

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview about A.E. van Vogt (August 2022)

Our expert is Charles Platt who interviewed about 40 sci-fi authors in the 80s for his non-fiction series called "Dream Makers."

Charles Platt: I regret that in many cases I don't have much to tell you. I did not know Van Vogt at all well and just spent a couple of hours at his house. If your group had existed in 1980, and I had known about it, I could have been much better prepared.

John Grayshaw here in blue (with research help from Richard Whyte) – we're jumping in here and helping to answer questions where we can.

Terry Petta/John DeLaughter: Given AEV's style and subject matter, I'd be interested to know who his favorite writers were, what writers he considered influences on his own work, and what other contemporary SF writers he enjoyed reading?

JG: Van Vogt systemized his writing method. So one of his biggest influences was "The Only Two Ways to Write a Story" by John Gallishaw. From this he learned about writing stories with scenes of about 800 words where a new complication was introduced or a problem solved. And also, from this book, he learned about "Fictional sentences" or "hang ups" as van Vogt called them in Science Fiction. Which means sentences where the author gives information in each sentence but not complete information, so it builds up suspense as you read it....In addition, van Vogt kept a very unusual sleep schedule, when van Vogt was working on a story he would set an alarm and wake up every 90 minutes so he could write down his dreams because he would often work his plots out in his dreams.

A.E. van Vogt said in a 1979 interview: R. A. Lafferty writes (for me) the best fictional sentences, Robert Silverberg the best true emotion, Harlan Ellison the most condensed fictional sentences, Larry Niven the best hardcore science fiction, Randall Garrett the best pastiche writing, and Jerry Pournelle the farthest in the shortest time. Of the great ladies, C. J. Cherryh, Vonda McIntyre, Katherine Kurtz, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree, Jr.), Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and Tanith Lee have all gone up into those rarefied heights that only women can attain. But the fact that I have to list that many names, and omit several dozen that have my respect-for example, John Brunner and Brian Aldiss-tells me that the field has changed drastically for the better.

Damo Mac Choiligh: Why did he change his name to Alfred Elton van Vogt?

JG: Damo, I don't know why he changed his name, but I do know when. He was born Alfred Vogt and he added the middle name "Elton" sometime in the mid-1930's. At this time he was writing "True confession" type stories and in one such story 1937's "To Be His Keeper" (which was published by the Toronto Star) they misspelled his name "Alfred Alton Bogt." In Vogt's 1975 autobiography "Reflections of A.E. van Vogt" he misremembers it as "A. Ban Bogt." Shortly after this he added the "van" and started going by A.E. van Vogt.

In his 1975 Autobiography, van Vogt talks about how his great grandfather was an "Oregon hunter, trapper and rancher" and was called van der Vogte but shortened it to van Vogt. And it was his father that dropped the "van" but only for a short time while Alfred was a child.

Van Vogt said in his autobiography, “at the moment it’s hard to imagine that I could have been successful as a science fiction writer if my name had been A. E. van der Vogte, or A. E. Vogt, or Alfred Vogt. Somehow, they don’t have the correct science-fictional sound to them. But all of them are valid and related variations.”

Damo Mac Choiligh: Philip K. Dick often said that van Vogt was an influence; do you see this in PKDs work?

CP: Absolutely, and I spoke about this with Phil. You can find that in my interview with him. He believed there was something beyond everyday reality, and eventually of course that became literalized in his vision of VALIS. But long before that, Phil found a strangeness in Van Vogt's work which resonated with his sense of "something more." Interestingly, Van Vogt didn't seem to see his own work like that at all; he almost seemed offended by the idea that it didn't quite make rational sense, and of course rewrote Null A in an effort to counter Knight's criticisms along those lines. Personally I think Knight imposed his own pedestrian outlook when he was trying to understand Van Vogt's work. Phil Dick compared Knight to a building inspector complaining about code violations. Exactly right!

JG: Here are the full quotes from PKD, “I started reading sf when I was about twelve and I read all I could, so any author who was writing about that time, I read. But there's no doubt who got me off originally and that was A.E. van Vogt. There was in van Vogt's writing a mysterious quality, and this was especially true in *The World of Null A*. All the parts of that book did not add up; all the ingredients did not make a coherency. Now some people are put off by that. They think that's sloppy and wrong, but the thing that fascinated me so much was that this resembled reality more than anybody else's writing inside or outside science fiction.”

“Damon feels that it's bad artistry when you build those funky universes where people fall through the floor. It's like he's viewing a story the way a building inspector would when he's building your house. But reality really is a mess, and yet it's exciting. The basic thing is, how frightened are you of chaos? And how happy are you with order? Van Vogt influenced me so much because he made me appreciate a mysterious chaotic quality in the universe which is not to be feared.”

Paul Fraser: To what extent was E. Mayne Hull’s work her own or in collaboration with A.E. van Vogt?

JG: Hull and van Vogt got married in 1939. For most of van Vogt’s career Hull was his typist. After only a couple of years of typing his stories Hull began to get ideas for her own SF and Fantasy stories. However, Hull’s career was fairly brief, she wrote almost all the stories in a 3-year period from 1943-1946.

In his autobiography Van Vogt talks about the ways in which he mentored Hull as a writer; he devised a system where she wouldn’t have to write too much science. The science stuff would happen “off-screen” and the character Arthur Blord would offer only a few words of explanation and before the reader could think too much about it, the story was over.

They published a collection “Out of This World” in 1948 that was a mix of some of Hull’s stories and some of van Vogt’s.

In 1965, their agent Forrest J Ackerman—found a new paperback publisher, The Book Company of America, who agreed to print “Planets for Sale”, but only if van Vogt would attach his name to it which he did reluctantly because they had just bought some land in Ventura County and needed the advance

to cover a payment. But Hull reminded him that he had “created the format, worked out certain inventions, and gone over each story after she had finished it, adding some of my special brand of adjectives.”

“The Winged Man” which was a fix-up that had been previously published by Hull in 1954 was expended and revised by van Vogt in 1966, so this edition is co-authored. He said in his autobiography: “Mayne was busy with Dianetic auditing, and totally uninterested in writing. But she did type a manuscript of the previously-written version. Using this, I took over the task of revising the story. I added 25,000 words, altogether, inserted a new villain and made better use of those aforementioned characters. Having done so, I felt justified in having my name added to the title page.”

Bill Rogers: Charles, van Vogt's 'The Voyage of the Space Beagle' has since been an inspiration to countless works in written and visual SF, and my favorite of his books. Did he reveal his inspirations for the novel (or more specifically, the short stories that make up the novel) as well as his own unique ideas, especially for the generalization-versus-specialization dichotomy between Grosvenor and the rest of the crew? Thanks!

CP: Sorry, I didn't ask this question!

Richard Whyte: van Vogt once said (in the 'Tyranopolis' introduction) he was a Democrat, 'without a leftist or rightist bone in his body'. Do you think he is a 'political' SF author, and if so to what extent?

CP: My sense is that he saw himself as guided by higher rationality, which transcends political parties.

Richard Whyte: van Vogt seems to have received more harsh criticism from US SF critics than any other major SF author. Do you agree, and if so, what do you think it was in his work that caused this? Oh, and many thanks for your fine piece on him in 'The Dream Makers'

CP: I'm only aware of the criticism by Damon Knight. But when Knight wrote it, he was quite influential, and persuaded a bunch of people that he was correct. Knight was a pedant and a nit-picker who spent his whole life advocating for fiction which conformed with his rather narrow outlook. He seemed insensitive to the power in Van Vogt's writing, to an astonishing degree. What interests me is that John W. Campbell demanded some rationality in his writers for Astounding, yet he thought very highly of Van Vogt and praised his work. Evidently Campbell was open-minded in a way that Knight was not. I think you have to have a kind of open-mindedness to enjoy Van Vogt's work. You have to surrender to the relentless revelations, reversals, and contradictions.

Ed Newsom: How did van Vogt feel about the phrase "Fans are Slans?"

CP: Ha! I don't know.

Ed Newsom: It seems obvious in retrospect that Slan influenced The X-Men. It's like a conversation between Stan Lee and van Vogt over whether the next stage of human evolution MUST exterminate or subdue the rest of us. Was van Vogt aware of the Marvel comic?

CP: I tend to doubt it. I don't think he read much science fiction and probably no comics at all.

JG: I think that Jack Kirby who co-created the X-men with Stan Lee was a really big science fiction fan. He had a collection of science fiction novels and magazines in his basement studio and would often get inspiration from them. So, the X-men didn't just come from "Slan" it also came from "Children of the

Atom” by Wilmar Shiras (The X-men are even referred to sometimes as “Children of the Atom”), Olaf Stapledon’s “Odd John”, “Mutant” by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore, “More than Human” by Theodore Sturgeon, and many others.

Ed Newsom: I love The Silkie. It's so visually rich in the way it approaches meta-humans. Has anyone ever sought to make a movie or anime or comic book out of it?

CP: I don't know.

Martin Stever: Did AEvV express any guilt for his part help spreading Scientology?

CP: No, because he had no interest in Scientology. He believed Dianetics contained some viable techniques and ideas, but he wouldn't deal with Scientology at all. He did remain committed, somewhat, to Dianetics.

JG: He was extremely committed to Dianetics, but he saw it as something scientific and didn't like that Scientology has made it into mysticism. He believed that Dianetic auditing had put aside his wife's cancer. He described it as similar to traditional Freudian therapy but concentrated upon one incident, going through it again and again. He and his wife opened their own Dianetics Center and ran it for 10 years (1951-1961) during which he gave up writing. He said that money from selling his fix-up novels supported the center because they didn't charge their patients much. \$75 for 30 hours of auditing. They closed the center in 1961. But van Vogt maintained his association with the organization and was still president of the Californian Association of Dianetic Auditors into the 1980s.

Terry Petta: AEvV became something of a master of the fix-up novel, perhaps one of its best-known practitioners. When he was writing the original stories, did they fit into neat series? Had he conceived of them as related, or as continuations of the same theme, scenario, or fictional universe? Did he have an overarching personal metaverse into which some or all could be comfortably fitted?

CP: I tend to doubt he worked that way. He had difficulty making all his ideas fit together just in a novel! As regard fixups, bear in mind that science-fiction novels were rare when he started writing. It was a short-story field. Even when a market developed for novels, there weren't enough people writing novels, so publishers were willing to publish fix-ups. They had no choice. Sometimes the fixups were planned, but more often not. This situation ended around 1970, and very few fix-ups were published after that.

JG: Also, it is worth noting that during the 50's van Vogt was publishing books about every 10 months, but they were all fix-ups of things he's written in the 30's and 40's. He didn't actually publish any 'new' SF stories for about 13 years before returning to writing sci-fi in 1963.

Terry Petta: I recently read Lester del Rey's opinion of AEvV. Many critiqued van Vogt, but what was van Vogt's opinion of his fellow SF Grand Master compatriots?

CP: I don't know. I don't think he socialized in the field much. Phil Farmer seemed to be a friend, but I didn't meet anyone else who knew Van Vogt at all well. Even Phil spoke of him in a way that suggested he wasn't really close.

JG: Van Vogt said the following in a 1979 interview Over the years, here in the United States, three groups of science fiction writers have enjoyed greater popularity than I. The leading writers of Group

One are Robert Heinlein, Arthur Clarke, and Isaac Asimov, all of whom have known scientific training. I believe that there is a growing audience which, in reading science fiction, requires the assurance that what they read is a genuine extrapolation from true science. The rapid rise of Jerry Pournelle, who has several Ph.Ds., is a further evidence of the importance of a scientific background for this particular audience. Group Two is headed by Ray Bradbury, Ursula LeGuin, Roger Zelazny, and Harlan Ellison. These are all persons who write wonderfully condensed fictional sentences—meaning, their use of the English language is unusually pure and beautiful. All of these writers accept human nature at its present level without argument, and seem to believe that is all there is, ever. And so the vast audience of television and film is within the reach of what they write about. And they have penetrated the fabulous women's market. I suspect that Ellison will eventually have to remove the four-letter words from future revisions of his works, because pornographic language always runs in cycles. I seem to detect that interest in the current cycle is waning. Group Three is headed by Robert Silverberg. He has an extreme ability for finding touching themes, as in *Dying Inside*. His are not sentimental stories. They have genuine feeling in them. There are also a few special individuals, like Frank Herbert, of whose education I know nothing. And then there is my own favorite, R. A. Lafferty. I don't know what his audience is. What I have isn't merely extrapolation of science. I've devised actual practical sub-branches of economics, psychology, education, physical fitness, politics, libertarianism, criminology, etc. None of this will displace, or transcend, the science fiction poets, the scientists-writers, or the marvelously sensitive women writers who have entered the science fiction writing field. But I believe what I have done will eventually exert an influence on modern thought.

David Agranoff: Van Vogt wrote three treatments for Star Trek do you know if turned any of those into Non-Trek Stories, I know Philip Jose farmer did with his unmade ST TOS pitches.

JG: It appears that there were 5 undeveloped Star Trek episodes with van Vogt's name attached to them. None of them were ever developed by Star Trek or by van Vogt.

"The Machine That Went too Far"—story outline by A.E. van Vogt and Jack Williamson from 1966 (TOS season 1). The story dealt with an android taking over the Enterprise, and resembled in some ways to the later Season 2 ep "I, Mudd."

"Machines Are Better"—Story outline by A.E. van Vogt, from 1967 (TOS Season 2). It was a revised version the previously rejected "The Machine That Went Too Far." In this story, the Enterprise discovers a desolated planet with only two survivors: a pair of androids named Number One and Number Two, with an apparent feud against each other. Beamed aboard the ship, the two androids continue their competing, and eventually Number One – who moves faster than light – takes over control of the Enterprise. Although more developed than van Vogt's previous submission, it was felt the story was still mostly unsuitable for television, and resembled another story involving androids, "I, Mudd". It was eventually turned down by Stan Robertson, who favored "I, Mudd" over it, and the story was scrapped.

"Miss Gulliver" by A.E. van Vogt was to have been about a woman who grew to gigantic proportions due to an accident related to an unsuccessful experiment in regrowing limbs. At the episode's conclusion, her lover also underwent the experiment, so that he too could undergo massive growth, and the couple were left to found a planet of giants. Robert Justman commented that it "bears a striking resemblance to "Who Mourns for Adonais?" – namely that someone grows larger and larger and larger. After that, it bears no resemblance to anything whatsoever that we would be able to depict on film..."

The Search For Eternity" Story outline by A.E. van Vogt, from 1967 (TOS Season 2). In the story, the Enterprise crew awakens to find themselves unable to remember the past few hours. It turns out that during this time, Kirk apparently ordered the destruction of a populated planet, whose inhabitants now blame him with genocide. Recordings of the destruction and a missing photon torpedo appear to justify the claim. A Federation Admiral then arrives on his own starship, and orders Kirk to be executed by firing squad. It turns out all is, in reality, a ploy devised by a reptilian-looking species who have faked the attack and can pose as Starfleet members (including the Admiral), in order to gain control of the Enterprise and wage war on the Federation. The story bears a resemblance to TNG: "Conundrum" and ENT: "Shockwave". The aspect of a photon torpedo being unaccounted for after an alleged act of instigation by the Enterprise resembles, albeit most likely coincidentally, part of the plot of Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country.

"Van Vogt's Robots"- was a story assigned by Gene Roddenberry to D.C. Fontana in 1968 (TOS Season 3), based on A.E. van Vogt's two previously rejected story outlines, "The Machine That Went Too Far" and "Machines Are Better". However, it was never developed beyond the pitch, as Fontana left the series before she could work on this premise.

Jack Dylarama: What did van Vogt think of Alien, as it was "inspired" by his story "Black Destroyer"?

CP: You have to bear in mind, he had such an idiosyncratic mind, he didn't respond to fiction or movies as you or I might. I think he was just interested in the extent to which they contained elements resonating with his various ideas about systems and mental abilities and techniques.

JG: Van Vogt actually sued the production company for plagiarism regarding "Alien" and eventually collected an out-of-court settlement of \$50,000 from 20th Century Fox.

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

CP: I first read his work when I was reading literally every science-fiction novel that was published. About one book per day. He wasn't my favorite author, but I did respond to his flood of strange ideas and his unique way of building a narrative. It was utterly impossible to guess what would happen next. I loved that unexpectedness, and still do. (I re-read World of Null-A just recently. Its plot is so convoluted, I felt as if I should be taking notes. But instead I just enjoyed the roller-coaster ride.)

John Grayshaw: Did van Vogt have favorites of his own works?

JG: In 'Reflections of A. E. van Vogt he says he used to consider 'Asylum' his best story. He wrote:

'I'm hoping to make a novel out of it someday, I didn't know how to Carry on after the ending of that story, where I had tried to show—by mood and atmosphere—someone with an I.Q. of 1200. That was the hardest scene I ever wrote. I thought, 'How can I go on from here?' I finally figured out how, some years ago, and wrote a sequel] "called "The Proxy Intelligence." | have in mind a follow up titled "1.Q. 10,000."

I don't know what story he considered his best in later years, but my guess is his non-SF novel, 'The Violent Man', as he devoted a considerable part of his autobiography to it

John Grayshaw: Are there any examples of van Vogt corresponding/meeting with fans? Did he enjoy going to conventions?

CP: I saw him and his wife at an LA convention. They just drifted through the hotel like royalty. Not in a pretentious way; they just had a presence that elevated them above their surroundings. She was in a kind of ballroom gown, and he was in a business suit--he always seemed to wear a suit at any event. He smiled and greeted people, but didn't seem to have much to say. You know, he had a fairly secure opinion of his abilities. After he read the draft of my profile of him, he sent me a short letter pointing out that he saw himself as an authority in every field he had entered. Techniques of short-story writing, techniques of novel writing, systems for learning foreign languages, Dianetics. He felt he was an expert in these areas. He believed he had completed his time in science fiction, and had moved on.

Incidentally I managed to buy a second-hand copy of the Gallishaw book which Van Vogt used to learn how to write short stories. It is a massive book, incredibly detailed, hundreds of pages. I cannot imagine that anyone other than Van Vogt ever finished reading it, let alone used the formula. Van must have had an incredible attention span. I think he could be very persistent, once he got interested in some new "system."

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

CP: I think context is important. For decades, prior to the 1960s, no one could make much money writing science fiction. You had to love it. You had to be dedicated. This was unpleasant for the practitioners, but it had a great benefit: Commercial writers went elsewhere. The field developed its shared ideas, with a lot of input from editors, and explored every conceivable aspect of concepts such as space travel. It was like a think tank. The serious writers of late 1940s and 1950s were free to explore their ideas without fear of losing their audience, because the audience was relatively small and consisted of people who were willing to embrace conceptual leaps. Alfred Bester used to talk about this. He said that in science fiction, he didn't have to worry about surprising his audience. In the commercial fields where he wrote, he was constantly restricted by conceptual limitations. So, I have immense respect for 1950s science fiction. The writers established a body of work that has never been equalled. And they shared a belief in human transcendence. That is a core concept in Van Vogt's work. Today there's so much fear of the future, I find it very depressing.