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First, let's talk a little about "steampunk." How would you define the term, and especially how your works fit into the genre? What do you make of the current craze of non-literary steampunk "lifestyle--" costumes, conventions, etc?

This is a complicated question, but I'll give it a shot. I'm not crazy about defining the term at all closely. Definitions are best left to reviewers and critics; writers shouldn't have anything to do with them. Most Steampunk is Victorian, but if that were a requirement, then Tim Powers's early novels don't qualify. *The Anubis Gates*, which is pre-Victorian (George III, if I'm not mistaken) is obviously a seminal Steampunk novel and one of the best ever written. His recent *Hide Me Among the Graves* is Victorian, but there aren't many Steampunk trappings in it, and he certainly didn't write it with the idea that he was producing Steampunk. Definitions seem to me to be immaterial at best. With apologies to a number of contemporary writers, I can't quite say how *The Aylesford Skull* fits into the genre, because I don't read very much contemporary science fiction and fantasy. I'm not anxious to know anything about requisite genre contrivances. That being said, I've always been a fan of dirigibles. I remember very clearly my mother and I walking several blocks from our home in Lakewood, California, to look at a Goodyear blimp when I was four or five years old. I grew up dreaming about that blimp. It's not surprising that my first Steampunk novel (written years before K.W. Jeter coined the term) featured a dirigible. I put it in there because the story wanted a dirigible and because I wanted a dirigible. Along those same lines, my father kept a small keg on his workbench at home that was full of all manner of small metallic and wooden pieces of this and that, which he pitched into the keg instead of into the trash. As a child I spent a heap of time sorting through it, picking out clock gears and other likely looking oddments, sorting them, and arranging and rearranging them on the bench top. There was no purpose in it. I simply liked the look of a gear. Clockwork somethings were bound to find their way into my stories. I find that it's impossible for me to write anything if I'm wondering what the audience wants or expects, and so for the sake of my writing I can't think in terms of genre expectations. It's also impossible for me to write without loading up the story with the things that I want, including dirigibles, gears, fog-shrouded streets, squids, leaf-like fish and other magical things. I hope that makes sense. One last thing in that regard: reviewers often refer to my

novel *The Digging Leviathan* as Steampunk, or as having Steampunk “tropes” or a Steampunk attitude. In fact it’s set in the Los Angeles of the late 1950s, or at least an imagined Los Angeles. Reviewers seem to be saying the same thing about my novel *Zeuglodon*, which is set in northern California in what seems to be the same out-of-time world in which *The Digging Leviathan* is set. Readers with a fixed idea of Steampunk might be slightly mystified, I think, if they were to read those two books after reading such a review. Perhaps it’s enough to say that they have Steampunk “sensibilities.” I like that very well, because it’s sufficiently foggy, and it inflates the definition of Steampunk to the point at which the term threatens to lose its shape entirely. As for the non-literary Steampunk lifestyle, I love it. I marvel at the whole lot of it. I’m far too introverted to wear costumes, although I wore an Edwardian tuxedo on my wedding day (or so it was described by the rental company). I’m a big fan of Steampunk jewelry. I buy into so-called Steampunk philosophy. Also, I’m attracted to the idea that Steampunk aficionados aren’t merely being theatrical, but that they’re in fact creating a Steampunk world within our own world in which they can exist. I wonder whether the Steampunk craze will reach some kind of critical mass, and such a thing will come true: one day we’ll walk out the front door and there’ll be a dirigible hovering overhead and someone wearing a beaver hat tootling past on a steam-driven octopus velocipede. I’d open a bottle of champagne.

After several novels set in modern-day California, you've recently revisited Victorian England with a flurry of stories, novellas, and books featuring Langdon St. Ives and crew. Were these tales always brewing, or did you wake up one day and think, "I really miss Jack Owlesby?"

They were always brewing, actually. I intended to write more Victoriana, and I’ve never stopped reading it. I had of course written *The Digging Leviathan*, a southern California book, before I wrote *Homunculus*, and then I went back to California for *Land of Dreams* and *The Last Coin*. So I’ve been fairly thoroughly mired in California all along, which isn’t surprising, since I grew up here and love the place despite overpopulation and the rise of the hideous shopping mall culture. (I drive past shopping malls with my eyes closed, other drivers swerving out of the way, shouting at me.) Anyway, in the late 1980s I got caught up in writing novels set in California, and didn’t surface for a long time, literarily speaking. My brother-in-law, some time in the early part of this century gave me a copy of James Norman Hall’s *Doctor Dogbody’s Leg*, tall tales set during the Napoleonic wars. I

found myself reading and rereading the stories, and it occurred to me that I was hankering to write more Victoriana. What resulted was a short novel titled “The Ebb Tide” (title stolen from Stevenson) that was published by Subterranean Press. That was the first of what is turning out to be a sort of series, and it led in time to other short novels – novelinis – including “The Affair of the Chalk Cliffs,” the recently completed “The Pagan Goddess,” and also to the much lengthier *The Aylesford Skull*. I’ve got another Steampunk novel in the works. *Doctor Dogbody’s Leg* turned out to be a sort of infection.

*The Aylesford Skull* is a great Dickensian tangle of mystery, romance, revenge drama, ghost story, and rip-roaring adventure. How did the plot emerge from all its various influences? The dark story at the heart of the novel--Dr. Narbondo's fiendish plot to use the skull of his murdered (by him) brother as a sort of doorway to the afterlife, and beyond--depends heavily on backstory. How much of this have you always known, and how much was developed for *Aylesford*?

Virtually all of it was invented for *The Aylesford Skull*, which meant a heap of research and the synthesis and paring away of the impossible amount of stuff that came from the research. The one thing that had been waiting in my mind was the idea of the lamps. I’ve long been a fan of Japanese (or Chinese) magic mirrors, and I’d had a strange, plotted, luminous dream about a magic mirror-type lamp that cast mysterious, signifying images on the wall of an old house. I’m probably not done with lamps. Also, for years I’ve been fascinated and generally creeped out by Auden’s poem “As I Walked Out One Evening,” especially...

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,  
The desert sighs in the bed,  
And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead.

I’m probably not done with lanes to the land of the dead, either (which of us are?) which I meddled with in a couple of short stories a few years back: “Home Before Dark” and “Small Houses.” (Sorry for the sudden morbid fit. I’ll try to chat about unicorns in the next question.)

'Somehow, I find the characters and situations in *The Aylesford Skull* less, for want of a better term, zany than what we see in books like *The Paper*

*Grail*, *The Last Coin*, and *All the Bells on Earth* (which, by the way, has permanently ruined "I Saw Three Ships" for me, thank you very much.). How do they compare in your mind--are they all part of one strange continuum, or is there just a certain level of disbelief we're better able to suspend when the setting is so obviously not our everyday world? (And did I actually ask you a question?)

There's a question in there somewhere, which, alas, doesn't call for a discussion of unicorns. The books seem to me to be part of one strange continuum, and in fact *The Digging Leviathan*, *The Paper Grail*, the St. Ives books, and *Zeuglodon* seem to be literally connected. The more connections that develop, the happier I am, although most readers, I think, wouldn't necessarily see the connections. As the plot of *The Aylesford Skull* slowly came into focus, I became convinced that zaniness had to abdicate. The problems that the principal characters faced were ruinous in too many ways. Failure would lead to some variety of emotional/spiritual death, from which there'd be no recovery. Zaniness of any variety would simply have been wrong. "The Pagan Goddess," my most recent endeavor, is a different variety of thing. I'd be happy if people found it amusing, despite the severed heads and the bloody piracy and the dead cow.

Let's talk a bit about your work with young writers. You're currently the director of the Creative Writing Conservatory at the Orange County High School of the Arts. As a writer, what's that like?

I've been a teacher for almost exactly as long as I've been a professional writer. I started teaching composition at a local community college right about the time that I sold "Red Planet" to *Unearth* magazine. So I've always worn two hats, so to speak. In 2001 I was hired to put together the Creative Writing Conservatory for the Orange County High School of the Arts (now more simply the Orange County School of the Arts, or OCSA). I talked the boss into hiring Tim Powers as a consultant, and the two of us created a curriculum. I hired teachers and we opened with 40 students who spent three hours after school every day reading and writing. Tim stayed on to teach poetry and novel writing. I agreed to teach short story writing and to direct the conservatory. We're both still there after twelve years. Tim drives an hour each way to work. We've got ten teachers in the conservatory, all of them publishing writers as well as teachers, and 160 students from four local counties who audition to get in. Last year the

school accepted just about 400 new students out of nearly 4,000 applicants. Most of the students are considerably smarter than I am, although I pretend otherwise. Not long ago a student asked me, “Which translation of Proust do you prefer?” “The good one,” I replied, and then pretended that my cell phone was vibrating and that I had to take the call. The students tend to go off to Harvard and Berkeley and Stanford and other high-flying universities. Many begin publishing while they’re students at the high school. It’s really extraordinary. There’s a lot of debate over whether people can be taught to write, with something to be said for arguments on both sides. One thing I know, however, is that if we can encourage the natural enthusiasm of young readers and writers, they’ll continue to read and write, and the more they read and write, the better writers they’ll become. That’s enough for me. The whole thing has been an exceptionally cool experience.

Thanks! Jim Blaylock