

## Interview with Stephen Baxter & Ken MacLeod

Science Fiction authors Stephen Baxter (SB) and Ken MacLeod (KM) talk with young reporters Sheena and Nathan, from Scottish Book Trust's What's Your Story? programme, about their chosen genre.

**Sheena:** To start, could you each tell us a little bit about your latest books?

**SB:** My latest book, *The Massacre of Mankind*, is a sequel to H G Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. It really comes out of reading Wells at school. My school had a great science fiction section at the library and I read all of Wells' books. This one is about what happens next - what happens when the Martians come again.

**KM:** My latest novel is called *Emergence*. It's the third in a trilogy called *The Corporation Wars*. These are novels that deal with a rather far-fetched possibility of robots spontaneously developing awareness and striking out on their own. It's not a new theme in science fiction, but what's slightly different is that it's set a long way away, about 1,000 years in the future around another star. And the robots in question are ostensibly on the job to prepare the place for humanity to thrive indefinitely in this other solar system. The idea that struck me was, if we had utopia where the machines did all the work, what happens when the machines that we're exploiting to do the work decide they're not going to work for us anymore, they're going to work for themselves.

**Nathan:** How do each of you define 'science fiction' as a book genre?

**KM:** I think this is a very much disputed question. It's quite fuzzy at the boundaries. Generally, I would say that science fiction is a fiction set in a world that is possible but hasn't actually happened. So it's an argued departure from the world that we know, because it's set in the future, or because of a technological change, or because of something from outside our world. Like for example, the Martians invade, what happens then? And it's thinking through the implications of that. That particular phrase, 'an argued departure', comes from one of the British Science Fiction critics John Clute, who's well worth reading. He's made that distinction with fantasy, in which you might have an 'arbitrary departure' - like once upon a time, or in another world something happens. With science fiction, you can at least notionally create a chain of logic between the world depicted in the book or the story, and the real world as it is now.

**SB:** I'd agree with that. Science fiction is about what could happen within the laws of physics and so on. Fantasy is where it's impossible really. What connects them both is that they're both fiction, so it's not like futurology where you're writing about the world of 2117 and trying to describe what

society might be like then. It's fiction so it's got people with feelings. How does it feel to live in a universe in which you've got smart robots doing all the work? How does it feel if the Martians invade? So it gets its power because it could happen this way - and how would we feel if it did?

**Sheena:** What would you say to someone who has never read a science fiction book to encourage them to pick one up?

SB: I think I'd say you probably have without noticing it! *Superman* is science fiction - he's a plausible alien in a way. The last movie where Batman challenges Superman, he says 'I've got to find a way to control you'. No matter how well intentioned you are, you might smash the world up. That kind of argument goes in the real world about how we would handle an interaction with aliens. They might seem benevolent but what damage might they do? So that is science fiction I would say. So you're probably reading science fiction without even knowing it. But if you want somewhere to start, there are classics like Arthur C Clarke which will always be accessible. A book like *Childhood's End* say, which was on the TV recently. But then there's plenty of new names as well - just dip in and try!

KM: I would say the same. There's an increasing number of ways into science fiction. There is the famous YA dystopian fiction which is definitely a form of science fiction.

SB: That's true, if you've read *The Hunger Games*, you've read science fiction.

KM: Exactly. And beyond that there's a great deal more. A good place to find out more about science fiction is online - there are many great resources online. There's a brilliant website called [tor.com](http://tor.com). There's another good one called [io9.com](http://io9.com), which just links literary and popular kinds of science fiction. There are online magazines like [Clarquesworld](http://Clarquesworld) and [Strange Horizons](http://Strange Horizons). So, you can dip into it and find out more, and connect what you already know about science fiction from games, films and TV series, whether it's Doctor Who, Star Trek etc to the wider world of written science fiction.

SB: Another good one to mention would be John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, a very accessible and enjoyable book to read. Likewise *The Chrysalids*, which I would strongly recommend in particular to younger readers in their high school years because it's told by a narrator who is in his high school years, except it's a world that doesn't have high schools.

**Nathan:** The UK has a very long tradition of science fiction in our literature as well as in television. For example, *Frankenstein* turning 200 next year, and TV programmes like Doctor Who which are incredibly popular and have been going on for a really long time. What effect do you think having programmes and books like this has had on how we think about the future?

KM: That's intriguing. Most science fiction in the English-speaking world is in fact American. But British science fiction has its own tradition. And I would say that it could be argued that it comes from Mary Shelley who was, in many ways, the founding mother of science fiction. In the

introduction to *Frankenstein*, there's a very clear definition of what science fiction is, that it's not a mere tale of ghosts and enchanters, but it's something different from the world, it's something that's possible and so on. Then you get H G Wells, you get Olaf Stapledon in the 1930s with these great cosmic visions, you've got Arthur C Clarke, and you've got Stephen Baxter who's right here, and who actually collaborated with Arthur C Clarke. And I think these do form a tradition of SF. Now what effect it's had on our views on the future, I think that one oddly enough, which British SF, which American SF doesn't, is a somewhat... a not so human-centred view of the world. It's a more cosmic perspective. In Wells' worlds, it's always possible that humanity's going to lose. Clarke and Stephen as well have looked at different possibilities, and how humanity might evolve, or change, or be defeated, or replaced. And in that sense we are the country of Darwin, as a country that sees the world through Darwinian eyes. I think some of the dark possibilities tend to appear quite a bit in British SF. Doctor Who in the '70s I remember, because I'm old enough, was always imagining fairly dark near futures for Britain.

SB: Yes, I think British fiction is just more realistic about the human position in the universe. It's all very simplistic saying this but if you're an American you're not going to always win you know. You're have to cope with defeat for at least a vastly transformed world. So that goes back to Wells: the Martians may come back and we're going to have to co-exist with this reality somehow. Wyndham was writing in the aftermath of the Second World War. So that was a mere catastrophe for Britain of course and he was kind of playing off that feeling of how close we can be to the precipice of losing.

But I have a theory you know, that at any point in time, for any generation, there's a kind of U-shaped view of the future, where there's going to be a disaster soon. When we were young it was going to be nuclear war. It seemed inevitable. But then with any luck we'd survive that, and then we'd build... and a couple of centuries later we'd be off to Mars and the stars. Now it's things like climate change, and resource depletion, and their future's terrible. So, you always think the near future is going to be terrible, and then the further future is not going to be. So I think that might be a British point of view. It's sort of pessimistic in the near future, but optimistic in the further future.

**Sheena: Following on from that, what science fiction books do you think give an accurate depiction of what the future will be like?**

SB: Well I could say you know, they're not supposed to really. Every SF novel is about the age and concerns in which it's written. So, Wells' War of the Worlds was really about colonialism, where the British were going out and literally exterminating populations in some cases. Thinking about the guilt and how you would feel if it happened to you. So it's all, not quite dreams, but more a nightmare, than a simple futurological projection. I'll name one though, Kim Stanley Robinson, an American writer, who writes big fat books about colonising Mars, and a kind of changed future. His latest book is called *New York 2140* in which sea levels rise, so New York is like Venice with canals and so forth, but still life goes on. So he's an American, so he just has American

preconceptions you know, it will sort of be off to the frontier. But he does try to write realistic, politically realistic, scientifically realistic visions of the future.

KM: Yes, I would strongly agree with that about Kim Stanley Robinson. And he has imagined different futures for the same places, so his first few novels dealt with different future Californias. I think another thing worth bearing in mind is that some of the classic novels of science fiction have been written precisely to prevent the future they're describing coming about. Like *1984*, I'll pick a very obvious example, was not predicting what life would be like in 1984, it was warning of the dangers that were already there in the world in 1948, as Orwell saw them.

SB: And it must have worked, hasn't it.

KM: I think it had an effect. Likewise *Brave New World* about a much more ostensibly benign future achieved by what we would now call genetic manipulation. And it's got the whole debate about genetic manipulation and it's dogged the whole debate about genetic engineering improving the human species ever since.

**Nathan: What advice could you both share to young writers, who are considering SF as a genre to write in?**

SB: I would say you've got to look for a story. It's a bit of a trap to dream about a really complicated world and then not be able to tell a story in it. The story's got to grab the reader. I think the key to that is to look for someone who it's hurting. The Hollywood screenwriters call that the Hollywood question, 'who's it hurting'? So you've got some scenario, like *The Hunger Games* where you've got the very rich elite, you've got medieval condition peasants with no technology with bows and arrows and so on - ask yourself, 'Who's it hurting'? So you don't want to tell a story about the guy at the top of the pyramid, the president. You know you want to tell the story of Katniss who's not even been selected. She's been curbed because the sister's been taken away. A human story. And then she's got to fight to save herself, and so on and so on. So I think that's a key bit of advice I would give, whatever future world you're imagining, ask who it's hurting and look from there.

KM: I would agree entirely with Stephen on that. When I was a teenager into my early 20s, I had no real aspiration to be a science fiction writer. I aspired to be a scientist quite mistakenly. That was one of the effects of reading too much science fiction at an impressionable age. But I kept having ideas about world building, about imagined worlds and I imagined them in considerable detail. But I very often couldn't come up with a story in that world, I hadn't got the knack yet. And that's still the aspect of writing that I find most difficult. If you're young and you have lots of ideas, write them down, don't forget them. Because you'll be able to use them when you're older, even if you can't use them now. That's one piece of important advice. The other one would be to read, keep on reading. Read a lot of science fiction if that's the field you want to work in. But don't read just science fiction, and don't just read science fiction plus history or technology or science or whatever. Read mainstream literature and popular literature as well. Read some of the classics. Because there is an awful lot of great stuff you can learn about human beings through

reading the classics of literature and there's a lot you can learn about how to tell a fast-moving engrossing story from reading other popular genres whether it's crime, or romance, or historical fiction, or war stories or whatever. You can learn a great deal about the mechanics of writing a good popular novel out of that.

**Nathan: Last question. What's next for both of you?**

KM: I don't know yet what's next, but what I am making a pitch for is a story that's based on one of my early notes and ideas, and worlds that I worked out when I was much younger that I now think I have the experience to write a credible novel set in that world. I won't go into the detail of it, but it is basically a near future space opera!

SB: In my case it's similar actually. My first published story was almost by accident. It was set in this universe that I got to call the Xeelee Universe. It's kind of war in Heaven where these Xeelee dominate the universe and the rest of us are struggling around looking for advantage further down. The saga of this universe emerged in my few books and I'm going back to that now. I think the stuff that you did when you're young is all your influences and your thinking and your passions sort of pouring in, in a kind of controlled way. So going back to that isn't a bad thing to do.