

Steampunk Interview for the SFWA Bulletin with Nancy Holder

When you were writing novels such as HOMUNCULUS, what were you seeing in your head? What inspired it How did you transfer that to the page? Did you have a special voice or vocabulary you consciously used?

I was inspired to write *Homunculus* via a love for Victorian literature that I picked up at the university. After I graduated (and suddenly had time to read what I wanted to read) I read a heap of Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson and reread all of Conan Doyle, much of Wells and Verne, much of Burroughs. I loved the language and the colorful trappings of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and the mechanical-mole science of Burroughs. My early steampunk stories and novels was a sort of amalgam of those writers. *Homunculus* was particularly a product of my reading and rereading *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and also Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*. Essentially, that's where and when I wanted to live (literarily speaking), and *Homunculus* was intended to be a novel as Blaylock might have written it if he were writing in 1885. As for the language of the novel, I was simply inundated by the language of the books I was reading, and it was second nature to me to shoot from the hip when it came to the language. That being said, whereas today I'm much more careful, technically speaking (looking out for anachronisms, say, among many other things) in those days I wasn't quite so careful, and often switched on the language ray-gun and hosed things down – one of the dangers of giddy inspiration, I suppose.

How would you define the steampunk genre? How has that definition changed since its early days?

For me the definition hasn't changed at all. I've always written just what I wanted to write in the way that I've wanted to write it. I'm not at all tempted to rethink my steampunk sensibilities in accordance with popular thinking. (On the other hand, I'm

tremendously happy that there is “popular thinking” in that regard.) In fact, I’m unhappy with definitions of any sort when it comes to writing. Definitions are tremendously useful when one is writing about writing. Suggesting that this or that is an example of minimalism, say, or metafiction or post-modernism or steampunk is a slick and simple way for a reviewer or critic to launch into a discussion of a writer’s work. In that regard it’s lazy. Worse, it can imply that a writer’s work is stereotypic. I often see steampunk categorized as dystopian fiction, for example, and often enough it is, but there’s no good reason that it should be. I’ve heard people insist that there must be steam involved, but that’s nonsense. People insist that the story must take place during Victoria’s reign, but that leaves out, say, *The Anubis Gates*, and most of Conan Doyle – one of my great inspirations – who arguably came into his own as an Edwardian rather than a Victorian, despite when he first began to publish. Wells, too, etc. Definitions are by definition exclusive rather than inclusive, which can be a detriment to one’s writing. For me, the great attraction of steampunk is that it allows for science and settings that are largely imaginary – space travel by gunpowder-driven engines, water-filled canals on Mars, lost cities in as yet unexplored mountains and jungles, backyard scientists pottering aboard oxygenation greenhouses in home-built spacecraft, etc. Also, it has the virtue of allowing for a language that’s richer than contemporary English. (I’ll suggest that steampunk *must* have that language in some incarnation.) And of course there’s an open invitation to work in an octopus or a squid, which certainly elevates any work of fiction.

What trends have you noticed taking hold within current steampunk literature?

Sorry to say that until recently I didn’t read much current steampunk literature. Now that I’m wrapping up a year as a judge for the World Fantasy Awards, however, I’m pleased to say that I *have* read some. I’m happy to see that there are good writers out there making steampunk their own. I’m not as

encouraged to see books that seem to be conforming to trends and definitions, full of trappings that might have been cobbled together from a list of okay or necessary steampunk gimmicks and goodies and with little indication that the writer has read any actual Victorian literature. That being said, earlier-on I wrote that I wasn't interested in rethinking my own steampunk sensibilities in accordance with someone else's, or in accordance with what's popular. I'd be a hypocrite if I suggested that anyone rethink their work in accordance with my sensibilities. I'm happy to write what I write, and I'm particularly happy when other writers are happily writing what they write.

In what ways would you like to see steampunk evolving in the future? Where can it go that it hasn't yet gone?

I'm at a loss here. Boaters instead of top hats? Goggles on the soles of our shoes? Steampunk might simply become more visible and endemic in the culture, or it might fade. If it evolves very much (it seems to me) it'll become something other than steampunk, in which case I'll once again be creating literary antiques and curiosities, as I was endeavoring to do when I wrote *Homunculus*. The nice thing about writing fiction is that it doesn't have to go where it hasn't gone yet. In fact, it's quite possible that there is no such place. I think that it was James Baldwin who said that the writer's duty was to "make it new" in the light of his or her particular way of seeing the world. No one sees the world in quite the way that Tim Powers sees it, for example, nor ever will, and the world of Tim's stories and novels is characteristically his own, whether the stories are set in the future or in the past. (I might be guilty of evading that question, but perhaps that's because trends tend to disappear, and I'm having so much fun looking at what Steampunk is up to these days, in my own writing and in the world around me, that I'm hesitant to look too far ahead.)

What networking opportunities are most valuable for writers looking to get more involved within the steampunk literary

community and genre?

I'm not an authority here. Certainly there's a heap of steampunk stuff going on all around us: conventions and organizations, online stuff galore. New writers and aspiring writers might easily be encouraged by and glean useful information from becoming part of a community in that regard. The biggest chunk of their time, however, should be spent reading and writing. The only way to become a better writer is to do the work, and the work – reading and writing – is solitary.

What steampunk markets have appeared over the last few years that have grabbed your attention? Why?

Can't really answer this one.

How has fan participation/art influenced steampunk fiction for good or ill?

For the good, to my mind. The more participation, the bigger the Steampunk snowball (steamball snowpunk?) grows as it's rolling towards it's still murky future. Writers would be in trouble without fans. If fans create their own steampunk stuff, so much the better.