The Nerd Cabinet Interview

I've heard that you were one of the founders of Steampunk, what made you start writing in such a unique genre?

This is a variety of chicken-and-egg question. I was friends with Tim Powers and K.W. Jeter in those days – the mid 1970s – (and still am) and the three of us had all graduated from the same university, all had an avid interest in the Victorian era, and all had grown up reading Verne and Wells and Conan Doyle. We all launched Victorian era stories of one sort or another, hashing over plots in O'Hara's Pub in downtown Orange. My story, "The Ape-box Affair" made it into print first, but only by virtue of its being a short story, and hence quicker to publish. K.W. followed with his novel *Morlock Night*, and Tim followed that with *The Anubis Gate*, which won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award in 1985. My Steampunk novel *Homunculus* won the award in 1986. It wasn't until two years later that K.W. coined the term Steampunk in a letter to *Locus* magazine, which seemed to cement the idea of Steampunk as a sub-genre of science fiction. I wrote "The Ape-box Affair" because I was binging on Robert Louis Stevenson at the time, and was particularly enjoying the stories that make up *The New Arabian Nights*. I wanted to mess around in a Victorian world of my own inventing.

I found that it was very easy to become attached to your characters, they seem so life like; they must have some real world influence, are any of them based on a person or people you know?

Although many of the characters in my books are loosely based on actual people, most of the characters in *The Aylesford Skull* are entirely made up. I will say that there's some of me in all of my male protagonists (some characters more than others) and that's true for Langdon St. Ives. Characters, to my mind, work best if they're larger than life, especially in adventure stories. I'm not, really, and so those Blaylock-like characteristics are elements of my life or hopes or worries or whatever, but taken to logical (and sometimes illogical) extremes. In that same way, Alice has some of my wife's genetic material in her, similarly altered. The problem with that sort of thing, of course, is that readers have no idea what to ascribe to me personally and what to ascribe to my imagination. Even my wife, Viki, doesn't know. Andrew Vanbergen in *The Last Coin* and William Hastings in *The Digging Leviathan* are both in some ways dangerously like me. They

both have tendencies toward erratic, loony behavior, which I might have if I didn't cultivate self-control. I suspect that Viki still wonders whether I went into a rage and chopped apart a garden hose, or secretly fed a parcel of possums living under the house. The more I deny these things, the guiltier I appear to be. It's like one of those woven, Chinese finger traps, the more you try to pull yourself free, the tighter it becomes.

Also, I personally felt very attached to Finn Conrad towards the end, which character was your favourite to develop?

Finn Conrad first appeared in a short Steampunk novel titled *The Ebb Tide*, published a few years ago by Subterranean Press. I hadn't anticipated his being in that book. He simply appeared peripherally in one scene, lurking in the shadows across the road, and promptly leapt (literally) over the fence into the midst of the scene. Within a paragraph he had established himself. Immediately he became my favorite character in that book. He's similarly one of my favorite characters in *The Aylesford Skull*. My favorite book in the world is *Huckleberry Finn*, and if readers suspect that Finn Conrad is reminiscent of Huck Finn, they'd be correct. Perhaps because he was already largely developed as a character before I started writing *The Aylesford Skull*, however, I have to say that Mother Laswell was my favorite character to develop. Although she looks very much like my first boss, a woman named Margaret Berry, who owned the pet store where I worked for five years, and has gaudy traits that are vaguely reminiscent of Edith Nesbitt (one of my favorite writers) I pretty much made Mother Laswell up out of the whole cloth. Near the beginning of her long conversation with Langdon St. Ives I came to realize that her personal story would certainly become a substantial part of the larger story of the book. I suspect that she and Finn Conrad will both reappear.

The detail in your imagery is stunning, so much so that I couldn't help feeling the emotion of many of the characters at such key points in the novel as when St. Ives and Hasbro are taking a wagon along a certain country lane, detailed imagery must mean a lot to you from what I've read?

Indeed it does. I'm as connected to setting as I am to character, and I give equal thought and play to both, and very often they get wrapped up together. I've written a number of novels set in California, where I've lived all my life, and I've found myself cheerfully developing the character, so to speak, of the mountains, beaches, and deserts of southern California as an

end in itself. Same with the foggy strangeness of the northern California coast. I got that way, I think, not only because of my love for those places, but also because when I was very young, first reading Steinbeck and Twain and Conan Doyle, I was attracted in a big way to their sense of place, and the way they conveyed it with such vivid detail and color. I was an outdoors oriented kid, and my love of outdoor places increased over the years. It's become fundamental to my books. In books set in England, of course, most of what I "know" I gleaned from research or soaked up reading Dickens and Stevenson and Conan Doyle, natural history, etc. I'm not alone, I suppose, in feeling that there is "emotion" in certain settings, and it's certainly true that the spirit of an oak grove is distinctly different from that of a redwood grove, say, or that the beach in winter is a distinctly different place than the beach in summer.

You referred, however, to the emotions of the characters in that one scene. There are plenty of books and films out there (some of them very good, perhaps) that quickly flesh out characters with troubles of one sort or another (they drink, ignore their children, suffer from painful memories) so that we come to know them a little better straight off, or think we do. That's a variety of narrative hook, I suppose. But too often those books and films conveniently disregard those troubles as soon as the action starts to rise. Readers and viewers figure out that those elements were a mere nod at character rather than something vital when the troubles disappear or scurry into the shadows so that plot or special effects or whatever else can take center stage. Like I said, sometimes that might be a good or even necessary thing. It seemed to me, however, that in *The Aylesford Skull*, St. Ives and Finn and Mother Laswell were caught up in potentially ruinous troubles that would have to stay with them, that must give the book a sense of danger and urgency and potential disaster. Also, although those kinds of troubles aren't ever entirely solved, it seems to me, except temporarily. Our concern for the wellbeing of our children, for example, is never ending. A number of reviewers and interviewers have evinced surprise that the novel is "so serious," and I'll agree that it is, but necessarily so rather than surprisingly so. Finally, and in regard to the scene you refer to, it seemed right and natural that St. Ives would begin to contemplate his troubles and the sudden dire emptiness in his life when he was out in the country under the summer sky. The open sky can be a lonely place.

Over the course of the past couple of weeks I've had lots of people asking what I'm reading, all of whom show a great deal of interest when I give them a brief overview of the plot, what were you aiming for people to get out of

reading this book when you started writing?

That's a hard question to answer, for the most part. The easy part is that I wanted readers to have fun reading it. I tried to make the plot sail along and to make the scenes and characters colorful. I planned it out in advance, as I do with all my books. But once it was planned, I put the outline away (as I always do) and didn't look at it again, and the book evolved as I was writing it. I found myself again as always) going back to earlier chapters to adjust them according to the stuff that came into my mind while writing later chapters. In that way, what I started with and what I ended with aren't quite the same. I didn't really have any idea of "themes" or any aim in mind beyond writing a good book (which I hope I did). That being said, I tried to make the concerns and troubles and sufferings of the characters as authentic as I could make them. If that illuminated the book in some way that readers can take away with them, I'm a happy writer.

I loved the book and fully intend on reading back over some of your other series, but will there be another book to tell the tale of Langdon St. Ives, and, if so, what can we expect?

There is indeed another book – a short Steampunk novel titled *The Pagan Goddess* – in the process of being published by Subterranean Press, although I just turned it in, and it'll no doubt take some time to see print. It's a *very* different sort of book than *The Aylesford Skull*, and in fact the plot is so… strange, loony, unlikely… that I can't begin to describe it without spoiling it and perhaps being committed. It's narrated by Jack Owlesby and features Tubby and Gilbert Frobisher as well as St. Ives and Hasbro. I'm currently thinking through yet another St. Ives novel, probably as long as *The Aylesford Skull*.

Thanks! Jim Blaylock