

Fantasy Book Addict Interview

1. It's been twenty years since you wrote a steampunk novel. What brought your interest back to the genre?

I never actually lost my interest in the genre, or at least I didn't lose my interest in Victorian literature in general, which I've read since I first became a reader. What happened was that I got caught up in writing novels and short stories set in California, where I've lived my entire life. There's a heap of difference between writing a novel that's set in a place you're familiar with and writing a novel set in a place that you're not familiar with. The difference isn't only a matter of the research that's necessary to write about exotic places (and London is particularly exotic to a guy who grew up in Anaheim, California); the difference is that my heart is in California, so to speak, and I seem to have a tendency to want to write about the things that I love and know, and the things that I've actually seen and experienced. The joy I take in writing Steampunk is another variety of thing. That being said, after years of being away from Victorian London I had a hankering to revisit old imaginary haunts, and I found myself writing Steampunk again and enjoying it immensely, partly because (to my mind) I'm better at writing it now and I know more about it.

2. When you're not writing award winning novels, what types of books do you like to read? Why?

Right now I'm rereading *The Pickwick Papers* (I seem to come back to Dickens and Conan Doyle on a regular basis) and also I'm once again working through Patrick O'Brian's books – all of them, stories and novels. I virtually always have a crime novel close at hand, especially when I travel. I'm big of Dick Francis, John D. MacDonald, and James Lee Burke. Currently I'm reading as much Michael Connelly as I can get my hands on, but I'm perilously

close to having read them all. I'm a fan of mystery and suspense (as my own stories and novels reveal) and I'm a fan of the language of Victorian writers, especially Dickens, but also of Patrick O'Brian, who of course was not Victorian but who managed to write with a distinctly historical tone while still appealing to a modern ear. (If I were a cartoonist I'd attempt to draw a picture of the modern ear.)

3. You've been called one of the founding fathers of steampunk. I know you've influenced tons of authors, but do you have a favorite author or one whose work has influenced you?

In the days when I was exceedingly impressionable as a reader – when I was a child and adolescent – I was heavily influenced by Wells, Verne, Conan Doyle, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. I loved the colorful, exotic quality of the stuff – the hollow earth, the mechanical moles and gunpowder rockets and fishy submarines. I was also steamrolled by Twain and Steinbeck, again for the color and storytelling, but also for the language. When I first read Steinbeck at 10, I desperately wanted to write like that. I'd traveled with my family to many of the places he wrote about, and I could see that he had made them in some sense magical and luminous. I wanted to do that, too. I still do. Steinbeck and Twain were the prime movers.

4. Do you have any writing rituals? Do you prefer to write during the day or at night?

Back in the old days, when I was regularly teaching until 10 at night, I'd get home so wired on thought and talk that I'd write till one or two in the morning, sitting on the front porch if the weather was good. There was a particular bird that would start cheeping around one, which would alert me to the time, and I'd start looking

to close things down. Also, I noticed that once the dew started to fall, snails would come out onto the lawn, trooping out of the bird of paradise plants, and would slowly increase in numbers. I used this as a fairly accurate snail clock. I really enjoyed the nighttime quiet and the animal activity – the possums coming past, the cats out and about, the occasional raccoon. Then I shifted to a morning teaching schedule and things changed. I get up at 5 to work, although I find that I'm most creative and focused between 2 and 6 in the afternoon. (What's with that, I wonder. Biorhythms?) For a long time I was convinced that I'd write better if I ate doughnuts in the morning and used a Flair pen – turquoise or green, preferably. I had to give up the doughnuts for the most part, and pens were long ago traded out for a keyboard.

5. I believe your book, *The Aylesford Skull*, will appeal to Victorian era historical fans as well as pirate fantasy and steampunk. Can you tell our readers a bit more about the book?

Sure, although not a lot, because the plot has some surprises in it, and I'm not fond of spoilers. The main character, Professor Langdon St. Ives (featured in other novels, novellas, and stories that I've written over the past 35 years) has semi-retired from adventuring and is a gentleman farmer, growing hops in Aylesford, Kent. Loathsome crimes occur in the area, however, and he begins to suspect that his old nemesis, Doctor Narbondo, is up to something. His new, comfortable life shortly flies apart, and he and a cast of characters become embroiled in personal and world-threatening conflicts involving river pirates, dirigibles, grave robbery, magically altered skulls, kidnappings, swamps, Neolithic coal, paranormal chicanery, and so forth.

6. How would you describe Professor Langdon St. Ives?

Langdon St. Ives (married to the stalwart Alice, two children) is a confirmed husband and family man and also a confirmed scientist/explorer/adventurer with a penchant for investigating crimes. These two sides of him are often at odds, which gets him into trouble on the home front and also in exotic places. He's a little too given over to guilt because of all this, and he sometimes thinks that he'd be happy to live a more placid existence, but honor and a recurring passion for adventure compel him to throw himself into dangerous situations, which quickly become more than mere situations. Like I said, he's figured in my stories and novels for 35 years now, and I suppose I'd say that he has developed as I've developed. Like all writers, I find myself standing on the shoulders of giants like Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson.

7. Can you tell us about one of your favorite scenes to write?

I had a lot of fun writing *The Aylesford Skull* (which I hope translates to fun for the reader) and there are a heap of scenes that were a pure pleasure to write. I'm fond of Chapter 4, in which Alice goes fishing. I'm also fond of Chapter 13 in which Mother Laswell is walking across London Bridge, caught up in life-altering worries, perhaps heading toward her doom. By the time I wrote that chapter (and during the writing of it) Mother Laswell, who had begun in my mind as a slightly peripheral character, was rapidly becoming one of my favorites. She clearly wasn't satisfied to remain small in any sense of the word. I love it when that happens – when a character comes into focus, and you see that she (or he) is much larger than you had thought, and much more interesting and authentic, and that they'll quite possibly occupy a place in your mind and imagination forever. That's the sort of writerly discovery that makes a writer happy to be at work. I once saw a drawing of Dickens asleep at his desk, with a dozen of his best characters around his head, figuring into his dreams. Some of my characters figure into my dreams, you might say, and Mother

Laswell became one of them in *The Aylesford Skull*. No gunfights or explosions in that part of the chapter, but some of my favorite writing.

8. If you could have dinner, coffee, or drinks with one of your characters, who would you choose and where would you go?

Given that it would be too unnerving to come face to face with most of my male protagonists, who often have too many of my own traits, faults, and eccentricities for me to be comfortable talking to them, I think I'd choose to drink coffee in Alice St. Ives's greenhouse while the two of us were repotting begonias. I'd also like to drink a glass of sherry on Hereafter Farm with Mother Laswell. I find the place both attractive and weird (a compelling combination); I'd be hoping for an invitation to stay for a week or two.

Thanks! Jim Blaylock