

## Science Fiction Book Club

### Interview with Steven Silver and Billee Stallings (Sept. 2022)

*Steven Silver maintains a tribute site to Murray Leinster: <http://www.stevensilver.com/leinster.html>. He is also a nineteen-time Hugo Award nominee and was the publisher of the Hugo-nominated fanzine *Argentus* as well as the editor and publisher of ISFiC Press for 8 years. He has also edited books for DAW, NESFA Press, and ZNB Books and is the author of the novel *After Hastings*. In 1995, he created the *Sidewise Award for Alternate History*. He also chaired several Science Fiction conventions.*

*Billee Stallings is one of William F. Jenkins' (Murray Leinster) daughters. Along with her sister, Jo-An Evans, she wrote *Murray Leinster The Life and Works*, which was published by McFarland in 2011.*

**David Stuckey: Did Leinster think his greatest legacy was his writing or his inventions?**

**Billee:** Probably proudest of his inventions.

**Damo Mac Choiligh: A trivial question perhaps, but where did he get the pseudonym 'Leinster'? The word is the English version of the name of a region of Ireland, well known to any Rugby fans.**

**Billee:** When *Will* was published in *Smart Set* magazine in his teens, H. L. Mencken put down the other magazines he was selling to and said he should use a pen name and save his own for the "good stuff" (ie; *Smart Set*). Dad selected Murray from his mother's maiden name (Murry. Wyndham Martyn, an English writer for the magazine, suggested Leinster. Martyn (known for the Anthony Trent novels) told him the Fitzgeralds (Dad's middle name) were descended from the Dukes of Leinster.

**Damo Mac Choiligh: Leinster's writing seems to have covered a huge variety of areas and genres; where did his science fiction sit in this body of work for him? Was it his most important writing or just one among many interests?**

**Billee:** Will called writing science fiction a hobby. Writing science fiction paid almost nothing in the early days. But he loved inventing things and developed a lot of useful things around the house (like a kitchen door that could store glasses). He was always fooling around with experiments (The family remembers once there were purple stains all around the house from some experiment). Writing was primary. After all he had no other job for over 50 years except for the Army in WWI and the OWI in WWII, and sent four daughters through college on it. He was amazingly versatile and changed with the times. He wrote pretty much for where there was a market—even sports stories although he probably never even tossed a ball in his life. He got a big laugh out of his years writing as Louisa Carter Lee for *Love Stories* magazine. Paid really well.

**Damo Mac Choiligh: Leinster is credited with anticipating the idea of the Internet and his concept of 'tanks' were essentially 'Servers'. Was he influenced by earlier science fiction in this? I'm thinking particularly of 'The Machine Stops'.**

**Billee:** I would think not. I don't think he was much influenced by other fiction except to see what was selling. He would have gone to the source and read the science.

**Damo Mac Choiligh: Looking at his bibliography, his enormous output leaps out at me, he was incredibly prolific! Did this impact on the quality of his writing? Did he feel an economic need to**

**maintain output at this level or was it that it didn't take him long to write a given novel or short story (reminiscent of Heinlein's instruction not to edit), so he produced at a higher rate than others?**

**Billee:** He wrote constantly and at great speed because he couldn't not write. He said once he would like a boat but couldn't afford one big enough to keep a desk and typewriter on. He had no other interests. No golf, gardening, clubs, or organizations. No "vacation" trips. He loved to socialize with close friends and have people over to the house evenings but that was it.

**Anastasia Hilvers: Leinster's bibliography is extremely heavy on science fiction, and a very respectable a body of Westerns and mystery. What would he have thought of The Mandalorian?**

**Billee:** No idea. He would not have seen it. He never went to the movies and watched little television. He was a reader.

**Anastasia Hilvers: What aspects of modern society and/or science would be most startling to him? What would not surprise him one whit?**

**Billee:** I don't think anything science developed would surprise him. However, modern society and its mores, even when he died in 1975, was hard for him to accept. His values were pretty Victorian.

**Eduardo Torres: Leinster wrote about devices which resembled smartphones and computers linked by a kind of internet, complete with search engines. What would he think of these things as they exist today, and their social impact?**

**Billee:** I think "A Logic Named Joe," reveals that. He saw the risks that we are now living with.

**Stevie Book: What isn't the most surprising thing about Leinster's 1946 story 'A Logic Named Joe' is his presaging the internet --as impressive as it is-- but that other sf writers at the time didn't follow his lead in speculation about computing networks. Why do you think that might have been?**

**Billee:** Surprises me, too. I think though, that they did not see the whole story that Will saw but did not continue. The maintenance guy thought he saved civilization by shutting Joe down. Nobody wrote about the guy who opened the box, dusted Joe off and turned him on again. We are living that now.

**Dave Hook: Many authors sacrificed quality for quantity to pay the bills. Leinster was certainly prolific and popular. How did he feel about the balance of literary merit accolades vs popular awards such as the Hugo?**

**Billee:** Will was in many ways an innocent. He believed in America the Beautiful and all the *Readers Digest* fillers. He was thrilled and honored by being awarded the Hugo for "Exploration Team." He was delighted to be Guest of Honor at a convention. He would assume everything was transparent and aboveboard. It would never occur to him that this could turn political.

**SFBC Member: John Campbell had an assistant who was reputed to edit "bad language" written by authors. Did Leister ever have conflict regarding this practice? Can you tell us some stories in this vein?**

**Billee:** Profanity etc. was not a problem in Will's stories. And he chuckled over one editor's comment, "Will Jenkins doesn't believe in sex." I think any of his books are suitable for teens and pre-teens and probably graded as that now.

As for profanity—Pre the sixties, you did not hear words used all the time now, ever spoken. In his society, one did not use certain words or tell certain stories in “mixed company.”

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

**Steven:** Leinster was extremely prolific, partly because he was earning his entire living based on his writing at a time when the pay rate was low. In order to survive and be able to raise his children, he needed to constantly be publishing. Because he published across genres, with science fiction and westerns being his primary areas, although he also published romances, he was constantly looking for different angles in his story telling to keep it fresh, but also taking some ideas and telling them within the confines of different genres, so there are some similarities in some of his science fiction and some of his westerns

**John Grayshaw: Did Leinster ever say anything about Star Trek’s use of the universal translator a concept he came up with in 1945’s “First Contact?”**

**Billee:** Yes, he knew about many of his concept uses in various contexts. I would say he felt validated and was pleased.

**John Grayshaw: Leinster imagined the Internet in 1946’s “A Logic Named Joe.” Would Leinster be surprised that the Internet is now an everyday part of our lives? Or did he feel he was predicting something that would come to pass?**

**Billee:** He knew he was predicting the future. He did recognize the problems to be solved before such things as space travel and may have been surprised that they were overcome this quickly.

**John Grayshaw: Why doesn’t he get more credit as the inventor of the front projection process? That special effect was used in movies all the time.**

**Billee:** Sherman Fairchild bought the rights for front projection. I pretty much handled the deal as I lived near NY City. Dined with him at his home. Interesting. Better not to get into the negotiation and, “He said.” Dad was happy to get the check.

**John Grayshaw: How would Leinster have felt about the Sidewise Award being named after him? Was Alternate History something he felt like he popularized?**

**Billee:** He would have been thrilled. He was a modest man and did not spend a lot of time worrying about who was getting credit for something. If he had cared, he would have spent more time mingling with the science fiction community and gone to conventions.

**John Grayshaw: What do you feel are Leinster’s most significant works? And why?**

**Steven:** Leinster’s most significant works correlate to his best known works. “First Contact,” “A Logic Named Joe,” and “Sidewise in Time.” These are his works that were not only widely read when published, but continued to be reprinted, given them a larger, multi-generational audience and also influencing the science fiction conversation as other authors wrote responses to them, or built on their premises.

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

**Steven:** I've always preferred his short work to his novels. Among my favorites are "Sidewise in Time," "First Contact," and "The Fifth-Dimensional Catapult." Although his writing can also feel dated and pedestrian, at the same time, his ideas and way of looking at the world in a slightly askew manner manage to keep the stories fresh. "First Contact," for instance, is a bit of a hokey set up, but Leinster sets up a puzzle in the story and resolves it using humor.

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

**Steven:** Working under the assumption that many of the stories I've mentioned are well known, which is probably not a safe assumption, I would suggest "If You Was a Moklin," which was actually adapted for the radio show *X-Minus One* in 1956 and appears in the NESFA Press collection *First Contacts: The Essential Murray Leinster*.

If you are looking for a novel, *The Greks Bearing Gifts* might offer a good starting point. It suffers from being written quickly, as were many of Leinster's works and is short by today's standards, but it shows Leinster's ability to think through the social, economic, and political ramifications of the world he has created for his work.

Anyone wanting to explore Leinster's works should start with the NESFA Press collection or one of the three collections published by Baen Books in the early 2000s: *Med Ship*, *Planets of Adventure*, and *A Logic Named Joe*. The 1978 *The Best of Murray Leinster*, published by Del Rey is also well worth seeking out.

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

**Billee:** He was a voracious reader. He read background for what he might be currently writing, some best sellers. As a child he read the series of the time.

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

**Billee:** He kept current

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

**Billee:** Extensive

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

**Billee:** Many over the years. I remember Ben Hibbs and his wife visiting when he was the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Also William Barrett (of *Lilies of the Field*) and his wife. Will had won first prize in a *Liberty Magazine* story contest and Barrett second.

**John Grayshaw: Silverberg told a story that Leinster was in the *Astounding* offices in the mid 50s and that Campbell told Leinster to help Silverberg with the ending of "Sourdough" and that Leinster read it and immediately came up with a better ending and Silverberg typed it right there in the office and Campbell bought it....Are there other stories of Leinster mentoring writers?**

**Billee:** Will was glad to talk to wanna-be writers. A couple became friends. I most clearly remember Ted Sturgeon coming to the NY apartment when I was still at home. He was starting out and selling but talked a lot about his experiences about when he was still working at sea.

Will often had lunch with John Campbell and enjoyed their discussions. They discussed story ideas and also John's latest passion which Will often did not agree with. But he always loved the talks

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

**Billee:** Will always answered fan letters. I remember he corresponded for a while with a lifer at Walla Walla prison. Professors sometimes brought students to visit. Michael Swanwick remembers coming up when he was at William and Mary University. Joe and Gay Haldeman (who live here in Gainesville) brought an award to him at Clay Bank. It was given at a convention he didn't attend.

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

**Steven:** Most of the interesting things were related to his non-science fiction. The fact that he not only invented front projection for films, but also a device that would dampen the wake of a submarine's periscope.

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

**Steven:** Although Leinster's works have been turned into films in the past, including *The Navy vs. the Night Monsters*, *The Terronaut*, and *Torchy Blane in Chinatown*, he does not currently have any works under option.

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

**Billee:** No free time—filled it with writing. Wrote any time, any place. Usually in the middle of everything going on. It didn't seem to bother him.

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

**Billee:** "Science" experiments

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

**Steven:** Although many people point to Leinster's depiction of a proto-internet in "A Logic called Joe" as being the only science fiction author to predict the internet, because of the time in which Leinster was writing, he was frequently a ground-breaker with his ideas. "Sidewise in Time" helped create the multiple worlds genre, "The Runaway Skyscraper" was an early portrayal of time travel through a vaguely mechanical means (after, of course, H.G. Wells' *Time Machine*, which only went forward in time not backwards). "First Contact" provided a genre with its name. His stories are still important in part because science fiction has always been a genre which is in conversation with itself. Later works are responses to earlier works. Without reading the earlier works, a person can't fully understand what the genre is currently saying.