

INTERVIEW WITH RICK NOVY

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Rick kindly took the time to answer some questions about his writing and other projects.—CF

Q: It seems that most speculative fiction writers that I know had it in their blood and were writing fiction since childhood. Was that the case with you?

I am in the generation that grew up watching *Star Trek*. *Star Wars* (aka Episode 4) didn't come out until 1977. It was my first year of middle school and I had already seen almost all of the original *Star Trek* episodes multiple times. In fact, I didn't see *Star Wars* until a year after it came out. I subsequently lost count after 40 viewings in the theater. So, it really was the wow factor of the visual that pulled me into the genre. I didn't start reading real SF until I was in high school.

However, I did start writing in middle school or early high school. I wrote about 60 or 70 pages of a *Star Trek* story—early fan fic—that I never finished. I was fascinated by the Romulans in those days. Now, when I say Romulans, you have to remember this was before any of the films or the subsequent series ruined them. To me, the Romulans were as portrayed by Mark Lenard in "Balance of Terror."

The novel I started really tried to explore the Romulans using the Mark Leonard model. I recall there were some cool space battles and secret trap door entrances to the Enterprise from outside the ship. I'd really love to find that old manuscript and see what I wrote back then, but I fear it probably passed through an incinerator decades ago. Trivia—I used a weird cursive typewriter because it was the only thing I had.

Also in middle school, I tried to write a collaboration with a friend. We traded chapters back and forth, but I got frustrated with it because we never really talked to each other. He just handed me chapter two and I hated what he did with the story.

After that, I got too busy with sports—I was a varsity gymnast—and also with my math and physics classes which were very hard for me. I put

off writing for many years after that. Still, I recall that even in grade school, in creative writing exercises I would get the grade A/C. A for content, C for mechanics. It took me a long time to learn the mechanics and most of that I learned by osmosis through reading. I read a lot, just not always SF.

In fifth grade, I wrote the epic *Jansy Jaguar*, my answer to *Moby Dick*. A true classic it was, displayed proudly on the bulletin board at the back of the classroom with the big red "A." I probably beat the word count of my classmates by 100% at least.

So yes, in fits and starts I wrote in my childhood, but nothing like the quantity of some writers, and my poor early mechanics kept me from being accused of plagiarism like other writers I know.

Q: A glance at your bibliography indicates something rather remarkable: you have a couple of short story credits in the first few years of the decade, and then starting in about 2006 to present, you have a lot of publications (including at least another half dozen still forthcoming this year). Did something change for you in your writing habits or discipline that made you more prolific (or certainly more frequently published)?

I've always been a rather undisciplined writer. It's something I have struggled with as long as I have been writing. Once I get momentum, I will write every day, or at least attempt to. That can last for years, but when life gets in the way and derails me, I struggle and struggle to get going again. In fact, I'm in one of those difficult phases right now. I had a perfect storm of stress over the past three years. I won't get into the details because much of it is personal. The storm broke recently, but I've struggled to finish anything and sometimes even start new projects.

But back to your question, there is a very fundamental change that occurred in my writing in August of 2004. I started writing a novel that I actually finished. The reason I mark that as significant is that I consider August 2004 to be when I started to take writing seriously. I decided to finish the novel no matter what. The writer who started that novel was not the same writer who finished it. A lot of learning happened along the way.

I finished it in five months. So, spring 2005 I had this completed novel and I set it aside to work on some short fiction. Along the way, I discovered the writer's workshop area on Orson Scott Card's web site (www.hatrack.com). There, I met some marginally published and unpublished nobodies who have since started making a name for themselves--names you might recognize today.

The dialog in that forum area was about the same as it is today—I drop in and visit occasionally--but there was a synergy that seems to be missing today. Maybe it's because I am no longer embedded in the discussions, or maybe because the main characters from that era have moved on.

About that same time, I met David Gerrold. He was very supportive and it has turned into a wonderful friendship. The relationship was cordial at first, but he read the treatment of my novel and loved the concept. He started acting more like a mentor after that. Unfortunately, we don't get together anywhere near as much as we would like.

It is an interesting relationship because he will provide guidance, but he has never really critiqued anything for me. He gives nudges in the right direction, but he still lets me fall on my face as a writer. It's a very hands-off approach, but has been a very effective one for me.

About that same time—2005 was a very important year for me as a writer—I applied to Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp. Since you specifically asked about that experience in a later question, I'll just say that sitting in the same room as Orson Scott Card for ten days, doing nothing but talking shop has been a significant milestone for dozens of writing careers, including mine.

Once I got back from the workshop, I really kicked my writing into gear. I became a short story machine. I had over 50 stories in the market simultaneously before the perfect stress storm blew in and crippled my output. I'm still coasting on that momentum and I have to wonder where my career would have been if life had treated me differently. But you only get to play the cards you are dealt.

That's the long answer. The short answer is that I learned how to be a writer in 2005. Note that I didn't say I learned how to write. Being a writer is more than just the writing. It's also marketing, the networking, and getting your name out there to be recognized. Even if an editor never buys anything from you, just seeing your name on 10

manuscripts over the course of two or three years helps with name recognition.

I could go on, but I'll weave it into the next question.

Q: I'm sure readers would be interested in hearing about your opportunity to attend Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp. What are the most useful/interesting things that you got from that experience?

Orson Scott Card doesn't get enough credit for all the speculative fiction careers he helped to launch. He operates the Uncle Orson's Writing Class that anyone can attend. In addition, he runs the Literary Boot Camp, which is an auditioned workshop that includes and expands on the writing class.

He only takes around fifteen writers and each has 24 hours to write a complete story. After that 24 hours, every single person in the workshop critiques every story except their own. Amateur writers don't believe that you learn more from critiquing other people's work than you do having your own work critiqued, but it's true.

The critique process was fun to watch. There were several ground rules to follow, but the first story or two still received a lot of very amateurish critiques. Card always went last, and he is as brilliant a critic as he is a writer. He led by example and by the time the workshop ended, an amazing thing happened. Pretty much everyone in the room adapted to his style of critique, which is much more insightful. It's also very unforgiving in a way that takes a thick skin to receive because it is brutally honest. A lot of inexperienced writers can't take that kind of critique, but often times it is what they need to hear. I'm kind of in Harlan Ellison's camp on that subject. If you can't take having your story ripped apart and learning from the pieces, maybe you shouldn't be writing at all. And believe me, I've had some ripped apart.

But the Boot Camp also gave me my first opportunity to do this sort of thing with other writers of similar ability and experience. The problem is that an advanced amateur or early neo-pro hasn't necessarily found the writers of similar ability at home, especially if you don't live in a spec-fic hot spot like New York, Portland, or Santa Fe.

Often, you take a writing class or join a writers group only to find out that you are years ahead of everyone else. You can tear their stories to pieces with ten valid points on each page and you start hurting feelings or the teacher tells you to hold back. When it comes to your turn, they give you back the story without finding any problems, but it's very rarely because the story has no problems. It just has problems that an inexperienced writer doesn't yet have the tools to identify and address. That arrangement is great for those learning from you, but you get nothing in return.

I have since formed my own group in Phoenix with local writers that I dug around to find, either by networking at the local cons or by contacting local people listed in the SFWA directory.

The other benefit I have as a result of the Boot Camp is eligibility to join Luc Reid's online group Codex. It is an online community for neo-pro writers, and it has a gate-keeper. You must have a pro fiction sale, or you must attend a major auditioned workshop. The collection of talent that congregates in Codex would probably astound you because we can fit a lot more people in Codex than Damon Knight could fit into his living room.

Q: Who are some of your all-time favorite writers? And are there any to whom you would point as a particular influence on or inspiration for your own work? Also, who would we find you reading today?

Larry Niven is probably my all-time favorite, but I love all the classic authors. I use a lot of my leisure reading catching up on all the classics I should have read as a child. I am hopelessly behind and because I read Heinlein instead of Scalzi, I continue to fall farther and farther behind.

I love reading Harlan Ellison. He writes like nobody else on this planet. His fiction is brilliant, and his non-fiction is sharp like a sword, even though I often disagree with his opinion.

David Gerrold has a style that grips and pulls a reader right through the story, especially with his later material. (And some of that material is very late, isn't it, David?)

There have been several writers with a major influence on my work. Orson Scott Card and David Gerrold I already mentioned. Michael A. Stackpole got me into the habit of evaluating every instance I use the word 'said.' An historical fiction writer named Sam Barone got me into the habit of

evaluating every instance I use the word 'was.' Damon Knight, through his book "Creating Short Fiction," taught me it's okay to let an idea percolate before writing it. Theodore Sturgeon, channeled through David Gerrold, told me how to write detail—something I haven't internalized yet. And finally, Dorothy Fontana, who I met on the same day as I met David, is another brilliant and very under-recognized story-teller whose opinions I greatly respect.

The major influence that did not relate to educating me would be Isaac Asimov. I think my style resembles Asimov's in the sense that he was the ultimate non-literary writer. Asimov cared about the story and wanted the words to disappear into the background and not be noticed so that the message came through loud and clear. So Asimov taught me that it's okay not to be a literary writer, and of all the writers I know, I'm probably the least likely to be published in a literary venue—it just isn't what I write. Asimov taught me that it's okay to tell the story and let the story speak. It's okay to use plain language that the everyman can understand with ease. Of all the speculative fiction writers who ever lifted a pen, Asimov is the guy I most want to be like. I write to entertain.

Q: What, in your opinion, is the function or purpose of the sf genre? One hears chatter every year or two about how it's dying or changing or needs to change, or some such thing. I've tended to think that change happens with the times, but also tend to doubt that the genre itself will fade away. I wonder what you think about it?

So, I get my standard podcast interview question thrown back at me, eh?

The purpose? I think the purpose is like any other literature—to entertain, to educate, to express opinion, to make a statement. The genre boundaries are artificial anyway, generated so people know which shelf to put the book on.

But as to the state of science fiction—true and real science fiction literature as oppose to on-screen 'flashing lights' as Ellison calls it—that is an interesting question.

If you look back over the history of the genre, it started as speculation about technology and the wonders that the scientific advances promised. We started as pure pulp, and some of that early pulp wouldn't get out of the slush pile today.

Later, John Campbell insisted on rigor for the stories he purchased for *Astounding* (now known as *Analog*). That is really where science fiction gelled into a genre.

That kind of story is still out there. *Analog* is still around, currently edited by Stanley Schmidt, who holds a doctorate in physics. But that kind of story is getting harder to write because science today, and I mean all branches, is becoming so diverse and specialized and it advances so quickly that it's hard to keep up in even one sub-branch. Also, the level of specialized knowledge needed to understand leading edge science almost requires you to be working in the field.

Some of us know enough of the specialized mathematics to still be able to go into the library and open a copy of *Physical Review Letters* with a chance of understanding at least some of it. But even then, a lot of the research is details that don't mean a lot to the macroscopic world. That makes it difficult to find a story line where you can actually make use of cutting-edge physics and still produce a story that is interesting and relevant.

Right now fantasy is attracting more readers than science fiction because fantasy has a lot to say. Those stories aren't necessarily less rigorous, but the author gets to decide what rules to play by. A lot of writers find that a little easier to do, however, make no mistake about it being easy. I do think the pendulum will swing back to science fiction eventually, but the main sequence (so to speak) of the stories probably won't look like what we've seen in the past.

Being relevant is a self-adapting process. Works that don't have anything new to say won't be published, at least not widely. Science fiction will evolve just as it has in the past. The genre has its rules about rigor, it already pushed the dangerous boundaries, and it has already forecasted doom and destruction.

One of the challenges that science fiction faces is the image it gets from "sci-fi," or what we see on the screen. You and I know that stuff isn't really science fiction. It's good Hollywood eye candy, but most of it isn't good science fiction at all. The problem is that many readers who *would* like science fiction literature *don't* like "sci-fi" so they turn to techno-thrillers and mysteries instead.

Readers who like Tom Clancy and Larry Bond would probably like Ben Bova, too. There is a stigma attached to the words "science fiction" that

holds the genre back. It's obvious because writers from outside of science fiction can use the tropes with great success merely because they don't call it science fiction. And some of that isn't even done particularly well. Why do you think Kurt Vonnegut was marketed as mainstream fiction? *Ice-9* is about as science fictional as it gets.

On the other hand, historically, science fiction has been something of a ghetto, much more so than fantasy. That affords a great deal of freedom to say what might not otherwise be said, because dangerous situations of today can be disguised within the tropes. Because of the stigma "sci-fi" places on science fiction, I think as science fiction writers we will always have that sort of freedom to say anything.

But the genre will evolve, there is no doubt about that. It's not going to be something planned like the wet-fused mundane movement of a few years ago. You can't force a change down a genre's throat. It won't stick because science fiction writers will tell you to go to hell if you force them into a box.

You might argue that Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* forced a change by introducing the New Wave movement, but that's wrong. In the case of New Wave, these were stories that were already being written as part of the whole sixties experience. They just weren't being published. For the New Wave movement, Ellison was more of a midwife than inventor.

We don't have that same situation now. There are very few, if any, taboos out there anymore. Whatever change will come will come when it is ready. I think science fiction will always be a conduit for politics and social messages. I think there will always be a segment of *Analog*-style hard science fiction. After that, I think people just want to read something fun. How long has Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* been in print? A second generation of fans are growing up with it.

As an insider, the main thing I do see happening in both science fiction and fantasy is an attempt to broaden the appeal by being inclusive. Science fiction has historically been a white male domain. That is starting to change, but there is understandably some fierce resistance to it. Slowly and incrementally, we are beginning to see main characters that are not white. We are starting to see a more realistic representation of possible futures.

That is a healthy change because literature reflects the society of its time. That means on the average we are becoming more tolerant and more inclusive. At least in the United States. Including a more diverse cast of characters will eventually broaden the base of readers who read science fiction, and I can't think of a way that could be considered a negative.

I also think the Harry Potter generation is going to change reading. No matter what you think of her fiction, J.K. Rowling did a huge favor to all writers by getting kids to read. Those kids are growing up and they are still reading. Some of them are turning to science fiction, and not necessarily at the expense of any other genre. More readers means more readers for all genres. Whether they read on paper or on a Kindle, or on something yet to be invented is a topic for another discussion.

Q: You've started a couple of new projects lately: Cactus Wren Video Productions and the terrific *Novy MIRror* show. I can see the *MIRror* as being a product sample of what you can do (by way of promoting your broader video business), but it seems like a thing that can have a life all its own. Are you planning to produce it on a long-term basis? Also, is it intended to be a fun "for-the-love" project, or is it a piece of a bigger career-building plan?

Cactus Wren Video Productions is my answer to sitting around collecting an unemployment check. I spent the past fourteen years working as an engineer in the semiconductor industry. It can be very stressful and when I was let go, along with what seems like half the division, I started to evaluate where I want to go with my career.

In this economy, the entire semiconductor industry is laying people off, and then boarding shut the doors. There are, even five months later, absolutely no similar jobs out there to even apply for, much less win. Hundred of people, many of them better engineers than me, are waiting to pounce on the one opening that occasionally appears.

Cactus Wren Video is an attempt to do something more fun, where I have some control over my own destiny. For sure it is an adventure and I have no idea whether it will survive over the long term. But, it has the benefit of being something I could do part time if another engineering position suddenly appeared. Failing that, at least it is

keeping me busy and productive and meeting people.

Cactus Wren is a video production company that targets the online market—web site welcome videos, lectures, video product brochures, and video pay-per-click ads. It's a market that is still in its infancy with the very recent wide availability of broadband internet connections and the portability of flash format video. In five years, online video will be everywhere.

I started the video podcast *Novy MIRror* for several reasons. Obviously I have an agenda as a writer to gain some name recognition. Also, the *Mirror* is something of a video laboratory for me. It gives me projects where I can work out problems with nothing on the line except my own satisfaction. The other cool thing is that I get to ask some pointed questions of interesting people and listen to fascinating answers. You see an interview of a writer and it's over before you even get going. I saw a need for a platform where the person being interviewed can take the time to give a complete answer. The third episode will be out several weeks before this interview appears in *M-Brane SF*, but I'm putting the finishing touches on it as I write this response. It will be another good discussion, this time with Tobias Buckell.

I promised myself that I would create a minimum of ten episodes. After that, I'll keep making them as long as it's fun for me. There are a lot of interesting people working in science fiction and fantasy, so I don't see a lack of material ever becoming a problem. I have been trying to release one episode every two weeks. After the first ten, it may slow down to monthly, but we'll see.

Other than here in *M-Brane*, where should be looking forward to seeing some new stories from you? Also, I seem to remember that you have a completed novel. Any good news yet on that being picked up by a publisher?

The novel is still being evaluated by a handful of agents. I need to get that moving again. I have six other stories that are due out this year. Two of those are with *M-Brane*, one is in the first paper edition of *The Martian Wave*, one in *Tales of the Talisman*, and one will appear in *Flash Fiction Online*—a major sale for me.

The sixth story is a novelette called "Winter." It is written from the point of view of an alien accompanying a human expedition back to earth. The expedition experiences time dilation after

traveling at relativistic speeds, and they return to earth during the next ice age. The story is being bundled with a reprint of "The Adjoa Gambit," a story set in the Antarctic that previously appeared in Orson Scott Card's *Intergalactic Medicine Show*. The two stories will be released as a stand-alone trade paperback, also titled *Winter*. The release schedule for the book has slipped a couple of times. As of today, it is expected out this July.