

Science Fiction Book Club Interview with Alastair Reynolds (July 2020)

Alastair Reynolds specializes in a form of space opera that is peppered with dark noir and gothic influences that still possesses a sense of optimism. He earned his PhD in Astronomy from the University of St Andrews (Scotland) in 1991 and went on to work for the European Space Agency. While there he became more focused on writing, working on short stories and eventually turning his attention to his first novel, "Revelation Space," which was published in 2000. Due in part to the Revelation Space series and his masterful storytelling, he was soon elevated to one of the new generation of science fiction masters. In 2004 he left his astronomy career behind to pursue writing full time. In 2009 he signed an unprecedented 10-book deal with Gollanz worth an advance of £1 million. Since that time, he has been delighting science fiction fans with the fruits of his labor. To date he has published 19 novels, and well over 60 stories/novellas in various short fiction outlets.

Before I take the questions, and rather than repeat myself, I'd like to thank everyone for their kind comments and interest in my work. It is greatly appreciated.

John Grayshaw: We saw a picture of you in a King Crimson t-shirt. What's your favorite album of theirs? And what are some other bands you like?

I've been a fan of King Crimson for decades. I like the more modern stuff, especially the trilogy of albums they did with Bruford and Belew in the early eighties, but the ones I keep going back to, almost religiously, are the first five or six albums, especially "In the Court ..." itself. I'm still playing the vinyl copy my mother gave me on my seventeenth birthday. Other bands? Almost too many to mention. My two lasting obsessions are Neil Young and Steely Dan. I also like lots of English prog rock from the same era as King Crimson, as well as Bowie, punk, post-punk, grunge and some metal. I like jazz, Mingus, Monk and others. More recently I've been digging Joni Mitchell's back catalogue. And a healthy dose of mostly twentieth-century classical music. Shostakovich, Vaughan Williams and others.

Andrew ten Broek: You've written about a lot of types of societies like the ones of the Demarchists and the Conjoiners. What type of futuristic society would you like to live in?

I've never thought about whether I'd like to live in one of my imagined societies, only whether I can get a good story out of them. I don't think I'd care to live in any of them particularly. At a stretch, maybe the reasonably ecological and peaceful global society of the Poseidon's Children books – but even that has its downsides. I am thinking about how I might do a fairly utopian far future space opera, though.

Paul Schulz: Why do you have this almost visceral antipathy to FTL travel in your fiction. Is it your science background? Or do you just feel it is a cop out when dealing with interstellar travel?

In my teens I wrote two novels (and a bunch of stories) that were all set in a consistent universe with FTL, very much in the tradition of Larry Niven. By the time I was getting serious about a third novel I wanted to do something different, and avoiding FTL seemed to open up as many story possibilities as it shut down others. It probably does have something to do with a physics background – I think once you've "grokked" special relativity it's hard to go back – but I'm not dogged about it. There's FTL in some of my short stories, as well as wormholes in novels like Century Rain, and if I felt there was a big story I couldn't tell without bringing in FTL, I'd gladly do so.

Derek Saballos: I heard you're possibly working on a new novel set in the Revelation Space universe.. any hints as to where/when in the universe it occurs? Any updates for a possible release date? Is this fake news?

Not fake news, no! I am nearly done with a new novel provisionally entitled War and Glass. It's a standalone book, but it does have some connective tissue with Absolution Gap, and it's mostly set in the years between the last chapter of that novel and the prologue/epilogue. Along the way there are some familiar and less familiar locations, and one or two characters from the earlier books make appearances, but I've been very keen to make it work as an entry point into the universe, for anyone coming to it new.

Molly Greenspring: In the past you were a working scientist; what do you believe is the relationships between science and science fiction? Does science fiction influence people to work or study science, is this true for you and the people you work with? Does working in the science help write science fiction, if so how?

I think about this a lot but I've not quite figured out a universal answer. In my case, I can't say with certainty which came first: the interest in science or the interest in science fiction. They were both there and tightly intertwined from an early age. My earliest science fictional memories are of Star Trek and Doctor Who, both of which contained scientist role models (Spock in the case of ST, with whom I identified very strongly). So the science fiction might have been shaping my aspirations to be a scientist almost before I knew any actual science, just because I found these scientist figures so attractive. Another factor that shaped my own educational and career choice was Carl Sagan, whose Cosmos series aired on TV at just the right time to nudge me into thinking seriously about science as a vocation. But Sagan also dabbled in science fiction, so where does one draw the line?

I don't think you need to be a scientist to write science fiction – in fact, absolutely not. But a layperson's interest in science might be a help. There's no doubt, though, that my own background has been a big advantage for me. It's helped with marketing, in that my publisher pushed the idea that my books were written by an actual astrophysicist. And having a foot in both camps, so to speak, has opened many doors for me. It's almost embarrassing how that's worked out. I joke about the fact that when I was a working scientist, I (and the team I was on) couldn't get a paper into Nature. They kept rejecting us! But not long after I've got Nature tapping me to write some fiction for them, so it's like an invitation through the back door! I've also found that, because I'm a writer who used to be a scientist, I'm now of interest to scientific establishments and organisations who probably wouldn't have been all that bothered about me when I was a jobbing researcher with few writing credits. I should add a personal note of gratitude to the European Space Agency, which has been incredibly welcoming and generous to me since I stopped working for them, having me back to do talks and so on.

Marc Collins: Do you think that technology will overhaul our democratic processes to the extent of your vision of Demarchy, should we lean into it, and do you see cybernetic transhumanism progressing to a Demarchist or even Conjoiner or Ultra extent as being an eventuality or even a necessity?

No, I'm very skeptical about all that. I came up with the Demarchists because I wanted to create some competing factions within my universe. I'd read a novel by Joan D Vinge (The Outcasts of Heaven Belt) which introduced me to the idea of Demarchy as a political system, so I took that and ran with it. It's an

actual real-world idea, incidentally. But my usage of it is very cavalier and I don't think much related to the real theories. As for transhumanism, I regard it as a source of ideas and speculation, but I'm not remotely interested in it on a personal level, and very doubtful that it has anything to tell us about the shape of our own future. And I wouldn't be an early adopter! I'm interested in technology for the sake of my fiction, but passionately disinterested in it in my personal life. I'm on my second ever cellphone, and I'm writing this on an eighteen year old Dell PC. That's how much of a tech-head I am. Actually, that's not quite true: I love gadgets and technology, but I'm much more likely to get excited about a new guidance gizmo for a telescope, or a new pair of image-stabilising binoculars, than a PC.

Keith Feinsein: House of Suns is my favorite of your novels. Can you talk about the genesis of the idea that became the story?

This is an interestingly complicated genesis. The first thing to note is that there's actually a much earlier "thing" called House of Suns. It was a short story I wrote in the 80s, and tried to sell to Interzone. I think it may have been the last thing of mine that they flat-out rejected before taking a chance on my first sale. The story doesn't have all that much to do with the novel, except for a far future setting and a robot protagonist. But the title stuck with me like an itch. Later, much later, I was asked to write a story for an anthology called "One Million AD", edited by the late and very much missed Gardner Dozois. That story was "Thousandth Night" and revolved around an idea I'd been toying with, that of a bunch of clones exploring the galaxy and getting together every now and then for a grand ceremony of memory-sharing. I liked the story but didn't think much about it once it had appeared. Then, round about the time I was gearing up to start another novel, a reader kindly emailed me and asked if I'd had any thoughts about expanding on the setting of the story. Out of blue, it seemed like the obvious thing to do and immediately I started getting excited about the possibilities. A few other things came into the mix (I stole an idea from myself, reusing a conceit about causality protection from an earlier story, Byrd Land Six, but I don't think anyone noticed) but that's the basic genesis.

Arthur Maia/EJ Kavounas: I absolutely love Zima Blue (both the textual version and its adaptation). So I would like to know which adaptive choices on the Love, Death + Robots did he found interesting and if there was any other of his stories that he would particularly like to become an animated movie/episode? And are there any plans to adapt more of your works on this series or elsewhere?

They did two stories of mine, both of which adaptations I appreciated, but my favorite is always going to be Zima Blue. That's partly because I'm most fond of the original story, which is one of my personal favorites, but also because, as a rule, I prefer the more traditional, stylised animation approach over photo-realistic CGI. I really loved every moment of Zima Blue. I didn't have a Netflix subscription so I had to take one out just to watch it. And I watched a fair number of the other adaptations but I'm not sure I saw all of them before I let the subscription lapse. They had to discard some of the thematic threads in my original story but that's a consequence of the running time, and I thought they did a good job given the constraints of the form. Beyond that, I haven't really given any thought as to which of my other stories might be suitable for adaptation. Most of my longer form stories are probably a bit too complex to distill into something as short as those episodes. There's been some interest in one or two of my novellas, as source material for feature films, but so far nothing's progressed to the point where there's anything worth mentioning. As for Love, Death + Robots, there isn't anything of mine in the next series. They were interested in developing a couple of pieces but there were a few too many hurdles to be overcome, so it wasn't to be.

Tom Alaerts: As a scientist and SF writer, what is your opinion on the Fermi paradox ?

Whatever else it may be, it's a great way of generating story ideas. I think I'm moving to being a little more open-minded about the whole thing than maybe I was ten years ago, or twenty. Back then I took a very hard, restrictive view on the argument, being heavily influenced by the book "The Anthropic Cosmological Principle" by John Barrow and Frank Tipler. That book essentially takes the line that colonising the galaxy ought to be easy, using Von Neumann machines, and so the absence of such machines is damningly conclusive evidence that we are alone in the universe. But now I'm a little doubtful that we have anything like the necessary evidence base to make such bold statements. They could still be out there, in other words. One thing I think I've rationalised to my own satisfaction is this: if aliens wanted to visit our solar system, and even conduct close-up exploration of our planet, they could do so without being detected. If you've crossed interstellar space, then conducting clandestine operations ought to be a trivial problem. It's part of the reason why I'm skeptical about UFO observations, because if there were alien craft operating in our atmosphere, I feel sure they'd have the means not to be detected. But then you get things like those clips released by the US Navy, and I feel chinks of doubt opening up again. What the hell are those things?

Andrzej Wieckowski: I grew up reading the Interzone of the late 80s and early 90s and saw the emergence of yourself and fellow writers, such as Eric Brown and Stephen Baxter, through your short stories. Do you think short stories are still a valid way for new writers to practice their craft, and get themselves noticed? Is the UK too small a market for his route, and if so, is there a difference with larger countries such as the US, where there are still several short story magazines?

My own experience is now thirty years out of date, but I can't see why it wouldn't still be a valid way to break into the field. The magazines are still out there, print and online, and they still get read and discussed. Writers still seem to be coming through who pick up a certain buzz through short fiction and then leverage that into novel deals. For instance, Sarah Pinsker is a new-ish writer who wrote some great stuff in Asimov's SF magazine, and has now written a much-lauded and timely first novel (A Song for a New Day) about a post-pandemic America. As for the market differences, I think the online world largely negates that factor, as writers can submit where they like and the commentators seem to read quite widely and without particular regard to regional boundaries. Again, though, my perceptions may be coloured by my experiences thirty years ago, and not all that relevant now. At the moment I'm reading a very good first novel by an American writer called Essa Hansen who seems to have come out of nowhere. But even back when I started, there were writers who jumped straight into novels with little or no track record of short fiction. Whatever works, works.

Blaine Savini: When you start one of your long novels, do you have an ending in mind or do you just begin and find out what happens as you go? I am especially curious where the Revelation Space stories are concerned...

I have a sort of vague destination in mind but I'm not good at outlining, and especially not good at following my own plans. Most of my books (I'd say most of my better books, at least) have reached a point where they go off in a direction I wasn't anticipating at the outset. I tend to look on that as a positive as it seems to be that if the story is capable of surprising me, someone who's been living with it for months, then it might be able to surprise a reader as well. Essentially, though, I just began with a vague sense of a story and see where it takes me. Most of my books start from a creative itch: a scene in my mind's eye that arrives fully-formed, but not necessarily with any context. It might be a character

doing something, a landscape, an emotional stirring. Anything that gnaws at my imagination long enough, until I have no option but to start writing something down.

David Stuckey: Who came up with the idea of "The Medusa Chronicles" novel, how was the alternate history change point (The Apollo Missions to destroy the asteroid) decided upon, and how was the whole collaboration process with Baxter?

Steve and I conceived the idea of a possible authorised sequel to the original Clarke story (A Meeting with Medusa) after a discussion about collaboration. We both liked the original piece, and had given thought to what happened after the final page. Steve had a track record of collaboration, with Terry Pratchett and Arthur C Clarke himself, so that was a natural "in" to make the project feasible from a legal position. Which still wasn't plain sailing! Steve and I wanted to use the original story as an introduction, or endpiece, but the estate was unwilling, saying it would detract from sales of the other anthologies in which it was included. They uhm-ed and ah-ed right up until the deadline, so in the end we wrote two different introductions to the novel, one of which assumed familiarity with the piece and one of which didn't. In the end we had to run without the piece – although translated editions did include it. As for the timeline switch, that was a clever bit of thinking by Steve. We wanted to remain true to the spirit of the original story, so the background of our universe had to make allowance for the "analog" feel of the piece, which is very much written in a pre-internet, pre-digital mindset. Positing an alternate history, in which the space program has advanced relative to our timeline, but computer advancements have been (initially) slower was a way to keep faith with the original story.

Declan Ellis: Did he intend RS to have any spiritual connotations? Just curious because of how (SPOILERS) Dan Sylveste died to save mankind and then was resurrected - it seemed like there were parallels to Christianity.

Not consciously. But one of the influences that interested me at the time was the visual imagery of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (the book and the film, both of which were firm favorites of mine) and that whole sort of monastic, religious-apocalyptic feeling does seep into the text a little, I think.

John Haylock: Century Rain would make a great movie, with Morgan Freeman in the lead role !... Make it happen 🙏

Ha, if only writers had the power to make such things happen. Unfortunately we just have to sit around waiting for the world to show an interest. A number of my books and stories have attracted nibbles of interest from the film world at times, but that's one that hasn't, to the best of my recollection. I think it would make a good standalone noir-SF thriller, especially if the story was rejigged to keep more of it rooted in the alternate 1959. I never really thought about casting choices for that one. Morgan Freeman would be good, I'll always have time for him in anything. By the way, Floyd was originally Orville Floyd but my editor vetoed the name. There was a children's TV puppet called Orville, whereas of course I was thinking of Orville Wright. I can't remember where I got Wendell from; possibly the REM song Wendell Gee, if I've got that right.

Tim Thompson: I really enjoyed Century Rain, especially the noir detective elements. Since you've said there will be no sequel, can you explain more about the origins you had in mind for the artificial Earths, war babies and so on?

I think what's in the book is pretty much all you're going to get. It's too long ago for me to remember what, if any, deeper worldbuilding I'd done. I never planned a sequel. Even when I was doing it, and enjoying it, I tried to be strict with myself and hold to the idea that it was a definite standalone. After I'd written four Revelation Space books on the trot, I wanted to plant a flag in another area of SF and declare (at least to myself, even if no one else cared) that I wasn't a one-trick pony, nor a slave to the endless series.

Paul Fraser: Your recent story "Polished Performance" is a successful attempt at a humorous SF story—do you intend to write any more?

I couldn't sit down and try and write a humorous story to save my life. All that happened with that piece was that I'd tried and abandoned a few false starts for stories for the "Made to Order" anthology, all to do with various "serious" ideas about robots and uprisings, when the idea of the robots trying to impersonate the passengers came to me. I immediately laughed out loud to myself because I could see the (admittedly grim) comedic potential. But that just doesn't happen as a rule. I think there's some drollery in some of my stories, maybe a certain dry wit here and there, but I don't have the chops to be a naturally funny author. I'm not even good at telling jokes in real life. When I read writers who are genuinely funny, like Wodehouse or EF Benson, I marvel at the skill and know in my bones I'll never have it.

John Grayshaw: Of the technologies invented in your stories, what would you most like to see become a reality? And why?

Fully immersive robotic telepresence. I'm not sure I'd feel any rush to be a customer but I think it would be a beneficially, socially useful technology, until it got militarised and used to kill people.

John Grayshaw: Why did you decide to leave a career in astronomy to write full time? Do you ever miss working in the field of astronomy?

I was finding the day job steadily less enjoyable, while at the same time the writing was taking off and demanding more of my time. It was not an easy decision but once committed, I felt it was the right thing to have done. I don't miss being a scientist at all, but I do miss the social interaction of working in a large organisation such as ESA.

John Grayshaw: Your books contain invented terminology such as "chinging" and "voking." What's your approach to coming up with terms like that?

No hard rules, just an intuitive sense of what feels plausible and what doesn't. Chinging came about because I needed a terminology for this fully immersive telepresence I just mentioned. The process went "virtual reality – virching – chinging". Generally speaking, if an invented terminology has more than three syllables in it, it's too cumbersome. We don't say "automobile carriage", we say "car", and that'll apply to any future invention.

John Grayshaw: There is a memorable scene in "Revelation Space" where a character survives being shoved into an elevator shaft. Could you talk about how you came up with that idea?

I can't quite remember, but I'm sure the genesis of it would have been one of those special relativity thought experiments where you're asked to consider if you could tell the difference between being inside a rocket being accelerated at one gee, and a box standing on a planet with the same gravity.

Ultimately, the scene is about flipping the reader's sense of frames of reference. You're inside this ship with a strong sense of up and down, so the assumption is that someone thrown into an elevator shaft is going to start accelerating toward the base of the shaft. But in fact it's the opposite; they stop accelerating and it's everything else around them that's doing the accelerating. My main concern with that scene was working out if Volyova would plausibly have enough time to issue the commands to reverse the engines before she hits the bottom of the shaft, and of course she also needs time to think it through. I think that's why the ship ended up being four kilometres long!

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the science fiction writers who inspired you as you discovered the genre?

I'm afraid the obvious big-hitters. In literary terms, it's Clarke first – I read him when I was eight – then in no particular order Asimov, Harry Harrison, James White, Herbert, Pohl, Niven, and then a little later Benford, Haldeman, Varley. The only female SF writer I encountered during my formative years was James Tiptree Jr (Alice Sheldon). I should certainly have read more widely but it is what it is.

John Grayshaw: Who are some science fiction writers you are friends with? How have these relationships influenced your writing?

I have a small circle of friends within the SF community. Mostly it's people who came up around the same time as me, give or take half a decade or so. Paul McAuley is my oldest friend in the SF world and a very good one. Steve Baxter and I are friends but we don't see each other all that regularly due to living a long way apart, in UK terms. Peter Hamilton and John Meaney both live a little closer and we meet quite regularly, sometimes do hill-walks and so on. For the first decade or so of my career I lived in the Netherlands so I was never an active participant in the SF convention circuit. I wouldn't say that these friendships have had that much influence in my writing, in that when I look back at the stuff I wrote in my teens and early twenties, all my current preoccupations are there, just more crudely formed. I was even doing steampunk pirate-pastiche stuff in my teens. Sometimes it takes a long time for this stuff to work its way out into the world.

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

As mentioned above, I spent a lot of my career not being particularly part of the convention scene. I go to a few now and then but they're not quite my thing, for the most part. Now and then I'll go to one as a guest and be treated indifferently, and I think I'll swear off them forever. But then the next one will be great. I have to say that every convention I've been to in the States has treated me very well indeed, and I've enjoyed them all. But I've been to some shockingly bad regional conventions in Europe (again, also some great ones). I'm not naming any names.

John Grayshaw: Are there any TV or movie deals in the works for any of your novels or stories?

No, not at present. One or two things are under option, but these things tend to come and go with nothing happening. A few years ago I had the experience of something really exciting looking like it would more than likely happen (a big-budget TV series adapted from one of my properties, with a top writer attached) but gradually it all unravelled and I found the comedown very hard to deal with. Since then I've vowed not to get emotionally attached to any of these putative projects.

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

I like to run. I'm not a good runner but I am determined. I'm involved in Parkrun, which is a big UK-wide fitness initiative. I run, but also do marshalling. I play guitar, again not particularly well, but I love the challenge. I took classical lessons for about ten years; now I'm mostly playing electric, trying to learn Steely Dan parts. I like to paint, and (like Greg Bear, I see) I also build models. I'm never not building something. I also have aspirations to fly so very occasionally I'll take a flying lesson, but when I'm not doing that I spend a lot of time on Microsoft Flight Sim. More generally, I'm also a keen observer of wildlife and nature, which I take to include astronomy and astrophotography. My wife and I are members of the Bat Conservation Trust.

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

Sort of, but Covid-19 has thrown everything into a loop. I write most days (including weekends) and aim to produce somewhere between 2 and 3000 words, but I'm not being too hard on myself at the moment due to other real-life pressures. Anyone can crank out 8000 words in a manic stretch, but to sustain a writing process over months and years you need to take care of the other aspects in your life, such as fitness, family and mental health. For me that means respecting my downtime as much as my time at the keyboard.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

I'm redrafting parts of War and Glass, the novel I mentioned earlier in the interview. I hope to submit it before too long.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

Nothing detailed. I rarely have a sense of what I'm going to do next until I'm nearly done with a particular book. I think there will be another Prefect Dreyfus emergency before too long, though, as I don't want to wait ten years between the books as I did with the first two.