

GOOD SCIENCE FICTION IS RARE

Houdini Nation Interview #1

Host: Andrew Sawyer

Location: Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool

In late January 2006 I went to Liverpool to meet Andrew Sawyer. He is the librarian of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection, housed in the Sydney Jones Library at the University of Liverpool. He is also the director of the MA course in Science Fiction Studies, which lasts two semesters and welcomes a handful of students every year.

The collection is home of well over 20.000 titles, including books and magazines in various languages. The office and collection are housed in the basement of the Sydney Jones Library, a building that could well be a hospital or police station in your average seventies TV-production. I bet Quincy would feel at home here.

Andrew led me from the front desk to the basement and into his office, which looked somewhat like that of a mail order company. Opened and unopened cardboard boxes everywhere, the tables were barely visible within all those cartons and stacks of books. "These are donations that have just come in and still need to be sorted out." Andrew explained, rummaging through a pile.

We then entered a grim side-room I wouldn't dare call conference-room or anything in that direction. It sure fitted the rest of the set-up and could be seen in a symbolic way: Sci-Fi? Go to the basement, where there is no light and where no one can see we actually have that sort of stuff.

The very second I pushed the record-button on my little voice recorder, the telephone in that room started ringing, "for the first time in about ten years" as Andy Sawyer put it.

A very convenient incidence to start a talk about Science Fiction, isn't it?



HN: Mr. Sawyer, I have come across people who were doing work in the field of Science Fiction but who were not reading Science Fiction themselves. Since you are mainly dealing with Science Fiction Literature, I imagine you must be an avid reader of the genre. When did you start reading Sci-Fi?

"I was terrified and amazed by the idea of going to the moon."

AS: I really can't remember ... in the mid-fifties there was a radio program called Journey Into Space and I remember listening to that, thinking how wonderful it was. I was sort of terrified and amazed by the idea of going to the moon and things like that. I was probably reading common books at that point; I was certainly reading childrens retellings of Greek mythology.

One of the first real science fiction books that I can remember reading, and I must have been quite young at the time, was *The Space Merchants* by Frederick Pohl and C. Kornbluth. I guess we just happened to have a copy in the house, I don't know why. It's a terrific novel and for a lot of it – I was just too young to understand. I went through the usual seeking out of stuff in the library, looking at collections and reading short stories ...

Another early one in a magazine which happened to be in the house for some reason – none of my parents were science fiction fans – was a story by Harry Harrison, *Captain Honario Harpplayer*, which is a spoof of the *Hornblower* stuff by C. S. Forrester, which I haven't read at the time but I knew he was kind of setting up something.

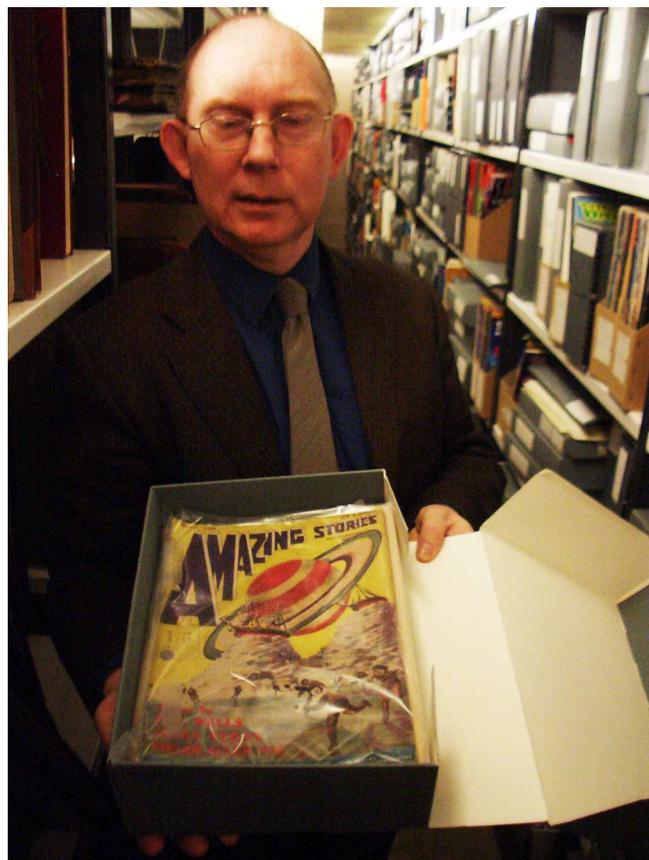
I was at a science fiction event, I think my daughter was there and I introduced her to Harry Harrison and said to her: This is the man who is responsible for everything.

“I'm fascinated by the possibility of being able to invent a new thing, being able to describe something that no one's ever seen.”

HN: What is it that intrigues you in science fiction? Because there is that group of people who really like the technology aspect of it and that is also reflected in the way they present themselves on the Internet and in the journals that they issue, they all look very technical. Myself I'm more intrigued by society observations, like if we assume that certain abilities have been developed and certain technological inventions have been made and just accept that and then see what happens to people ... what is it that you're intrigued by?

AS: It's probably the latter rather than the former; I mean I'm not a scientist by background. I think it's probably two things. One is the idea of being able to imagine how to change the world, being able to invent a new thing, being able to describe

something that no one's ever seen. Like a lot of the early science fiction by H. G. Wells ... and secondly it is the idea of extrapolation, like: what if such and such a situation occurred, what would be the consequences? I've always liked that.



I've always felt that one of the most satisfying reads is a good sort of hard science fiction novel that gets the science right and then starts to move out of the known into the unknown. Unfortunately they're rarer than one might think but if you get a good one ...

HN: When I started reading science fiction it had already come quite a long way, but if I take novels from the 30ies, 40ies or 50ies, when the technological advancement hadn't been that far, we hadn't been to the moon and so on, and then read a current science fiction novel, the new stuff doesn't seem to be that far ahead, compared to H. G. Wells or Frederick Pohl.

AS: Again I think there are two things. One is that I think that Wells really kind of defined the field in the sense that he defined the major themes in science fiction. Although I'm not necessarily saying that he was the first to present a time travel story but if you read a time travel story now, you're speaking to H. G. Wells. You read an invasion story and you're speaking to H. G. Wells. It is very difficult to think of a new theme.

Having said that I think there are number of authors like Greg Egan who deals amazingly well with the idea of the far future in which humans will not be humans as we know them ...

At this point the aforementioned telephone rang again, magically changing pitch with each ring as if it tried to tell us that it was in fact an urgent call. Andrew Sawyer finally got up to answer it but when he picked up the receiver, the phone was dead.

AS: What was I saying? Yeah, Greg Egan – he talks about this kind of far future, a post-human future. For example in one of his novels *Diaspora* most of the human race has downloaded itself into computer software. Life exists as programs inside some super-computer. And so we can copy ourselves, we can change our personalities ... whole areas of experience, right down to the level of basic sensory perceptions, are not as we have them today.

“Time is going very quickly in terms of progression of technology.”

There is a really interesting article in today's *Guardian*, which is essentially about smart drugs that enable you to choose body and mental attributes for your children. One of the points that she [the author] was making was that this would be in a sense within her lifetime. She is saying, “My daughter is ten, in twenty five years time, she will be exploring these choices. And I,” she said, “May still be there to watch her.”

We got a number of different kinds of perceptions in modern science fiction, both this idea of the far future; the great, huge expanse of time that Oliver Stapleton was talking about in *Last and first man* in May 1930, we've got the sort of huge future history involving eons of time. And we've also got this sense that – certainly over the past few decades – time is going very quickly in terms of progression of technology.

I was listening to the radio the other night and there was someone talking about a novel set in the 1960ies or 70ies and it was about somebody going abroad and the comment was made: This was in the days before mobile phones and you could escape from your family by going abroad because it was really difficult to contact them, you had to send cables ... so that was certainly within my kind of lifetime. When my daughter first went to India she could only communicate to us by fax. Or when she got into a big city by finding one of the – at that time – very few Internet cafes and email us. Now she's taking a mobile phone.

HN: Today it's actually harder to escape. You need technical devices to make you invisible and you need to switch everything off because you are generally accessible for everyone.

AS: And there are all sorts of areas there, which are explored in fiction. It used to be a sort of cliché in detective stories that there would be a mysterious phone call and you'd know somebody had a phone call but you didn't know who it was and there was no way of finding it out. Nowadays you just pick up the phone, dial a certain number and you know. Unless they got the number withheld ...

HN: That leads me to another question I had regarding the influence of science fiction movies on the whole genre. Because if you look at the really old movies, they had a whole different texture and tone to them compared to what's going on now. Movies like *Minority Report*, movies based on Philip K. Dick in general, or movies like *13th Floor*, they are moving in a different direction. It's not that kind of attention seeking type where special effects are the most important thing. But most of the science fiction movies are used to show off special effects.

“Independence Day is basically a weak steal from H. G. Wells War of the Worlds.”

AS: In the 50ies there was a nice subgenre that was almost documentary science fiction; like Destination Moon, which had quite good special effects for the time. But the story was the moon shot, which was in everybody’s mind. And now we’ve got that sort of great CGI stuff and it does focus your eyes on spectacle rather than story. You’ve got a film like Independence Day, which is basically a weak steal from H. G. Wells War of the Worlds. The only possible reason to go to it is for special effects and that kind of leads you to the question whether really that’s enough.

On the other hand I think there are some interesting films like Eternal sunset of the spotless mind, which definitely is a science fiction film. It’s got that technology about wiping memory and that sort of stuff but you’re more focussed on the story and the characters. I think we could do with a few more of those. Cinema is quite good for playing around with reality. Is this real? Is the image you’re seeing meant to be real?

As if to mock us, the mysterious telephone rang again. Andrew managed to pick it up in time ans alas: wrong number. Mystery solved.



HN: Let’s change the subject and talk about the Science Fiction Foundation and to your work. When did you get into the position that you’re in now?

AS: The Science Fiction Foundation itself began in the early seventies, for a number of reasons, centred around the idea of promoting science fiction, of using education to create an understanding of how science fiction works as a literary form or cultural tool. It was in what’s now the University of East London and it was centred there for a long time.

In 1993 the UEL decided that they didn’t want to host it anymore, I’m talking particularly about the library being built up as a resource collection for scholarly interest in science fiction. At that point Liverpool University were interested in setting up an MA in science fiction. So the two sides got together and the result was that the library [of the UofL] would house the collection, that they would hire a librarian to administer the collection and to do some teaching on the MA.

“One goal of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection is to create an understanding of how science fiction works as a cultural tool.”

So they advertised the post. I was kind of there on the sidelines as it were, I wasn’t associated with the Foundation in any big way. I was a member of the Science Fiction Foundation and I’ve been doing a lot of stuff for the British Science Fiction Association and I was about to kind of retire from all that. And then the possibility of the job as a librarian came up and, having some of the background, I applied. And they gave me the job.

It’s developed a bit since then, I’m doing a lot more teaching now ... in a nutshell: That’s how I came here.

We've been trying to progress ever since, we've been trying to catalogue the collection, to develop the collection, to promote it as a resource for scholars, researchers, students, readers of science fiction. We occasionally work with the media. There was a BBC 4 documentary on John Wyndham, which we were involved in and I'm doing the same with a forthcoming BBC – I don't know which arm of the BBC it is, I'm going to find out later this week – documentary on the history of British science fiction.

So occasionally people will ring up and say, we're working on this program, what do we need to look at – sometimes it will actually turn into a program, sometimes it won't. Hopefully this one will.

HN: How many applications per year do you get for the MA in Science Fiction Studies?

AS: It's hard to tell. We probably get about twenty inquiries, not all of which turn into applications and not all of the applications will turn into people. The average number of people on the course over the past few years has sort of been four to six.

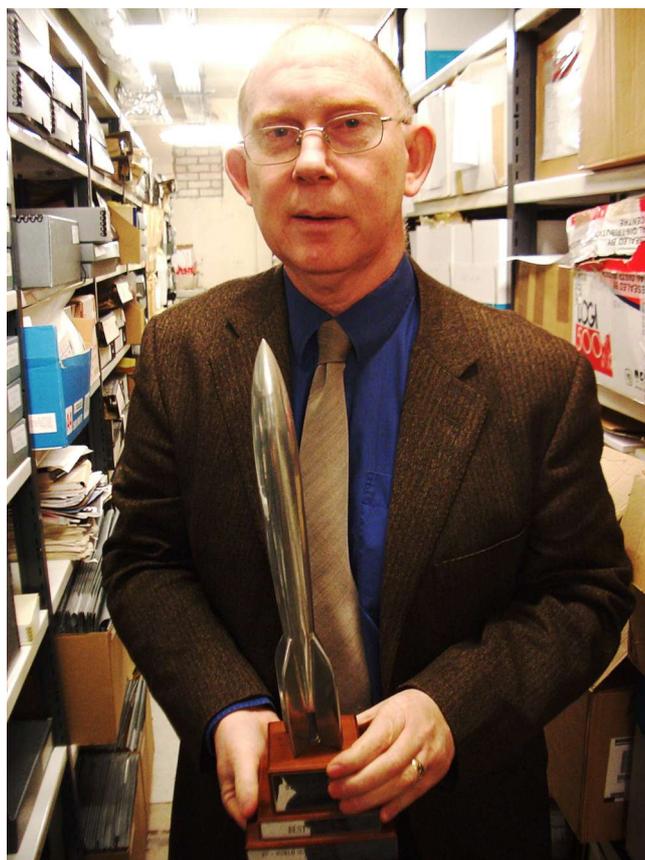
“One of my students went on to run a science fiction section in the local bookstore, successfully!”

HN: Do you know what the people who actually complete the course are doing with their degrees? Or do they shift into other fields?

AS: Some of them go on for further studying ... people who did last years course for example: I think there were six, two have gone on to do PhD work, one guy basically did it for interest, he has gone back to Mexico to take up his old profession again, one person is working for the Welsh Arts Council or something, which has not necessarily to do with science fiction ...

One of my students went on to run a science fiction section in a local bookstore, successfully!

Another one is not working in his day job in science fiction but he's translating science fiction stuff to Chinese. So, yes, some people stick with the field and others don't.



Unfortunately, the University of Liverpool are not yet offering the MA in Science Fiction Studies in the form of master classes, enabling people to take on the course additionally to their daily routine. Not everyone has the chance to go back to studying, even for a year and relocate to Liverpool for that whole time. It is not out of the question however, that master classes will be offered in the future, Andrew Sawyer says. I will be keeping my fingers crossed.

After that more formal talk Andrew led me into the archive where the collection is housed. Shelf after shelf full of treasures – it makes you want to live there. Everything from ancient issues of magazines like Astounding over rare english versions of the german series Perry Rhodan to foreign language works in Russian, Chinese etc. are neatly stacked by the thousands.

Houdini

NATION

WWW.HOUDINATION.COM

The original manuscript of *Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham can be found here amongst other exclusive material that forms the John Wyndham Archive.

The collection mainly exists through donations, which first form the piles in Andrew's office until they are sorted out and catalogued. The library also sells material when they receive several copies of the same work. Naturally, I left the library with a big box full of magazines.

"Some stick with it and some don't," Andrew said. He definitely did all he could to motivate me to stick with science fiction. It really is enthusiastic people like him that do a lot for the genre as such and I guess it's only fair that every once in a while we think about these 'ambassadors of science fiction' out there.

This article is dedicated to them.

Tommi Brem

May 31, 2006

About the Science Fiction Foundation:

Writer/social activist George Hay and others founded the Science Fiction Foundation in 1970 as a semi-autonomous association of writers, academics, critics and others with an active interest in science fiction, with Arthur C. Clarke and Ursula K. Le Guin as patrons. The aim of the Science Fiction Foundation is to promote science fiction and bring together those who read, write, study, teach, research or archive science fiction.

<http://www.sf-foundation.com>

About the Science Fiction Foundation Collection:

The Collection is housed in the Sydney Jones Library at the University of Liverpool and consists of some 25,000 books and magazines in the field of Science Fiction and related genres. This is supplemented by an extensive stock of critical works and a number of special collections in its care.

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/~asawyer/sffc1.html>

About Andrew Sawyer:

Andrew Sawyer is the Librarian of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at the University of Liverpool Library, and Director of the MA in Science Fiction Studies. Sawyer has published on children's/young adult sf, children's fantasy, John Wyndham, Telepathy, Babylon 5, "Reverse-Time narratives", and Terry Pratchett. He is an active reviewer in the sf/fantasy field and is developing "The Science Fiction Hub" as a portal to the University's unrivalled collection of science fiction materials.

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/~asawyer/ma.html>
<http://www.sf-hub.ac.uk>

About Houdini Nation:

Houdini Nation is the effort of Tommi Brem and the only archive of all the books Tommi has read, including complete publishing information, cover scans and content listings to almost every book. This archive is to lay the groundwork for a Museum of Science Fiction Literature to be opened by Tommi Brem in Germany around 2030. The term Houdini Nation has been invented by Stefan Stöckel and is used by permission.

<http://www.houdination.com>

About Tommi Brem:

Tommi is an avid Science Fiction reader with a special interest in short stories, especially from before the nineteen eighties. He has translated works of science fiction for the German magazine *Nova* and is himself an author of rather eerie poetry.

<http://www.tommibrem.de>

Images taken by Tommi Brem. All rights reserved. This article or parts thereof may only be used with prior permission by the author.