

## Special Feature:

Interview with 2007 SFWA Grand Master James E. Gunn

By

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*Editor's Note: In Spring 2006, I was lucky enough to get into the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame's online science fiction class taught by James E. Gunn. It was a tough class, but very rewarding. We learned about such concepts as the anatomy of a short story, and the importance of character, setting, and dialogue from an expert. In November 2006, I was delighted to hear that Jim won this well-deserved and prestigious award. He was gracious enough to accept an interview for our first anniversary issue of Electric Spec. Thanks, Jim!*

University of Kansas English Professor Emeritus James E. Gunn is author of 26 books, including *The Joy Makers*, *The Listeners*, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* (1983 Hugo Award), *The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*, and *Gift from the Stars*. He has edited 10 other titles, and had nearly 100 stories published in magazines and books. In November, Gunn was chosen as the 2007 Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). The title is bestowed upon a living author for a lifetime's achievement in science fiction and/or fantasy. He also has won many awards for literary achievement and excellence in teaching. Gunn is past president of the SFWA and of the Science Fiction Research Association. He founded the J. Wayne and Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas, and helped found the website <http://www.AboutSF.com>.

### Why do people read fiction?

I've written an entire essay about this question, and no doubt a book could be written. In short, though, I think fiction is a way in which we can experience other people's lives in a way that makes sense of them, and the universe in which they live. Fiction is just; life isn't. We learn our sense of right and wrong from stories. Fiction also gives us emotional release. It leads us to care about what happens to people we can identify with and then releases that caring in a way that we interpret as pleasure. It makes us feel, and the end of all fiction is to arouse and satisfy emotions in the reader. In science fiction, sometimes that is done through intellectual insights but no less an emotional response.

**How is reading like sex?**

I'll address fiction rather than all reading. The release we feel when the characters we have been led to care about finally achieve their resolution is akin to the release we feel from sex.

**How did you first get interested in science fiction (SF)?**

I started with fairy tales, Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Doolittle* books, and some juvenile historical novels in the school library while in second grade, graduated to Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* novels that I found in my grandmother's back closet, moved from there to the hero pulp magazines, beginning with *Doc Savage*, that my father brought home during the early 1930s, then discovered SF magazines, like *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories of Super Science*, in a used magazine store in downtown Kansas City. I was hooked, and ransacked the public library for stories like these. Later, I got hooked again when, beginning in 1939, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* began reprinting the Munsey fantasies.

**You started writing SF in 1948. How has SF changed over the years?**

There are a lot more SF writers and fewer magazines, more opportunity to get published in books, but more difficulty in getting a short story or a novel accepted. A couple of decades ago, I was on a panel at a Kansas City convention discussing the problems of getting published, and I looked around at the half-dozen writers on the panel and said, "You're the problem." When I began writing in 1948, I was the only writer, and as far as I knew, the only SF reader, in Kansas City. I didn't meet another writer until I attended my first convention, the SF WorldCon in Chicago in 1952. Standards have climbed; opportunities have multiplied; new writers with new and better skills have emerged. But the genre experience when everybody had read everything is gone, and the brotherhood I felt in 1952 has diminished as individual writers and readers splinter into various sub-divisions of literature, film, gaming, etc. So, we can celebrate opportunity while we miss togetherness.

**How has the SF market changed over the years?**

When I started writing, the magazines were dominant, and this gave the field its center. Now, the books are dominant, and the center cannot hold. Maybe a dozen writers could make a living – a limited living though it may have been – writing SF in the late 1940s; most writers did it in their spare time. Now, there may be hundreds of writers working full-time. That's good, but it also means that they sometimes must write books from need rather than from desire.

**With 26 books and approximately 100 stories published, what's your personal favorite book or story among those you've written?**

It's hard to choose one among many. I could cite a handful that I'm particularly fond of, often for different reasons: *The Joy Makers*, *The Immortals*, *The Listeners*, *Kampus*, *The Dreamers*, and *The Millennium Blues*.

**What's your favorite book or story written by someone else?**

That's even tougher. I've liked different books at different times in my life. I read a lot of historical novels when I was young (Neil Swanson), detective novels (Raymond Chandler), and literary novels (Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe). Among fantasy writers, I was fond of A. Merritt's novels – any of them. Among SF writers, Heinlein, of course, particularly *The Puppet Masters*, which I still teach, anything by Fred Pohl or Clifford Simak, and Alfred Bester. Lots of others.

***The Listeners* has met with critical and commercial success over the years. To what do you attribute that?**

Critical success, maybe; commercial success, modestly at best. Certainly I was happy that Scribner's published it, and published it as a novel, not a science-fiction novel. Maybe it gained some traditional readers because of that and because it incorporated some literary virtues, and SF readers recognized it, so it got them as well. It also sold well through the Science Fiction Book Club. Some critics and other writers may have liked it because it focused on characters dealing with inter-human communication as well as alien-human communication.

If I had to guess, I'd say it was successful because it was based on other people's research and ideas, including the book *We Are Not Alone* by Walter Sullivan, and the work of Carl Sagan and many others. So, it appealed to scientists. It also tried to tell a good story, though through unconventional means, including description of a project that might have to endure for 100 years without results, so it appealed to SF readers. It developed through strong characters and literary allusions, so it appealed to mainstream readers. Paul Shuch, president of the SETI League, told me once that *The Listeners* had done more for SETI than any other book; maybe it was influential as well.

**Your new book, *Gift from the Stars*, also deals with first contact. What is it about the human psyche that is so drawn to the idea of extraterrestrial intelligence?**

Some of us hate the idea that we may be all alone in the universe, that the entire future of rationality in the universe depends on us. Others think it's unlikely that rational life could have happened just once on a little backwater planet, in the vast universe filled with galaxies. Others are looking for help from the stars or fearing destruction. Of course, there are just as many who think humanity represents the only rational creatures in the universe and prefer it that way. Certainly the contact with other

intelligences would be as exhilarating, or as traumatic, as anything imaginable, and how we respond to that will determine humanity's fate and maybe its transcendence. It represents a critical moment, maybe *the* critical moment, in humanity's long history, and it behooves us to contemplate it before it happens, if it happens.

### **What makes *The Joy Makers* a modern SF classic?**

George Zebrowski called it that when he edited a series for Crown Publishers. More seriously, I have no business calling anything of mine a classic of any kind. I've always liked *The Joy Makers* and a few film makers have thought it would make good film, because it deals with a philosophical question – what would happen if we had a science of happiness? – in a dramatic narrative that seems appropriate.

### **What did you try to achieve with *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*?**

*Alternate Worlds* started out as a series of lectures for my first formal SF class in 1970. An editor for Prentice-Hall came by my office and asked if I'd be interested in writing a book about fiction writing. I said no, but I have these lectures that might make a good book about SF. He wrote back a couple of months later and said he'd tried them on some SF teachers and they said they wouldn't use such a book, but what would I think about a "lavishly illustrated coffee-table book" about SF. The editor-in-chief decided it was time for a coffee-table book, and I was in the right place to provide it. As for what I was trying to do, it was to convey my love for SF, my experience in reading it, and my sense of its historicity.

### **Where do you think ezines stand in relation to the fanzines and prozines of yesteryear?**

I think the implication of the question, that ezines occupy a position between fanzines and prozines seems accurate. Historically, fanzines offered an opportunity for fans to try out their writing, both critical and creative, before it was ready for the prozines, and the ezines serve that function today. But the prozines are declining in number, in circulation, and in influence. When I started writing, the prozines were almost all there was, and they shaped SF and SF writers. Ezines provide a broader opportunity to get published and sometimes get paid for it. Writing for pay is a critical step in a writer's evolution. Some ezines – largely newszines or reviewzines – are becoming influential, and some fiction published in ezines is now being considered for awards, but it is difficult to contemplate the development of ezines into the gatekeeper role of the 1930s-1960s prozines.

**Do you think the unity of SF has disintegrated?**

Certainly SF fandom and the publishing of SF itself are far different than they were when I started in the late 1940s, or even into the 1950s and the 1960s. Then, everyone had read everything, and the extended conversation that is SF could be informed and influential. Today, it is impossible to read even a small portion of what is published or viewed or gamed. SF consumers have splintered into interest groups, even within the published literature itself, which has been invaded by aliens from the viewing part until what is written specifically for publication is difficult to locate. Similarly, what is being written is created by authors more in tune with other aspects of the field and aimed at those differing audiences, a situation complicated by the merging of SF into adjacent fields, fantasy, for instance, and the mainstream, as well as writers from those areas adopting SF concepts for their own purposes. A core constituency and a core body of work still remains, and I hope it survives, because that is where the peculiar SF virtues reside.

**Your six-volume series, *The Road to Science Fiction*, is an impressive overview of the SF genre. How did it come about?**

After *Alternate Worlds* was published, Barry Lippman, then an editor for NAL's Mentor Books, called me, complimented me on the book, and asked if I had an idea for a book I might do for Mentor. I suggested a volume of SF theory, and, when that didn't appeal to the editorial board, suggested a historical anthology that would trace the origins of SF up to HG Wells. When that book sold well, the new editor at Mentor agreed to let me do two more volumes, which turned into #2 and #3 (#3: *From Heinlein to Here*, covering the period from 1940 to about 1980, has always been the most popular). When those sold well, the new editor (I had almost half a dozen over the history of the project) agreed to let me do #4, which considered the literary uses of SF.

I had discussed with the editor the possibility of doing a fifth volume covering British SF (a number of British stories had been included in the first four volumes, but I still felt that another entire volume could be devoted to the particular characteristics of British SF) and a sixth volume covering international SF. We were approaching agreement when New American Library took a look at sales and discovered they were running only about 2,000 copies or so a year. NAL had a standard of 5,000 copies for mass market paperbacks to continue keeping books in stock, though only 2,000 for trade paperbacks. NAL considered reprinting the books as trade paperbacks, but instead decided to drop the series. My German publisher had already approached me, asking if I had any other volumes in mind, and I agreed to do #5 and #6 for Heyne. By that time, I had been approached by White Wolf, which agreed to publish #5 and #6 in the US. White Wolf decided to drop #3 and #4 even though they were selling well and it never got around to reprinting #1 and #2. Scarecrow Press, which has published a number of my books, reprinted #1-4 in updated and expanded form, and that is the current situation. White Wolf still has copies of #5 and #6, at last accounting.

**Are you still the only person to be a past president of SFWA and the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA), and what is the significance of SFRA?**

My career has seemed to span the creative and the critical areas of SF, and the fact that I was president of both associations provides a kind of validation of that. Both organizations were created within a few years of each other – SFWA to deal with writerly issues, SFRA with teaching and scholarship. Often the creative and critical functions are at odds, but a few teachers and scholars have always belonged to SFWA and a number of writers have belonged to SFRA. In addition, writers have been involved in writing criticism and reviews as well as short stories and novels, for example Damon Knight, James Blish, AJ Budrys, and others, who made significant critical contributions beginning in the 1940s and into the 1950s and beyond. The distinction between creating and critiquing is not as foreign nor as divisive as in other fields. I'm still the only person who has been president of both organizations, and won both of their career awards. Damon Knight also won both career awards.

**How did speculative fiction become an accepted area of academic study?**

World War II was won, in some measure, in the laboratory and its prime innovations, the rocket and the atom bomb, were identified with science fiction. Ted Sturgeon commented that SF was dismissed as "that Buck Rogers stuff." That validation created a boom in SF publication – first magazines, then books, finally films and TV, continuing through this day. Teaching also was validated, and first fans, such as Sam Moskowitz, and then long-time-fans-turned-teachers, such as Mark Hillegas at Colgate, Tom Clareson at Wooster, and Jack Williamson at Eastern New Mexico, created courses. The 1960s, it might be noted, also was a decade of students making their voices heard, first in terms of race relations, then within campus governance, and opposition to the war in Vietnam. They found the notion of taking a course in science fiction rebellious and exciting. By the time I returned to full-time teaching in 1970, the chairman of the department commented, "Some younger members of the department hope you will be willing to teach a course in science fiction." Enrollments were overwhelming. I had 165 students in my first class. Gradually, the novelty wore off, but enrollments continued around 50 as long as I was teaching the course during the regular semester.

**Why did you establish the J. Wayne and Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at KU?**

I created the Center for the Study of Science Fiction (CSSF) in 1982 as a focus for our various efforts in SF at the university, including the courses I taught, like the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction in the summer; the collections the University Library put together; our film series; and our other outreach efforts. When my father died, my brother decided to honor him and my mother by endowing the Center, and the Regents agreed to name the Center in their honor.

**What do you mean by "let's save the world through SF?"**

It's hyperbole, of course. I'm not sure the world is in danger of destruction, though it may be, and if it is I'm not sure anyone or anything can save it. I think we need to try, not in any specific way, but in the spreading of SF's capabilities as far as we can. From my earliest contacts with SF, I recognized qualities that I did not find in other kinds of fiction: a realization of the continuity of existence from the remote past to the distant future, the relationship of present decisions and actions to the futures we and our descendants will inhabit, a recognition of mutual humanity that emphasizes species concerns above those of individuals or tribal or national groups, a willingness to work together for a better world, and general good will. HG Wells said that the world was in a race between education and catastrophe. I think SF is a major part of that education, and we all can help by introducing more people into its charms and values, particularly young people. David Brin and I, with help from SFWA, SFRA, and Tor Books, have created a website to help out, primarily through coordinating volunteer activities. It's <http://www.aboutSF.com>. Look it up. See if there is some way you, too, can help save the world through SF.

**One of your many claims to fame is your definition of SF. Please remind our readers of it.**

Everyone has a favorite definition, and I'm not sure mine is any better than any else's, except that I have more experience in thinking about it. In fact, it has many definitions, some long, some short. I prefer the shorter ones that I used to use for the final exam in my SF class (choose one and defend it!): science fiction is the literature of change; science fiction is the literature of the human species; science fiction is a (note not "the") literature of ideas. If I had to choose one, slightly longer, it would be: science fiction is the literature of the human condition experiencing meaningful change.

**How would you differentiate between SF and fantasy?**

In the same vein, while SF is the literature of change, fantasy is the literature of difference. There are many distinctions, not all of which hold for all examples. The major distinction I make is in the way we read the genres: SF skeptically, asking hard questions about how we got to the SF world and how things work there; and fantasy naively. That is, if we ask hard questions, the fantasy becomes unreadable. Of course, the more common occurrence is to read SF as if it were fantasy, without asking hard questions, and then it becomes adventure SF, even when the work responds best to the skepticism that makes the most of the author's research, imagination, and invention.

**How is SF writing a science?**

I presume you refer to the title of my book *The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*. I took that title from an essay by John W. Campbell, Jr. in the 1947 collection *Of Worlds Beyond*, edited by Lloyd Eshbach. Campbell was discussing the principles of science

fiction writing that he had evolved during the Golden Age. I was putting together what I had learned from teaching fiction writing, science fiction, and SF writing since 1958. SF writing still may be more of an art than a science, but I think it can be taught, and in my mind that makes it a science.

### **What unique challenges does the SF writer face?**

The mainstream author inherits the world of everyday experience; the mainstream story deals with how the particular characters interpret and interact with that world, and the reader generalizes from their special circumstances. SF authors have to create new worlds built upon the crucial change (the "novum," Darko Suvin calls it) that makes the story SF. After creating the world – the overpowering presence in any hard-core SF work – the author must work to make his characters seem real, even when they are minimized by their environment, if readers are to get the most from their reading experience.

### **As a teacher, do you have any tips for speculative fiction writers?**

I can't help a bit of realism. An old maxim for writing teachers is that if you can discourage someone from going into writing you should because the only ones who should continue are those who can't be discouraged. Remember it doesn't pay well on average; it offers more rejection, and consequent discouragement, than most; and it isolates the writer from a good deal of normal human experience. So:

1. Don't quit your day job, even if you have sold a story or two, or even a novel.
2. Find out who you are and what makes you different from everybody else, and find a way to put that into appropriate narrative and language that communicates to other people, and you will get published and might even be successful. Note that writers become writers because they like to read, and their first impulse is to recreate their reading, but no one wants second- or third-hand (insert your favorite author here). They want first-hand you.
3. Write regularly and write with a purpose; the prime purpose is to get published, and, as Heinlein suggested, send what you have written out to someone who can publish it; and keep sending it out because...
4. Works get published because they fall into the hands of an editor who knows how to publish them.
5. In your writing, don't give the editor an excuse to say "no"; see the article on the author's strategy in *The Science Of Science-Fiction Writing*.
6. Remember the reader. Always consider the reader's expectations and either fulfill them or offend them, but never forget that everything in a work, even the most insignificant word, creates an expectation in the reader's mind that must be dealt with.



**What three novels have had the most profound impact on SF in the last 20 years and why?**

I won't be able to tell what novels have had a profound impact until a couple of decades have passed. So, I will pick a couple of older novels and suggest where a third might be found: William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, even though it was published in 1984; Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which goes back to 1969; and one of several recent novels dealing with the singularity, typified by Charles Stross's *Accelerando*, although it could be some other novel of this kind. The influential works are going to have SF virtues, like originality of concept executed with the craft that makes the most of those concepts, not mainstream virtues, because SF tropes will always seem like interlopers in the mainstream. They can invigorate the mainstream but they cannot influence it.

**With the recent success of speculative fiction movies and TV shows, it's been said that speculative fiction has become "mainstream." Have the walls of the SF ghetto fallen?**

I concluded *Alternate Worlds*, which was completed in 1972 though not published until 1975, with the following comments:

"As the science fiction writer becomes more concerned with character, with language, with technique, he will be better accepted by non-science fiction readers and critics.... Meanwhile, mainstream writers will continue their explorations of what previously was the exclusive preserve of the science fiction writer – the future and other lands unknown – and they will do so with increasing sophistication. In the middle, the two will meet and be virtually indistinguishable...."

"A genre called science fiction will continue to exist.... The unity of science fiction, however, will begin to disintegrate without the magazines as a focus; the new wave is a portent. The consensus future and the philosophical position on which it was built will begin to fall apart as science fiction splinters into a hundred markets, into a thousand disparate, individual visions.

"Beyond this, the shape of things to come grows blurred, and the long journey, the odyssey of science fiction, from Homer to Hamilton, Heinlein, Herbert, and Harlan, has reached, if not an end, at least a pause, a place to sit for a moment and contemplate the future. Tomorrow, the endless voyage begins again...."

I think those predictions have pretty much come to pass. There still is science fiction, and I think there will continue to be something uniquely SF, but mainstream writers increasingly pick up SF tropes, and SF writers are passing in the mainstream.

**What does “the future isn't what it used to be” mean?**

Arthur C. Clarke suggested the phrase as the motto for SFWA, comparable to the Mystery Writers of America's slogan, "Crime does not pay – enough." It means that the SF writer's task grows increasingly more difficult as science and technology catch up to the SF imagination and as old tropes get worn out.

**When is your next online class through the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame?**

I haven't had any requests to continue the online class in SF writing since Leslie Howle left SFM. The staff is smaller and probably busier. Maybe they don't have time to handle the arrangements. I know *I'm* busier.

**What's the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction and what's coming up in 2007?**

In 1971-72, when I was president of SFWA, I received many letters from teachers saying, "I've been assigned to teach a course in science fiction. What do I teach?" In 1974, I created the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction as a three-week (now two-week) short course to offer a background in SF. Over the years, a couple of hundred teachers have taken the course, including some from the Netherlands, Denmark, Argentina, Canada, Japan, China, New Zealand, and Australia. Now, teachers have more opportunity to study SF in college, as courses have become more common, but I still offer the three-credit-hour course for currently enrolled students and for the two or three teachers who want to enroll.

The next Institute, available for graduate or undergraduate credit, will be July 9-20, 2007.

**What's the CSSF Writer's Workshop and when is the next one?**

I've been offering the Writer's Workshop in Science Fiction since 1978. It's a two-week intensive workshop for people who are about ready for publication or want to publish more regularly. It operates by requiring three stories to be submitted in advance for critiquing during the two weeks, plus the revision of one of them over the first weekend. The next workshop will be June 25-July 6. We're going to condense the last two days into one to allow participants to attend the Heinlein Centennial, SFRA annual conference, and Campbell Conference all meeting in the Crown Center hotels July 6-8, 2007. Kij Johnson is offering a novel-writing workshop during the same period.

Check the Center's website <http://www.ku.edu/~sfcenter> for details.

**What's the CSSF Novel Writer's Workshop and when is the next one?**

See above.

**What's the Campbell Conference and when is the next one?**

See above for dates and places. Usually we offer several days of events, including lectures by authors and editors on Thursday evening, Campbell and Sturgeon Awards at a dinner on Friday evening, and a round-table discussion about a single topic on Saturday, ending with a session about writing with the writers present, particularly the winners of the awards. Last summer we also filmed a series of interviews on Saturday afternoon. This coming summer, we'll combine our awards with SFRA's award ceremony on Friday evening, and will have a Saturday morning roundtable on the topic of "Jack Williamson and Robert A. Heinlein and 21st Century Science Fiction."

**You will be the twenty-fourth writer recognized by SFWA as a Grand Master, a monumental and deserved honor. What is the purpose of the Grand Master award, and what does this award mean to you?**

When the award was created by Jerry Pournelle, then SFWA president, it was intended to honor those writers who had made lifetime contributions to SF, but may have come along too late to have their works recognized by SFWA awards. The first honoree was Robert A. Heinlein. Others who were recognized, like Clifford Simak, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Williamson, and Isaac Asimov, did receive Nebula Awards, then or later, but the principal of honoring a lifetime career continues. For me, it represents the culmination of an involvement with SF that began when I was seven or eight, a career in writing SF that began in 1948, and a career in writing about SF that began in 1951. To join the company of the other 23 grand masters is incredible. This is as good as it gets in science fiction recognition, and I can't say I feel any more worthy of it than many others. When I looked at Isaac Asimov's trophy, commenting on the misspelling of his name ("Issac Asmimov") and asking him if he would give it back, he said, "Not on your life."

**What do you hope to accomplish with this award?**

I hope the honor will enhance many of the other aspects of the things I have been involved in, not only the writing *of* SF (and it would be good to get many of my older novels and collections back into traditional print though they're all available electronically and as print-on-demand), but writing *about* SF (including an updated *Alternate Worlds*), and spreading the word about SF through the non-SF portions of the culture, such as the website <http://www.aboutSF.com> to coordinate volunteer activities in behalf of SF.

**Is there anything else you'd like to tell our readers?**

You too can help "save the world through science fiction."