the Mountain" that gives me goosebumps. I used that song as an epigraph for Waking the Moon, and her version inspired me so much that I'm using the song again as a motif in my new novel.

John Grayshaw- I've also heard that you are a fan of film noir movies. What are some of your favorites and why? And how has this influenced your writing?

I grew up watching The Million Dollar Movie on NYC metro-area TV, so I got exposed to both film noir and Roger Corman movies at an early age (along with Gorgo, still one of my favorite movies). I have too many favorites to name, but I really love The Third Man, also Odd Man Out, another Carol Reed movie that deserves to be much better know.

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

I basically fall down a rabbit hole for every book — books, music, video, internet. If I could get paid for doing research without ever having to write a novel, that would be my dream job.

John Grayshaw: Who are some the science fiction authors you grew up reading?

I grew up reading fantasy and not science fiction, though I loved SF movies. My real intro to SF came with reading Delany's Dhalgren when I was seventeen and a senior in high school. That rewired my brain, and I don't think it's ever been the same.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them?

I LOVE going to cons — I attended my first, Disclave, in 1988, and went to Nolacon later that same year. Readercon remains my favorite. For a week or two during the pandemic, I had these recurring dreams in which I was at a different con every night, overjoyed at seeing old friends and meeting new ones. I really hope Readercon will be back next year and I can make at least one dream come true.

John Grayshaw: Any TV/Movie adaptions of your works in the future?

The Cass Neary novels, Wylding Hall, and Hokuloa Road are all under option and in various stages of being developed for TV and film. I hope I may have good news about at least one of those projects before the year is out, but media stuff is a crapshoot. So, we'll see. Keep watching the skies!

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

When I'm in the UK or Northern Europe, I love finding and exploring ancient sites. There are fewer here in the US, though I've seen paleoglyths in Hawai'i and Colorado. I could do that all day.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick to? Do you still write in Tooley Cottage?

I'm writing this at Tooley Cottage right now! It's where I work best. I try to work every day, but it's a challenge, between teaching, reviewing, and other professional responsibilities, along with Life.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

With the support and permission of Shirley Jackson's family, I'm writing a novel inspired by The Haunting of Hill House, called The Witches of Hillsdale. We first started talking about it about eight years ago, and then last year the conversation resumed. I'm over the moon about it — it's centered on a small group of theater people who take over Hill House as rehearsal space for a contemporary play inspired by "The Witch of Edmonton," a Jacobean work itself inspired by the execution of Elizabeth Sawyer for witchcraft in 1623. I feel so honored to be doing it, and am trying not to be intimidated!

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

Same as it ever was — to keep writing as long as I can. And keep porcupines from eating Tooley Cottage.