

This interview ran in thedamnedinterviews.com.

How do you feel your growing up in California has influenced your writing style? □ □

I don't believe that growing up in southern California has influenced my style of writing, but it has certainly influenced the way I see the world and has led to my writing the kind of fantasy that I write. Southern California, especially Orange County, was once a supremely beautiful place, especially for an impressionable kid to grow up in (and many writers, I think, are "impressionable") -- orange, walnut, and avocado groves, strawberry fields, empty beaches, rocky coastlines crawling with every sort of local sea creature, plenty of camping in wooded canyons near home, etc. No one worried about my safety when I was 13 and riding my bike to the beach or up into the foothills to a regional park, or walking endless miles along railroad tracks looking for empty pop bottles. Gang violence was rare, graffiti, was rare, it was safe to hitchhike, and so forth. (Things weren't quite so idyllic if you were non-white, however, or if your politics made certain people unhappy. My 4th grade teacher, for example, who happened to be black, was forced to resign because of pressures from the local John Birch Society. My mother (a nurse) was fired from her volunteer job selling popcorn during lunch at my junior high school when it was discovered that one of her friends was a "known communist," which happened to be nonsense. My mother laughed out loud when she was fired. Unfortunately, right wing excesses in the county didn't always have to do with things as trivial as selling popcorn.) Anyway, I developed a deep and abiding love for the place. I saw the magic in it -- magic that's leaking out of it as it's being overbuilt, overpopulated, and generally turned into a place of shopping malls, chain stores, parking lots, etc. When I was a teenager, we drove to the beach, parked our car for free along the highway, threw our wetsuits and surfboards over the chain link fence, and climbed over. Now virtually the entirety of coastline is built up, and beach parking is 10 dollars. All of these sad changes give my work an underlying nostalgia. Also, my love of the place has meant that almost everything I write is fairly heavy with setting, because I'm caught up in what it is about the place that makes me see it as I see it, and I'm trying to capture that in my work. Setting, in other words, is fundamental to what I write. Reviewers have suggested that in that regard I'm a "regional" writer, and probably that's true in some sense. □

Why do you think so many authors do write about the regions in which they were raised?

Probably I covered this in the previous question, but I'll add a couple of things. The most obvious reason that writers set stories and novels in the places they've lived is that they know those places. They know the people who live and have lived in those places. They have a feel for the atmosphere of the place. All of that makes it to some degree simpler to write. On the other hand, the writer has to hope he or she is good enough to translate that atmosphere into words, which isn't all that easy. Also, I am who I am largely because of where and how I grew up, where I raised my children, etc. My stories and novels often have a great deal to do with who I am, how I understand the world that I'm familiar with, and that's no doubt true for other writers as well. I'd write differently, I think, if, say, I'd grown up in Denmark or had been an army brat moving from place to place.

What were you like as a kid?

I was bookish, spent countless hours reading in my bedroom, read the books in my mother's library (Steinbeck, Conan Doyle, Poe, Hemingway, Mark Twain... I remember, weirdly, reading *Mrs. Astor's Horse* and *Ivanhoe* when I was around 11 years old. My sister, a year and a half older than me, was wading through all of Scott's Waverly novels, but I didn't have the patience. I routinely read her Walter Farley books, however; I was a big *Black Stallion* fan. I spent heaps of time hanging around in orange groves. I was probably 5 or 6 when I figured out that I could come fairly close to telling what time it was when the afternoon onshore winds started up and from where the sun would be hanging in the sky in summer or winter -- how much time was left to me before I had to be home. There was a sense of freedom in that that's hard to explain. I was guilty of climbing into orange trees, finding a comfortable branch, and reading a book. I was also guilty of running like hell if the owner of the grove wandered out with a shotgun loaded with rock salt. I rode my bicycle everywhere -- miles up and back with my friends for no reason at all -- and now and then got into trouble: arrested in the first grade, for example, for breaking into the "abandoned" farmhouse in a nearby grove. The neighborhood was full of guys my age, and it was generally always a good idea to climb out the window in the middle of the night and horse around the neighborhood. That being said, I was also introverted, afraid of any display of emotion, and unwilling to get into real trouble, although I learned early to run like crazy when someone shouted, "Hey you kids!" or "Stop right there!" When a friend of mine filled

a gallon jar with gasoline, crammed a soaked rag in the top, and got the fine idea of going over to the schoolyard, lighting it, and throwing it, I declined to accompany him. And I hated fighting, which made me kind of a wimp, since many of my friends liked nothing better. I played baseball and was crazy for the beach. I was a king-hell collector of tropical fish, and had a part time job for years in a pet store taking care of forty or fifty aquariums. In those days I knew the genus and species of most aquarium fish available in southern California, and I read Sterba's *Freshwater Fishes of the World* for fun. I put countless miles on my bicycle and then on my car searching out rare species in tropical fish stores, driving into Long Beach, for example, to take a look at an electric catfish or freshwater stingrays. I still miss having the leisure to carry on like that, and I'm wondering whether, when I retire, I can redevelop my interest in tropical fish (and begonias, another of my youthful passions). □

Why do you think you first developed your love of words? □ □

I'm virtually certain that a lot of it was genetic. I had a passel of immensely literate great aunts and aunts, and my mother was a literary type. Also, my mother hauled me down to the local library on Tuesday afternoons so that I could bring books home -- usually Jules Verne, Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Howard Pease, who wrote top notch seafaring books. Both of my sons can write. One of them has a degree in literature and the other in communication studies. It seems to run in the family to some extent, or maybe books run in the family, and that leads to an interest in words. When I was ten or so I wrote countless opening paragraphs that mimicked Steinbeck or Twain, just because I loved the gaudier aspects of their language.

How do you feel about being credited as being a pioneer in steampunk? □ □

It feels interesting – very nice when I think about it, although I have to admit that I don't think about it much. When I write it (which I still do, happily) I don't think about it at all. I have no desire to be influenced by what steampunk has become. It also feels a little bit fraudulent to be called the "grandfather" of steampunk. It's true that my story "The Ape-Box Affair" is arguably the first domestic steampunk story to see print, but K. W. Jeter and Tim Powers were both writing it, too. K. W.'s *Morlock Night* was being written, or perhaps was already written, before my story came out. Being a

novel, however, *Morlock Night* simply took longer to publish. So I'm happy for the attention, but in fact I share the credit with Tim and K. W. □ □

Why do you think you prefer to write about things in more modern times as opposed to the traditional otherworldliness of fantasy? □ □

My first two novels were more classic fantasy in that sense -- set in a made up land, although that land bore a relationship to back country in southern and northern California. Also, I got character names and place names by shutting my eyes and pointing to a map of England. Somewhere along the line, however, I became much more attracted to authentic places -- places that I loved and that I understood. I don't read a lot of traditional fantasy, with the exception of books that look a little bit antique now -- William Hope Hodgson, Lovecraft. I was crazy about *The Lord of the Rings* when I read it 40 years ago, and I still reread it from time to time. I enjoy reading Alan Garner, although there's nothing "traditional" about anything he writes. I guess I'll say that I was never particularly attracted to writing traditional fantasy or to reading it. □

Do you enjoy the classic myths and legends? If so do you have a particular favorite? □ □

I'm big on legends, a big fan of Sabine Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*. I've borrowed from it a lot. I'm a fan of myths, too, the Icarus myth being my favorite, because it has largely to do with a father who encourages his son to fly despite the dangers, which leads to the death of his son. Makes a person think, especially a father, although the thinking doesn't lead to easy answers, which is good. I'm not fond of literature written to supply answers. Myths supply a lot of mysteries, which I'm happier with. □ □

Do you enjoy being able to write stories that offer a form of escape for your readers? □ □

Yes. I myself read for escape (whatever that means; it's a trashcan of a word). I'm "escaping" if I'm reading a crime novel or a literary autobiography or a novel by Proust. I once picked up a book that explained the nature of calculus. There was no real math in it, just a clear explanation of what it did and how it worked. That was an escape. All reading that one is not forced to do is a form of escape.

Do you remember what was running through your mind when you sold your first work? □ □

I was crazy happy. My first short story netted me 20 bucks. I still have a photocopy of the check somewhere. Holding a copy of my first novel was a thrill. Still is a thrill to sell a book and to see it in print, although it's lost some of its glory by now. It's true, however, that the thrill evaporates fairly quickly, because by then you're writing something new, and it's taking all your efforts, and your hopes and fears are pinned on the new thing, the old thing already receding into the past. □ □

You also write short stories. Do you find those easier to pen than the novels? Which do you prefer to write most? □ □

Short stories are easier only because they're shorter. Also, they don't require the months that it takes me to come up with the stuff of a novel. If I have a notion for a short story -- a concept, say -- as soon as I know what kind of character would best carry out that concept, I can get started. Several years ago, for instance, my wife told me that I was the only person she knew who took the weather personally. I immediately knew there was a story in it. And I knew that the main character would share a lot of my sensibilities, and that there was no reason to leave my own neighborhood when it came to setting. I loafed around for a time before I wrote the story, but once I got going on it I had most of it down in a couple of weeks. If I had to spin it into a novel, it would take me a couple of years.

What did feel like to win the World Fantasy Award? □ □

Wonderful. I was literally speechless. I went up to the microphone to accept it and could do nothing but croak. Now I've got two of those busts of Lovecraft, and I'm as fond of them today as when I won them.

Do you still teach Creative Writing at Chapman University and direct the Creative Writing Conservatory for the Orange County High School of the Arts? What led you to become a teacher? □ □

Yes, I do both those things. Teaching -- hanging around a university campus -- became attractive to me when I was a sophomore or a junior, and even more attractive when I was a graduate student. My lit degree made teaching an immediately sensible job. When I graduated, however, I was working a construction job, and, in the following couple of years, I became a carpenter. I grabbed teaching jobs at the local community college in the

evening in order to boost my income. I soon became aware that carpentry appealed to me only as a hobby, and so I taught more and carpentered less, until I was teaching here and there, working in writing labs, etc. About 20 years ago I applied at the university in my neighborhood, got hired, and am still there, walking to work in the morning. Ten or so years ago I had the opportunity to develop a creative writing program for the Orange County High School of the Arts, to hire teachers, etc. My first hire was Tim Powers, who's still there and who helped plan the program. The CW Conservatory has gotten large -- 160 students and 10 faculty -- and is an absolutely dynamite place to work. Teachers at most high schools think I'm kidding when I reveal that students leaving class routinely say "thanks" or wish me well, and that students can be found reading poetry at lunch, and that Big Issues have to do with chewing gum (an issue easily solved last year by the Principal, who simply declared that it was okay to chew gum). No fighting, virtually no drugs or alcohol. None of the problems that plague most schools. I'm lucky in that I'm allowed two assistant directors who in fact do most of the work, and that my teachers have been there so long now that they really don't need for me to be around at all. Anyway, I discovered that I love to teach and that I do an okay job with it, or so my students seem to think.

As a teacher what do you think is the most important thing for an aspiring writer to learn?

Given that they've got some talent and sense of the craft and are literate, the most valuable thing is perseverance. It takes a long time to get where you're going, and most writers begin writing well enough to publish when they're older. 15-year-old violin prodigies are common; 15-year-old writing prodigies are not. Writing students are simply too impatient. They don't think in terms of the long haul, the work meanwhile being its own reward. I blame that on our culture of instant celebrity -- very different than when I was starting out.

What was it like to work with Tim Powers and K.W Jeter? Do you find it a nice change of pace to work alongside your friends?

It was wonderful, because it gave us an excuse to hang out. We could kill a long afternoon horsing around and call it research. We aided and abetted each other in that regard. I'm too busy to do that these days, although I'll still coerce Tim into eating a pizza now and then so that I can compel him to

help me out with plot problems. That doesn't happen often, and, like most writers, I work alone.

I heard you are also friends with Lewis Shiner? What is he like? Do you enjoy his work?

Lew and I have been friends for a long time. He's funny, loyal, tough, hip, and an all around great guy. My sons took to him instantly when they were kids, as did my wife, Viki. Unfortunately, he lives on the opposite coast, so I don't see him often enough. He's influenced my reading a great deal (as have a number of my friends) and my writing, and I don't hesitate to ask him to read a novel that I'm writing if he's up for it, which he usually is. He's a topnotch editor -- no mercy at all -- and almost always right on the money. Looks a little like a debonair Herman Munster.

Who are some of your favorite living authors?

Tim Powers and William Gibson. Lew Shiner. James Lee Burke. Alan Garner. Until they passed away recently, Tony Hillerman and Patrick O'Brian.

Is there one question during an interview have you never been asked, that you most wish someone would?

Sure: What do you think of tropical fish and begonias? Just kidding. I guess not.

What can your readers expect from *The Affair of the Chalk Cliffs*? When it is due to be released?

The bound proofs are already out, so the book should be out soon (it's the end of January as I write this). Readers, I hope, can expect to enjoy it. Seems to me to be the best steampunk thing I've written, but an author's opinion of his own work is often wrong, especially his most recent. I'm hoping, obviously, that readers will enjoy it.

Do any of the series that you have written speak to you more than the others?

That's a tough one, because I'm happy to have written all my books. My contemporary novels and short stories, set in California, however, have the most to do with me and with my life, and so that's where my heart is. Could be that steampunk is more fun to write, but that's a different thing.

Since you do write short stories, do you have any favorite short stories from other authors?

I'm crazy about James Norman Hall's collection titled *Doctor Dogbody's Leg*. I'm fond of the short stories of Patrick O'Brian. When I was younger I couldn't get enough of Twain and Steinbeck and Poe. I read and reread all of Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster stories. I'm crazy for some of Stevenson's short stories, especially "Markheim." Right now *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* is sitting on my desktop, and I've got to prevent myself from opening it so that I can get some work done. I'm a fan of Hemingway's stories. Because I teach literature I've got a long line of literary favorites, but I won't go into that. I might start talking like a teacher.

What do you hope your readers take away from your various works? □ □

I hope they're happy to have read them. I hope that when they look around at southern or northern California they see it a little bit differently, and that maybe they look for what it is about a place that makes it glow, so to speak. I hope they don't forget what they've read.

What projects are you currently working on aside from the Chalk Cliffs? □

I'm jump-starting a new steampunk novel, and I've got ideas for several other projects. The job that produces the paycheck, however, is the tail that wags the old dog of a writer. (Sorry) Thanks for listening. □