



Worldcon
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San José

World Science Fiction Society

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WSFS - Tad Williams' Toastmaster Speech

This is the speech that Tad Williams gave as part of his duties as Toastmaster for the ConJosé Hugo Award ceremony.

DOCTOR STRANGETOAST, or, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE ROCKET-SHAPED THING

I'm sure you're all wondering how someone like me wound up being the Toastmaster at the Hugo Awards. Your puzzlement is understandable. First off, I'm known primarily for writing fantasy, which many people in our field believe bears a relationship to science fiction not unlike that of infomercials to PBS.

Second, I seem to be woefully out of touch with the contemporary field. I was startled to realize that many of the writers I revere and who I expected to be seeing on the Hugo ballot this year are actually dead -- or if not, they're pretending to be so for tax purposes. Instead the lists of nominees and presenters are full of saucy young upstarts like this Robert Silverberg fellow. How's a toastmaster-designate supposed to keep up with this mad whirl of a genre?

Third, I have to admit I'm sadly uninformed on mainstream science fiction entertainment as well. For one thing, I don't watch much TV at the moment so I have no idea what happened to Deep Spaces One through Eight, just for instance. Were they a miniseries or something? And X-Files -- I never even tried. I know that it has something to do with the FBI and a lot of goeey, unpleasant people, but that could describe so many things these days. And all the science fiction movies that come and go -- well, they may start OUT as unique, well-crafted ideas (like the sort of work nominated for this year's Hugos, he said parenthetically) but by the time it comes out the other end of the Hollywood fun factory, it always seems to wind up as Bruce Willis in a space suit saying "I'm too old for this shit."

Speaking of that immortal phrase and situations that might cause a person to utter it, one of the main reasons that I'm struggling to keep up with the current SF world is because my wife Deborah Beale and I made the curious decision to produce children of our own (instead of merely making appropriate noises at other people's offspring.) Not only has this moved me right out of the active center of the gene pool and onto life's hard poolside bleachers, where I sit glumly watching everyone else play evolutionary Marco Polo, but life in the continuous shrieking madness of a house occupied by children has also left me pretty much incapable of following any storyline more complicated than "Elmo's Alphabet Jungle." Which reminds me: Neal Stephenson, just for one, really needs to develop a friendly little furry narrator who will step in from time to time and help me out with unfamiliar technology and some of the longer words. Actually, by that standard, Greg Egan and C. J. Cherryh could use more Muppets, too.

Really, the key metaphor for what parenting does to a person's life comes from another SF thing, although on the filmic side rather than the literary -- namely, the movie ALIEN. NOT just the process of pregnancy and birth, although I doubt there's a woman in the industrialized world who's carried to term without thinking at least once or twice about John Hurt and HIS little rideshare, but it's AFTER the arrival of your children that you really get into Ridley Scott/James Cameron territory, with frightening numbers of snappish, incredibly elusive monsters racing through the heating ducts and dripping acid on everything. At least that's how it goes in OUR house.

In any case, the fact is, I spent a lot of time worrying about this discontinuity while preparing for the convention and this ceremony, and wondering what happened? Okay, it's not entirely my fault I'm out of touch with the field -- SF Fandom has a thoughtless habit of holding many WorldCons in places I don't live, for one thing. But I don't think I'm the only one going through these kinds of changes, either. A quick look at the LOCUS poll confirms that the average age of science fiction readers is now 93 and rising, which explains the welter of new anthologies in our field with titles like "Dangerous Night Vision", and "There Will Be Naps." Soon we'll be seeing books about generation

ships that have given up on their colonization mission and instead are just cruising along very slowly in the faster-than-light lanes of the Crab Nebula, with one turn indicator blinking, blinking, blinking...

In fact, I've heard that even Kim Stanley Robinson has jumped on this gerontotechnological trend and is publishing another trilogy, this series bearing the titles Mars is Cranky, Planet of Assisted Living, and For God's Sake, Enough with the Terraforming, People are trying to Sleep.

(PAUSE)

I was first asked to do this Toastmaster gig a long time ago -- so long ago that I've conveniently forgotten the guilty parties who asked me, so there's no point in the rest of you looking around for tar and feathers. When I started thinking then about what I'd say here tonight, my thoughts were along the lines of, "Well, THAT'S bloody typical. Somebody else is going to get the 2001 Hugo Ceremony and have a ready-made set of SF community references to play with -- monoliths, Strauss waltzes, bone-flinging apes -- and what do I get? The year after." I toyed with some ideas about other disappointing dates -- 1493, the year that Columbus's younger brother discovered Schenectady, 1777, when Jefferson finished up a final version of the Declaration of Independence that proclaimed the new government would end slavery and extend equal rights to women, only to find that the other delegates had already gone home, that kind of thing. But such low-key silliness was not to be. Because, to make a sudden, dizzying lurch into real things that matter, 2001 won't be remembered quite the way Sir Arthur's readers expected or hoped, and the question of what we care about and where science fiction fits into it all has become a bit different.

It wasn't merely the murderous attacks on New York and Washington, that War-of-the-Worlds, it-can't-be true horror, that soured the end of 2001, although you can't get much worse than that. But the audible pop we had heard sometime the year before turned to be the complete bursting of the dot-com bubble, and that had a huge effect as well, creating economic fall-out which has put thousands upon thousands of people out of work -- something we here in Silicon Valley know as well as anyone else in America. So suddenly in 2002 I find myself asking not just does science fiction matter to me -- but does it matter at all?

One person can't answer that question for everybody else in the field, of course, and even if one person could, I'm probably not the person and this isn't the time-slot. (In fact, I can already hear the impatient heavy breathing of all those high-rollers who've got big money bets riding on the results of the Best Editor Hugo.) But just as all writers ultimately have to write for themselves and people LIKE themselves instead of toward some nebulous concept like an "audience", I can at least answer that question for myself.

The first time science fiction really seized me -- not counting the unsavory crush I had on the Aqua Marina puppet from "StingRay" -- was probably when I was about eight or so and was given a copy of Ray Bradbury's THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, that wonderful collection of stories about human colonization of Mars. It's probably a significant indicator of why I became more of a fantasy writer than a straight SF writer -- well, that and my bizarrely low SAT scores in Math -- that although I loved those stories to distraction, they didn't so much make me consider flying to Mars and think "How can human beings accomplish all that?" as make me wonder "How can human beings DREAM all that?" It was the way Bradbury talked about so many things while still telling a good story. It was the sadness of the last Martians, the fabulous silvery Martian deserts and the silent sandboats that Bradbury created and which I knew would live forever in my head. It was the way that while he was writing about Martians the author made me think about what human beings should and shouldn't be. No, not what they should be -- what they COULD be. The fact is, I have never recovered from that moment. Others in this room no doubt trace their own SF epiphanies back to many different sources, but I'm willing to bet that whether it was Madeleine L'Engle who first grabbed you or Robert Heinlein or Andre Norton, the net result was much the same.

And, ultimately, this wondering about WHAT COULD BE is what we people in science fiction give back to the world. To cite a famous SF community story, it's not so important to pay BACK those who have helped and inspired us, but rather to pay forward to others. We try to do this in the small ways of giving advice and sharing connections and just making time, which is a large part of why science fiction is a wonderful and friendly community to join, but I think we also give back to the world at large, although that fact is not always recognized. We people of science fiction don't just pay forward, we DREAM forward -- we help to create an almost quantum complexity of possibilities, good, bad, funny, sad -- so that people can imagine futures more hopeful than just increased kill-efficiency ratios in military planning or a wish-list of improvements in targeted advertising, futures more inviting than a straightline extrapolation of present-day foolishness and

tragedy. We think, we guess, we plot (and yes, sometimes we invent minor characters just so we can kill them off at need), but mostly we dream forward. We help to invent not just a single approved future, but, because we are NOT led or directed, because like cellular automata -- if cellular automata tended to be fond of cats, chocolate, and making fun of William Shatner -- we are each one of us pursuing our own weird needs and interests. Together, though, we manage to create something large and beautiful, a matrix of ways to ponder the shape of things to come and to reconsider things that have already been. We invent a million different futures and pasts, and here's the most wonderful secret about what we do: they are none of them real, but they are all true.

Tonight we're going to be handing out that rocket-shaped thing, the Hugo Award, to some of those we think have been especially skillful at imagining these futures and pasts. I truly believe we can at the same time tell ourselves that in a world still so grim and frightening, we ARE doing something to make it at least a little better. Because if you can't imagine a better world, you can't change this one.

So here we are. It's now 2002. 2001 didn't turn out quite like we expected, but on the other hand, neither did 1984, so you win some, you lose some. Besides, every now and then it's nice to get dressed up, huh? That's another good thing about the Hugo Awards Ceremony -- it forces most of us to wear something other than a software expo giveaway t-shirt at least one night in the year.

As for me, I do love science fiction, I really, really do, and I promise to do a better job of staying in touch. I fully intend to participate in any future futures -- so please keep me on the mailing list.

Thank you.

Tad Williams, 2002

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