

Interview with M.M. Buckner

By
Lesley L. Smith

Your new book, *Watermind*, is out in November, 2008. What is it about?

Watermind is set in present-day Louisiana. It's about a liquid artificial intelligence, spontaneously self-assembled from trash in the Mississippi River.

Every day, the Mississippi carries up to 400,000 tons of rubbish from forty-one US states and three Canadian provinces. All of North America's most advanced technology flows into the river – microchips, nano-devices, pharmaceuticals, genetically modified seed. Now in the Louisiana Delta, a radically new primordial soup gives birth to an elusive entity. Drifting in the water, it's more alien than anything that might come from outer space – because it springs from the waste-stream of our own civilization.

How did you get interested in rivers and water pollution?

Water is my element. I'm a devoted whitewater and sea kayaker, and for many years, I've served on boards of environmental organizations seeking to protect water quality in our streams and rivers. Among other things, I edited a major report for the World Wildlife Fund about aquatic species in southeastern rivers. I've also participated in river clean-ups and macroinvertebrate samplings. The sound of clear running water feeds my soul.

How did you research this book?

I used all the standard tools – books, articles, web sites, as well as interviews with experts and a site visit to southern Louisiana. Actually, I traveled through New Orleans and Baton Rouge just a few months before Hurricane Katrina. Most of my story takes place in Baton Rouge – or more precisely in an EPA Superfund site called Devil's Swamp. This is a real place, and most of what I say about it in the book is literally true. The site has a long notorious history as a haunted dumping ground. I learned a lot from talking to locals while I was there.

Your books have been called eco-thrillers and ecology seems important to you. How did you get into it?

Eco-fiction is a natural for me because of my work in environmentalism. *Watermind* is actually my first novel in the eco-thriller vein, though I don't think it follows the typical thriller formula. I've tried very hard to develop engaging characters. All my novels are character-driven. I do enjoy a good adventure ride though, and I hope this book provides excitement for readers. There's plenty of suspense and action.

Your work has also been called post-cyberpunk. What is "post-cyberpunk"?

My first three novels were labeled post-cyberpunk. *Hyperthought*, *Neurolink*, and *War Surf* are set in a dystopian near-future earth, which is characteristic of cyberpunk. There's a lot of debate about what the "post" prefix actually means.

I do relish the works of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson and Bruce Sterling, and they have clearly influenced me. However, my work offers a more hopeful view of the future, and I tend to focus more on climate change as a driver of progress.

My next novel, the one I'm writing now under contract with Tor, will again be set in a near-future earth altered by climate change – but I offer optimism about how science and technology can solve our environmental problems. Its working title is *The Gravity Pilot*, and it's about an extreme skydiver living in Alaska

Is *Watermind* set in this same world? Why or why not?

Watermind is set in the present, and this really freed me to do things I couldn't do in the earlier books. The interesting thing about writing in the present day is, every detail has to be accurate. Any mistake about a street name or a historic date will stand out to readers. And when you need technology, you can't make it up. It has to be real. So for many reasons, the research for this novel was more involved. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Your Greenhouse Earth Series terminology for the workers, protes, reminds me of Orwell's proles in 1984. There are also similarities with your coms and Orwell's totalitarian super-states. Were you influenced by Orwell?

I guess everybody has been influenced by Orwell's seminal works. I read them in high school and loved them. I hope to read them again before long. My coms are multinational corporations.

Regarding the coms – corporations, conglomerates – many futurist writers include these in their stories, for good reason. Just look around at our caving economy, where inept CEOs walk away with \$millions while workers lose their homes. This is not Sci Fi. This is the nightly news.

In all three of your Greenhouse Earth novels, the main male character becomes trapped in a structure (underground lab, underwater settlement, orbiting spaceship), is transformed literally or figuratively, and then reborn into the world. What about this plot particularly appeals to you?

Yes, the womb-grave theme obsesses me – although it doesn't appear *Watermind*, which is basically a journey-by-water story.

Of course, many classics have been written about the transformational womb-grave. Edgar Allan Poe was haunted by it. In grad school, I read his novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and it continues to inspire me. I highly recommend it. Other stories along this line include *Jonah and the Whale*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and my all-time favorite, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Joseph Campbell has written extensively about tomb-womb mythology. I see this theme as an expression of the endless cycle of life – the death and rebirth of the universe itself.

Only your first book, *Hyperthought*, has a female protagonist. What about *Watermind*?

Yes, *Watermind* has a female protagonist! She's feisty and smart, with lots of troublesome personal history and a tendency to make reckless mistakes. I like her a lot.

I notice you use your initials in your professional name. Why? Do you think there's sexism in science fiction? Why or why not?

My parents gave me a double name, which is common in the South where I grew up. I'm Mary Margaret. Nobody wants to pronounce such a long name, so I'm M.M.

Regarding sexism, yeah, sure, there may be some. I don't worry about that, though. The people I write for are more enlightened.

In *War Surf* some members of the exec class actually surf wars--go to battle zones and sightsee. How did you come up with this idea? Is it an extrapolation of reality television and 'real video' on the Internet?

War Surf definitely fits with reality TV and video. Actually, I got the idea from an article in the *New York Times*. A reporter was describing how weird he felt covering the war in Bosnia. He described spending an afternoon with freedom

fighters, ducking bullets behind a riddled wall with dead bodies lying all around. Later that same day, the reporter flew to Paris to have dinner with friends in a nice restaurant. I don't know if he called it "mental whiplash," but that's the sense I got. That story was the germ of my idea for *War Surf*.

You have won a number of awards, including the 2006 Philip K. Dick Award for *War Surf*. How do you do it?

I feel very honored and grateful to have received those awards – also very lucky. This year, I'm serving on the jury for the 2008 Philip K. Dick Award, and there are so many excellent novels coming out, it's tough duty to choose the best.

Your book blurbs by the likes of Robert J. Sawyer, C.J. Cherryh, and Allen Steele are impressive. How did you get those?

Again, I feel immensely thankful for the kind words from these celebrated authors. My main focus is to write to the best of my ability. Everything else flows from that.

How did you get your first book deal?

I sent my manuscript "over the transom," and an editor at Ace picked it out of the slush pile. Good luck strikes again!

How did you get your agent?

After I received the offer from Ace for my first novel, I contacted an agent recommended by a colleague. What a stroke of good fortune that was. My agent has been a true friend, and I owe him a huge load of thanks.

Do you ever write short fiction? Why or why not?

Yes, I have written and published a few short stories. One day, I hope to devote much more time to the short format. The requirements of that form are very different. Short stories are closer to poetry. They achieve power through economy, tone and truth – the perfect turn of emotion. I have great respect for the masters of the short story.

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

Please tell your readers I would love to hear their thoughts about my work or the art of science fiction in general. I always try to be helpful to other readers and writers, because so many people have helped me. We are all on the same road. Any reader or writer can reach me through my web site, www.mmbuckner.com.