

## Interview with Robert J. Sawyer

By  
Lesley L. Smith

### **What is unique about written fiction as compared to other entertainment?**

Prose fiction is the only form that actually gets you into the head of another character. Through the use of limited point-of-view – either first- or third-person – the reader *becomes* a character in the story, seeing only what that character sees, feeling only what that character feels, knowing only what that character knows. It creates identification, not just in the literary but also the psychological sense. Watching as a spectator on the sidelines, as one does when viewing a movie or a TV show, is an impoverished experience compared to actually becoming the viewpoint character – that's why prose text endures, and always will endure.

### **Do authors have an obligation to help spread understanding of diverse peoples? Was this issue on your mind when you wrote the *Neanderthal Parallax* (*Hominids, Humans, and Hybrids*)?**

Authors have no obligation whatsoever; no member of the audience has a right to impose any agenda on an artist of any kind. That said, I *choose* to celebrate diversity and multiculturalism in my work; I'm very proud to have been nominated twice for the Spectrum Award, which honors positive portrayals of gays and lesbians in SF, and I was thrilled to see a website on the depiction of religious people in SF name my character Sarkhar Muhammed from *The Terminal Experiment* as the most realistic Islamic character in SF. But the issue at the heart of the *Neanderthal Parallax* is something different, and I tip my hand right up front with the opening epigram, which is from a nonfiction book called *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*. Those novels are my exploration of what it means to be a strong male, and the accountability my gender has for the evil it has done in the world.

### **Of course, the ultimate diverse peoples would be extraterrestrials. You have often written about aliens, e.g. *Illegal Alien*, *Factoring Humanity*. What do you think it is about aliens that are so appealing to humans?**

The masks, the disguises. The TV series, "Alien Nation," did this particularly well. When

we talk about aliens, we hide, at least at the outset, what we're really talking about. That said, although I do employ masks, I make them translucent if not out-and-out transparent. The aliens in *Illegal Alien* are defended by an African-American civil-rights attorney; the parallels are obvious.

**You have often addressed spiritual issues, such as the soul in *Terminal Experiment*, a human overmind in *Factoring Humanity*, and God in *Calculating God*. Why is science fiction with spirituality a theme for you?**

In part because it's an area few others have explored in any real depth. We're all supposed to nod appreciatively when people mention Clarke's *The Nine Billion Names of God* or *The Star*, or Asimov's *The Last Question*, but the debate in them is so simplistic as to make the stories risible to anyone who knows any theology. SF is an ideal vehicle for in-depth discussions, but most – not all, but most – of what's been done in the area of religion that has endured in the field is at short lengths. I saw a street few others were working, and started knocking on doors, seeing what I'd find.

**Another issue you have often investigated is consciousness and machines, be it uploaded human consciousness, as in *Mindscan* and *The Terminal Experiment*, or conscious/self-aware machines, as in *Factoring Humanity*. Since you've spent so much time on this issue, what conclusions have you drawn about whether machines can be conscious?**

I think we're going to see a paradigm shift in the next few years about artificial consciousness that echoes what happened in the debates about extraterrestrial life. For decades, the received wisdom – and the unchallenged assumption behind most SF, not to mention the SETI program – was that the universe must be teeming with intelligent life. Now, we've come to realize just how complex the chain of contingent circumstances was that led to us being here. As one small example, if we didn't have a freakish, oversize moon, formed by a random impact, Earth would be a hellhole with a runaway greenhouse effect, like Venus. Well, as I've researched my latest series of books, the *WWW* trilogy about the World Wide Web gaining consciousness, I've discovered why everyone has always done the actual birth of machine consciousness either off-stage, *a la Neuromancer* or in a ridiculous fashion *a la* just about everything else: it is so hard, so complex, so unlikely a thing to have happen that I suspect no matter how complex our computers become it will never emerge spontaneously, and it's going to be a good long time, if ever, before we can replicate it on any substrate that doesn't have a belly button.

**I can't help noticing that your novels always deal with dramatic moral issues such as murder, rape, revenge, abortion, marital infidelity, terminal illness, genocide, and incest to name but a few. Why do you include such emotional issues in your work?**

No one would ask that question of any genre *except* science fiction. That's the litany of issues that make up the moral landscape today, and mainstream writers, mystery writers, romance writers, and so on all explore them all the time. The question from my point of view isn't why *I* do it, it's why so many of my colleagues prefer a sterile, unemotional, uninvolved, escapist view. Writing about people *in extremis* is incredibly liberating, because it tears off the normal veneer of civility and let's you get at who these characters really *are*.

**Since the early 1990s, you've published a huge amount of fiction. How do you remain so prolific?**

Do I seem prolific? I've done less than two million published words in the last 20 years – I started seriously writing my first book in 1988. My buddy, Harry Turtledove, does 700,000 published words a year. But I'm lucky that almost everything I've published is still in print; that helps give the illusion of being more productive than I am. I wish I could do two books a year – my publishers wish that, too – but I just can't. A book a year is my pace, it seems. How do I do that? By parking my fanny in a chair and working every single day.

**You have been nominated for, and won, a number of awards, including Nebulas and Hugos. In your expert opinion, what is it that makes some SF novels stand out above all others?**

It's changed over time. There was an era when stories about *things* could win the top awards in the field: *Ringworld*, *Rendezvous with Rama*. Now, it's stories about people that make the biggest mark. It took an awfully long time, but SF is discovering that, just like every other field of writing, the most interesting thing to write about is the human heart in conflict with itself – even if that heart happens to be battery-driven!

**What is your favorite book you've written and why?**

For a long time, I answered that question by saying *Factoring Humanity*, because it did best what I always set out to do: combine the intimately human with the grandly cosmic. But, quite unusually for me, I'm changing that answer to say my most recent book, *Rollback*. Not only has it gotten the best reviews I've ever had (and I've had mostly great reviews since day one for my books), but more than any book I've done, it really does bridge my own two personal worlds: that of genre science fiction (which is how I'm published in the US) and mainstream literature (which is what I'm perceived to be a part of in my native Canada). *Rollback* in no way gives short change to hard-SF concepts (hell, it was serialized in *Analog* – you can't get any more hard-SF than that!) but it still has been widely embraced by people who have never read SF before. As it happens, on the day we're talking, I got my very first copies of the paperback edition of *Rollback*.

**What is your favorite book by someone else and why?**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. It's not at all about what it appears to be about on the surface. It's a thematically driven, ideas-rich book, and it's got unforgettable characters.

**I must admit, one of my favorites among your books is *Flashforward*, partly because of the high-energy-physics setting and its use of quantum theory. I also enjoy it, however, partly because it raises the issues of fate and free-will not unlike Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*. What inspired *Flashforward* and was the *Foundation Trilogy* part of it?**

Interesting. You're the first person to raise a comparison to the *Foundation Trilogy*, and my book has been out for 10 years now. I honestly don't think Asimov had anything to do with it. Some books have complex inspirations, but not *Flashforward*. It came about when I was at a high-school reunion, and everyone was saying, 20 years on, "If I'd only known then what I know now..." as if it was obvious that foreknowledge of the future would make one's life happier. I simply got to wondering if that was really true, and *Flashforward* was the result.

**You've taught science-fiction writing a number of times. What's the most important advice writers should hear?**

Write *your* stories. Don't write fan-fic, media tie-ins, things you think *other* people would like to read. Write what *you* want to read in a universe of your own creation. Trust me. In terms of feeling good, "I made this!" beats all hell out of "Oooh, I love what you did with Spike as a four-year old!"

**You are also considered a futurist. What prediction are you most proud of?**

An odd question: predictions are about rational extrapolation. Am I proud that I was talking about global warming long before it was fashionable? "Proud" doesn't seem the right emotion. The one I get the most email about is predicting the name of the current Pope, Benedict XVI, back in 1995 in *The Terminal Experiment*.

**What are the similarities and differences of a futurist versus a science fiction writer?**

A science-fiction writer's job is often to make social comment, and to find the most entertaining extrapolation of what we know. A futurist's job is indeed to predict the

future. A science fiction writer's job, as Ray Bradbury so famously said, is very often to prevent the future, by sounding a warning call.

**I've heard you're not going write any more short stories and instead focus on novels from now on. Why? What are the pluses and minuses of novels compared to short stories?**

Short stories are very hard work, don't pay nearly enough, and I don't enjoy writing them. I've done more than 40 of them, and I've been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, and Bram Stoker awards for short fiction, and have won the Crime Writers of Canada's Arthur Ellis Award, *Analog* magazine's *Analytical Laboratory Award*, and *Science Fiction Chronicle's* Reader Award, all for best short story of the year, plus five Aurora Awards – Canada's top honor in SF – for best short story of the year. In May of 2008 a second volume of my short stories is being published – *Identity Theft and Other Stories* – and with it, all my short fiction will be collected and in print. It seems a fine time to take my bow from that part of the industry and settle in to do just the things I really enjoy.

**At one of your speaking engagements you said that the short story is the way genre writers have traditionally broken into the business. Do you think that's still true? Why or why not? Any suggestions on how we can help the genre short story market?**

Oh, absolutely it's still true. With more and more publishers not willing to look at unagented manuscripts, and most agents wary of people with no publishing credentials, getting credits as a short fiction writer is still the standard career path. As for how to help the genre short story markets, one word: subscribe. If more people don't, they will die; they're in critical condition already.

**What do you hope to accomplish with Red Deer Press's Robert J. Sawyer Books?**

I've been publishing books either by new authors or by authors whose careers have stalled: damn good writers who never found the audience they needed with a bigger publisher. I'm giving some great books a home and treating the authors with tender loving care.

**What's your next book to be published and when is it coming out?**

My next book is called *Wake*, and it's volume one of the *WWW* trilogy I mentioned earlier. I'm just putting the finishing touches on it now, and it should be out in 2009. The theme is just that: the waking up of a global consciousness, with all of it happening step-by-step on stage while the reader watches. It's been the hardest book I've ever written, but I really do think I've managed some cool stuff in it.