

Titan Books Interview

This is your first new steampunk novel in over twenty years. What brought you back to the genre?

Since I wrote my first Steampunk story I've enjoyed writing it, and I never consciously intended to stop writing it. Way goes on to way, as the poet said. Anyway, after the publication of "The Ape-box Affair" I wrote the stuff for many years (as did Tim Powers and K.W. Jeter) before K. W. coined the term in 1988. I continued to write it now and then for some years thereafter. My novel *The Last Coin*, published in the late 80s, reminded me how much I had enjoyed writing *The Digging Leviathan* several years earlier, both books being set in the southern California world I grew up in. I was compelled/inspired to write more California books, and so I drifted away from writing Steampunk. Many years later my brother-in-law gave me a collection of short stories titled *Dr. Dogbody's Leg*, by James Norman Hall, of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame. The stories were set during the Napoleonic wars, all of them starting out with a group of seafaring types sitting around a table in a comfortable inn, listening to Dr. Dogbody tell stories. I was crazy for the book, and still am, and I realized that I missed writing Steampunk. I wrote a novella – "The Ebb Tide" – which opened at an inn of my own inventing, with my characters sitting around a table, setting out to eat. It was my idea that the inn door would fly open and someone – a messenger, a wounded person, a man with a gun – would walk in, and they'd be off on an adventure, their food untouched. I sold it to Subterranean Press. I followed that with another novella of the same sort – "The Affair of the Chalk Cliffs" – and then was convinced by my agent to write a longer Steampunk novel, which turned out to be *The Aylesford Skull*. Just last week I finished a third companion novella for Subterranean – "The Pagan Goddess" – and I recently I wrote a Gaslamp fantasy for Ellen Datlow's *Queen Victoria's Book of Spells*. Somehow I've become a Steampunk writer again, and I'll no doubt go on writing it until I run out of steam. (Moderately lame joke.)

What was the inspiration behind Langdon St. Ives and Dr. Narbondo?

Langdon St. Ives came into my mind back in the mid 1970s when I wrote my first Steampunk story, "The Ape-box Affair." His coming to life as a character I attribute to two things: reading that I had done some fifteen years earlier, when I was ten or eleven years old, and reading that I was doing at

the time I wrote the story. The first adult book I ever read was *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, which I borrowed from my mother's library one day. I can't quite say what suddenly prompted me to read real books, but I recall that I very much liked the look of them and the smell of old paper. I was drawn particularly to books with black covers, with gold or red printing on the cover and spine, and with cool-looking frontispiece illustrations. The McClure, Phillips & Co. edition, 1905, scored high in all categories, and so that's the book I borrowed. I had no idea what "the return" referred to, because I'd never before heard of Sherlock Holmes. I got caught up in the stories, however, despite their being tough to read, particularly the foggy London backdrop, the pipe smoking and other small trappings, the evocative prose, and the exotic characters. Sherlock Holmes loomed large in my imagination ever after, and Langdon St. Ives owes Holmes a debt of gratitude.

When I was in my twenties I undertook to read all of Robert Louis Stevenson, including his letters, plays, ephemera, and anything else I could find. Tim Powers and I used to drive out to Acres of Books in Long Beach once a month or so in order to buy books. The store was vast – several large rooms and a number of small rooms – with only a nod at order. The ceilings were high, with overstock books far out of reach overhead. We soon figured out that no one had messed with those out-of-reach books for years, probably decades, and so when no one was paying attention, we'd climb a few rungs of the wooden cases and pull down likely looking volumes. I found scores of old hardcover books marked at 25 or 35 cents that way, including dusty old Stevenson books. I was a big fan of the stories in Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*, which featured a Holmes-like detective who is secretly the deposed Prince of Bohemia, Prince Florizel, living under the assumed name, Theophilus Goddall. His Watson-like sidekick is his trusted friend Colonel Geraldine. Along with the Stevenson books, I was binging on P.G. Wodehouse (on Tim good advice) and it came to me that I badly needed to write a story of my own set in Victorian London, featuring my own detective/scientist/explorer. The result was "The Ape-box Affair," which is infused with Wodehousian language and Stevensonian plot devices. When I wrote my novel *Homunculus* several years later, I borrowed Theophilus Goddall wholesale and simply made him a character. In *The Aylesford Skull* I borrowed Arthur Conan Doyle. As for Dr. Narbondo, the first appearance of Narbondo is in my short story "The Idol's Eye," published in the early 1980s. He appears as a stone idol in a Borneo jungle – a petrified human being, actually, with rubies for eyes. When I wrote *Homunculus* a year or two later, I made Narbondo a living, breathing evil

genius in London, at which point I decided that the earlier Narbondo must be a different Narbondo – this new Narbondo’s father, say. There’s evidence of that in *The Aylesford Skull*. In short, I was too fond of Narbondo to give him up.

Many of your books are set in Orange County. What aspects of this part of California lend itself to the fantasy genre?

I’m afraid that casual visitors to Orange County would see nothing fantastic in it. The coastline is still beautiful, but it’s overbuilt and mobbed with tourists and parking at the beach costs \$15.00. Most of the county is overpopulated suburban sprawl, with houses so unfortunately like each other in appearance and spirit that people driving home after having a couple of drinks can scarcely differentiate their house from the rest of the houses on the block. Much of the county has been disastrously uglified with strip malls and jumbo shopping malls and other sorts of depressing things. The Orange County that my father grew up in was an underpopulated rural garden of orange, walnut, lemon, and avocado groves, strawberry fields, small farms, and so forth. I grew up in an Orange County that was in between – wonderful in the 1950s, declining in the 60s, and going to hell in a hand basket in the 70s and 80s. The only thing that remains virtually unchanged is hundreds of square miles of chaparral wilderness in the Santa Ana Mountains. You can still hike there on a quiet weekday and easily forget where you are. Because I’ve lived here all my life, however, a memory of its more wonderful past has always been in my blood, so to speak, and I’ve spent some time wandering around in the mountains and surfing on deserted beaches in the winter. In my California books I’ve made an effort to capture what it is about the place that makes it glow, at least in my memory, and to bring to life. (Sadly much of what you find in those books are the ghosts of things that have passed away.) The result has often been a strange combination of past and present Orange Counties that are in some way or another afloat in time.

You've collaborated with Tim Powers on various stories. How do you approach working with another writer on a story and what challenges do you face?

The only writer I’ve ever collaborated with or would collaborate with is Tim. We’ve been friends for 40-odd years (some of them particularly odd) and I’ve got a high regard for his writing and his literary sensibilities.

He has a similar regard for mine, although he's not averse to making useful suggestions to me when I'm writing something new, for which I'm always grateful. As many readers know, we've written stories, poems, introductions, and any number of strange pieces under the pseudonym William Ashbless. (Ashbless would deny that he's a pseudonym. Best not to mention it in his company.) When we first set out to collaborate on a more serious short story – something called “The Better Boy” in 1990 – Tim wrote a paragraph or two, then I wrote a paragraph or two, and so on back and forth until the story was finished. We agreed that either of us could change or add to the other's work, and that the other could change it back. It turned out that each of us brought something a little bit different to the story, and the result was an authentic Powers-Blaylock hybrid. We collaborated a couple of other times with equally good results, and we've talked about collaborating more often, but both of us have been caught up in writing our own work. It's a challenge doing the work required for collaboration: as fun as it is, one story consumes two writers' time and energy. As for the process itself, there were no real challenges aside from finding the time to get the work done. It has always been a smooth process, without any disagreement, and it gave us an excuse to hang out together as our lives grew more complicated. I'm hoping we'll collaborate some more.

What books and authors have inspired your work?

Over the years I've come to understand that the books that most affected me were the books I read as a child or adolescent. The Victorian science and imagination of Verne and Wells seem to have filled my mind with indelible pictures, and those two writers, Verne especially, almost certainly led to my writing Steampunk. However the greatest influences on my literary sensibilities, on the language of my writing and my love of setting, were the novels and stories of John Steinbeck and Mark Twain, which I started in on as a ten-year-old and read and reread regularly until I was in my twenties. (In fact I still reread them.) When I was nineteen or twenty and avidly paying attention to the sound of the writing of the books I loved, I went head over heels for Robert Louis Stevenson, who's prose style did more to shape my own than that of any other writer. So, if I were to list authors and books, which is exactly what I'm fixing to do, then...: Steinbeck, Twain (particularly *Huckleberry Finn*), Conan Doyle (the Holmes stories), *The Wind in the Willows*, Nabokov (the short stories), Patrick O'Brian, Stevenson (*Treasure Island*, *The New Arabian Nights*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), Edgar Rice Burroughs (*At*

the Earth's Core), C.S. Lewis (*That Hideous Strength*), Charles Williams (*All Hallows Eve and The War in Heaven*), *Tristram Shandy*, Dickens, Wells, Edith Nesbit (the Bastable books), Philip K. Dick....

You often set your novels in a real world setting with fantasy elements. What draws you to using this as a setting instead of creating entirely constructed worlds?

My first two novels, *The Elfin Ship* and *The Disappearing Dwarf* were set in imaginary worlds. They were published by Del Rey, and they remained in print for many years. I can't recall that I've ever had more fun writing books than I had when I was writing those two. (I'm not sure what that signifies. It's a little like the fact that the hamburgers of my youth were the best I ever ate. One wonders whether they were actually better hamburgers, or whether the passing years have made me idealize those hamburgers.) After writing those two books I decided to write a hollow earth novel set in Los Angeles. I threw the idea at Lester del Rey in a letter and he called me on the telephone in order to reject the proposal first hand. His opening sentence was, "You went to the same God damn university that Powers went to, didn't you?" I admitted that I, after which he told me that I had to unlearn everything I'd been taught there, and that my lunatic proposal was "cultistic" foolishness, and that he'd have no part in it. When I came to my sense, I told me, I was welcome to send him something more apparently sane. I subsequently wrote the hollow earth novel and sold it to Ace Books, which had recently bought Tim's *The Anubis Gates*. My book became *The Digging Leviathan*. Tim and I remained great good friends with Lester and Judy-Lynn del Rey, and in fact went out to lunch with them about a year later. Over plates of pasta, Lester nodded at us and said cheerfully, "I'm glad you two have found a publisher for your inferior books." That was Lester's style. Judy-Lynn was tougher than he was. How does that apply to the question, you're wondering. Frost pointed out in his poem that "way leads on to way," and that's what happened to me. Two or three years later I finished up a prequel to those two early magical land books, but by then Lester and Judy-Lynn had passed away, and the book was published by Ace. I've never considered constructing new worlds for novels since then. Who knows what the future will bring?