

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR Orange County Arts and Culture - James P. Blaylock

1. You set quite a bit of your fiction here in Orange County. While it is sometimes natural for an author to write about their local area, what are some of the "special qualities" you find here that seem to work their way into your work?

I grew up in Anaheim in the 1950s and 60s, spending about half my time hanging out in orange groves with my friends or walking for miles down railroad tracks, and I've lived in downtown Orange for over 30 years now, so aside from a year or so up in Eureka, I've spent most of my life in Orange County. My father grew up in Tustin, and my grandfather came to California from Oklahoma not long after the turn of the century. I have a natural love of the place, and from the time I was very young I was hearing stories about what life was like back in the 20s and 30s. When I was a kid I rode my bike to Huntington Beach down Magnolia and Brookhurst, past bean and tomato fields -- I even walked... once. I camped and hiked in the Santa Ana Mountains, and in the late 80's and 90s we owned a cabin back in Trabuco Canyon. In short, I feel like I'm part of the place. Certainly the place is a part of me. On top of that, I started reading real novels when I was around 10, and immediately got hooked on Steinbeck and Twain, who both wrote books in which setting seemed to be as important as character. The books kick-started my love of literature and for setting-heavy stories and novels. That hasn't changed. So it turned out that Orange County settings are more than mere backdrops in my books. They're a part of what I am essentially, if that makes sense, and so they become a part of what the books are. Orange County has a lot of "special qualities," but I'm drawn to the qualities that have affected my life -- the beaches and mountains and my own neighborhood. Many of those qualities, however, are in my memory, because, as anyone knows who has lived here more than 20 years or so, the place is overcrowded and overbuilt and has developed a sort of shopping mall culture. I have a negative interest in that.

2. It's been said that you were mentored or influenced strongly by Philip K. Dick. Did he introduce you to the idea of "fabulism" where normal everyday life moves along and then inevitably veers into the "not so normal after all"?

By the time I met Phil my writing and thinking was already shaped by influences on me when I was growing up. My uncle, John Carl Blaylock, was a mover and shaker, so to speak, in the New Age movement, and in the 50's and 60s I got a head full of flying saucers and *Fate* magazine. Also, my mother hauled me down to the Stanton Library on Beach Boulevard every Tuesday, where I checked out books – usually Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells. (Steinbeck and Twain and Conan Doyle were already on the shelves at home.) So I was primed for fabulism, whatever that really is. I like the word. When I met Phil and started reading his books, I immediately figured out that he was writing in a way that I was naturally drawn to. I don't think you can write that sort of book unless you believe that normal everyday life is in some sense fabulous, which I do.

3. In your fiction, you've explored science fiction and fantasy as well as steampunk literary themes or styles, yet -- in other ways -- it seems to border more on the adult fables of Jorge Luis Borges, Gunther Grass, and Italo Calvino with their twists of humor. Do you think an author's work is always evolving and mutating or does it at some point solidify and harden into what readers (and critics) think of as "classic"?

That's a good question. I hope my writing is always evolving and mutating in some sense. The idea of its "hardening" doesn't appeal to me. On the other hand, I can't imagine writing books that aren't obviously my own. I am who I am. Reviewers sometimes put my books into categories, but I think that's merely a convenient way of organizing a review, or whatever it is they're writing. Maybe there'll be a new Blaylock category somewhere down the line. I've always been happy just to have a story to tell.

4. You currently teach creative writing at Chapman University in Orange. I'm always curious about how exactly one goes about "teaching" writers to express themselves better. What kinds of exercises and influences do you use and -- to follow up -- what are the qualities you're seeing in some of your students that will separate them from all the other aspiring authors out there?

People perpetually argue about whether creative writing can be taught. As is true of any controversial subject, as long as people are arguing about it, there's no agreement. To my mind, a person cannot be taught a love of the craft or a love of books, and certainly a person cannot be taught talent. Good creative writing classes can, however, inspire students to write, create

the need to write, give a student writer an audience, and teach a writer how to make the work better. For the several years that student's are in a writing program, they're compelled to think like a writer and to practice the craft. I've been teaching writing for 33 years now, and I've kept in touch with a lot of my students. To the best of my knowledge, none of them have regretted studying writing.

5. Lately your published works seem to be focusing into short stories again, as when you started. Is it a matter of "available time" or are you re-discovering that shorter works just "express the vision" better for you at the present?

Actually, in December my most recent novel, *Knights of the Cornerstone*, was published, and in April a short steampunk novel titled *The Ebb Tide* will be published, so I'm happy to say the long novel drought is over, at least for a time. As you say, however, I focused largely on writing short stories for a few years. Available time was a big factor, along with my having a ready market for the stories. Also, I enjoy writing short stories. When an idea or inspiration for a story comes into my mind, I tend to hold onto it. If it's an idea that's right for a short story, as it often is, then that's what I write.

6. Finally, if you could suddenly have "the magic touch" what would you have happen to bolster and increase Orange County's public awareness of its rich literary fiction resources?

That's another tough question. After years of teaching and being around young people, I've come to believe that not everyone will become a reader regardless of what well-meaning teachers and parents want. That's okay with me. The world is full of interesting pastimes, and what's important is to have a few, not to have some *particular* pastime. What's deadly is to have no interest at all in the world, which seems to be all too common these days – talk to any high school teacher about their students. Fortunately, however, bright, willing, curious students haven't gone out of style. And it's probably true that the best thing teachers can do is to inspire in students an active interest in the world. It's a tough job, though. But to answer your question, a writer can become a bestseller by selling 100,000 hardcover copies of a novel, often far fewer copies than that. All things considered, that's not very many (although very few authors sell anywhere near that many copies. I certainly do not). A television program that only

drew that many viewers would flop. If I could push a magic button, it would be to make ten times as many people readers. Then they'd have a natural interest in literary Orange County and writers would be happy with their royalty checks. (If that worked, I'd start looking for other buttons: ten years of good waves, no fires in the hills, no more development in the back country, more consistent rain, the return of the dimestore and mom and pop businesses, the clock moving backward for a while.)