Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Robert J. Sawyer (August 2020)

Robert J Sawyer is the author 23 novels including, "The Terminal Experiment," "Calculating God," the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy, "Flashforward," The WWW Trilogy, and the recently published "Oppenheimer Alternative." Sawyer has won the Nebula Award (1995), the Hugo Award (2003), and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award (2006).

Mike Saltzman: Are you a discovery writer or do you plan everything in advance?

I have to know my thematic statement in advance — what it is, at the highest level, that I'm trying to say. For *Quantum Night*, for instance, that was "the most pernicious lie humanity has ever told itself is that you can't change human nature." For *The Oppenheimer Alternative*, it's "the world would be a better place if the smartest people in it stopped making the things the stupidest people want them to make." Once I have that in place, I set upon my journey, discovering the story as a I go.

Mike Saltzman: Stephen King famously does very little research for his books. I assume you must do a LOT. How do you do your research? Do you subscribe to any scientific journals? Which ones? Do you just read science books? have expert resources?

I subscribe to a lot of popular-science magazines, including *Scientific American*, *New Scientist,* and *Astronomy*, but not any journals currently — although I access them frequently online. I do tons of research — a full year, full-time, before I wrote word one of *The Oppenheimer Alternative*. I discuss my research techniques for that book in particular here: https://sfwriter.com/pfoa.htm

Mike Saltzman: Which one of your books is your personal favorite?

It varies over time, but right now, honest to goodness, it's *The Oppenheimer Alternative*. I usually don't say that about my most-recent novel — it takes awhile for me to warm up to them, not unlike the way it took Oppenheimer himself with his own children! But in this case, I honestly think it's the best thing I've ever written.

Chris Mullins: What kicked off the switch over to self-publishing? (or at least it LOOKS like self-publishing to someone who is an idiot about publishing) Are you actually seeing gains by not using a big-name publisher like Tor or whatnot?

The only out-and-out self-publishing I do is of older backlist titles for which the rights have reverted to me. I have eight of those out now. *The Oppenheimer Alternative* is traditionally published in the US and in Canada — but I chose to work with smaller presses than in the past, because the big publishers are all rapacious in their terms. They want three-quarters of the royalties on ebooks for themselves, and they now also want the lion's share of audiobook rights. Well, as Krusty the Clown said about T-shirts, "They're the sweetest plums!" I wanted to keep the audiobook and ebook rights and only smaller publishers would let me do that. If you buy a $5 ebook published by me, I get $3.50. If you buy one written by me but published by Tor or Ace, I get 87 cents. The choice was clear.

Chris Mullins: After *Starplex*, you moved over to more metaphysical sci-fi. *Starplex* felt HEAVILY researched and adventure-focused, but after that, the ideas seemed to explore the human condition through an alien lens (*Calculating God, Illegal Alien*) before doing away with the alien angle entirely. I enjoy the hell out of it, but the transition is very marked. Did something prompt that transition?

Sales, pure and simple. I found that only SF fans would read books with aliens in them, especially if they were set in the future, whereas I didn't lose a SF reader but gained a lot of people who otherwise never read science fiction by eschewing aliens and setting the books in or very close to the present day. And I found I could still do everything I wanted to do philosophically and creatively without extraterrestrials, although, of course, the Neanderthals of *Hominids* and its sequels and Webmind and Hobo of *Wake* and its sequels are aliens of a sort.

Chris Mullins: Do you and Robert Charles Wilson just kind of hang out together, smoke cigars and ponder how awesome the two of you are or what?

Ewww. Neither Bob nor I smoke. We do hang out together, though; we very much enjoy each other's company. We talk about the books we're reading — mostly nonfiction for both of us — the tribulations of our little industry, and so forth. Bob and I are very different people, but he's my brother.

Seth A. Milman/Marina Akushskaya: Hi Mr. Sawyer. As someone who has never read your work, where would you suggest I start - and why?

With my 2016 novel *Quantum Night*. I honestly thought it was going to be the last novel I'd ever write, and I set out to do something that more-or-less tied together thematically a lot of things I've been

exploring for my entire oeuvre. It's a standalone novel — you don't have to have read anything else by me to appreciate it, and, as it's set in the present day, it's very accessible, plus, as you'll see, also very timely, predicting an awful lot of what's wrong in the world of 2020.

Carl Rosenberg: Science fiction has always seemed to me a strongly Anglo-American genre. What aspects of Canadian SF do you feel make it different from SF in the UK and US?

Canada is a middle power, and has never strived to be anything but. We don't believe we can definitively solve the world's — or the universe's — problems, but simply try to come up with a workable compromise. In my novels, reflecting Canadian values, pacifism is better than militarism; multiculturalism and diversity don't just work, they're a foundational underpinning; the greatest good for the greatest number is the best we can hope for; and there are no lone wolves, no out-and-out heroes, and no triumphant climactic battle scenes.

David Stuckey: Having read "Rollback" serialised in ANALOG SF&Fact, and going back through the story as I read it, I developed an uncomfortable feeling for the future of that world, with particular regard to the aliens. My question is, was it your intention to write a 'benign invasion/colonization" story in between the lines of that book, or do the themes just line up coincidentally?

I don't think it's an invasion/colonization story at all; it's an immigration story. As a Member of the Order of Canada, I actually get to conduct Canadian citizenship ceremonies. I swear in new Canadians all the time who come from more powerful nations (ex-pat Americans), more technologically proficient nations (ex-pat Chinese), more populous nations (ex-pat Indians), and so on. It's a positive, win-win, not the negative that you perceive, my friend.

Donovan S. Brain: Your evolved dinosaurs in *Far-Seer* seem pretty plausible. Bischoff and Monteleone had similar creatures in their *Dragonstar* books; lacking our mammalian hindbrains, they would wake as animals and recall themselves like an old DOS computer loading autoexec. When they finally woke, they'd grab a woven straw jacket and put it on to show they were themselves again. If we meet aliens, how likely would you expect the reptilian type to be?

Well, remember that despite all this talk about dinosaurian aliens lacking our mammalian hindbrains, *birds* lack them, too, and parrots and corvids (crows and ravens) are among the most intelligent

creatures on the planet, clearly capable — especially parrots — of affection, language, and a certain mischievous *joie d'vivre.* But my Quintalgios, as you note, are descended from dinosaurian stock transplanted from Earth — they are not aliens, in that sense. As for *real* extraterrestrials? Who knows? Any extrapolation is based on a sample of one, and only one, fossil record. The transition from outer skeleton to inner one, from water and soft-shelled eggs to land and hard-shelled ones, from splayed-out inefficient limbs to under-the-body pillar-like limbs, from cold-bloodedness to warm-bloodedness, and from small brains to large ones all seem like things that would be selected for on many worlds. But a specifically reptilian *look?* Nah. I'm not even sure tetrapods in general are likely, that scales are inevitable, or that a circulatory system based on a single heart makes much sense.

Louisiana Galileo Ahnström: As a blind person, I've been waiting desperately for the day someone would represent us accurately in film or literature, showing our strengths rather than the perceived weaknesses and disadvantages sighted people believe we have.

in your WWW trilogy, why did you feel it was necessary to include some of the cringe-worthy blindisms that sighted people think are real. You said yourself at the beginning of the audiobook that you sort advice from the blind community, so I am assuming that you have a real indication of how independent we can be. Why then did you make Caitlin so....pathetically dependent on her sighted friends and family? Many people in the blind community agree, for example, that having a blind teenager who needs help from a sighted classmate just to get to her classes is just a very inaccurate representation of our capabilities. Did you actually spend any decent physical time with us to learn how we can and do these things unassisted?

Nice try, Louisiana, but I call bullshit. You're entitled to like, or not like, whatever you want, but you no more speak for all people in any given category than I do. My grandfather was blind, one of my best friends is blind, and I spent an enormous amount of time discussing the work-in-progress with blind people, and the acknowledgments in *Wake* thank the blind beta readers, including those from the BlindMath group, which exists for people such as my main character who are both blind and gifted in mathematics. Caitlin is a specific character — totally blind from birth (very few blind actually are, as you well know), transitioning to a public school after years of one for the blind. She's not GENERIC BLIND PERSON anymore than you are; she's a specific, unique human being. The first book came out 11 years ago and the mail I've received from blind readers is in a 20-to-1 ratio of compliments to complaints. In fact here's the latest fan letter for it, which I just received today, from a reader in Seattle, Washington:

“Thank you so much for your WWW trilogy. Just finished it again. It means so much to me as a partly blind stroke impaired but still sentient being.”

To take just one of your examples, Bashira is only there to help Caitlin in her first days at her new school, because it’s the first time Caitlin has been at that school, instead at one specifically for the blind, and it’s a school that has zero accessibility accommodations — no Braille signage, for instance — and it’s Caitlin’s overprotective parents, *not* the school, who decide she needs help, which, as the text plainly shows, she very quickly demonstrates to everyone that she doesn’t.

I know it’s fun to be “the offended” in today’s society, and empowering to accuse others of “ableism” (or whatever “-ism” enables self-righteousness in a particular subculture), but in fact the portrayal of Caitlin was as thoroughly researched as I was capable of, fully vetted by people more similar to her than I and perhaps even you, and widely praised by the blind community. Here, for instance, is me being interviewed by Jonathan Moser, himself blind, from Freedom Scientific, the makers of JAWS screenreading software:

http://podcast.freedomscientific.com/FSCast/episodes/fscast031-june2009.mp3

Michael Nabert: One of the things I thoroughly enjoy about your work is the way that your science fiction premise commonly intersects with an accessible emotional narrative for one or more major characters, like a serious cancer diagnosis or the emotional aftermath of a rape or marital infidelity. I find this helps to ground the story by engaging readers in the internal process of the characters and also by placing the aliens or scientific discovery or whatever into a larger life context for the characters.

Are there any such personal narratives that you might shy away from writing? Is there some conscious element of activism in encouraging greater empathy towards those impacted by such events among your readership? Are there any specific narrative elements like this that you might in hindsight have written differently based on feedback that you later received from readers who have dealt with similar challenges in their own lives? Does the process of writing occasionally lead you to see a character arc as dominantly about this common human element with a science fiction sub-plot rather than the reverse?

There is absolutely nothing I'd shy away from writing about; the whole spectrum of human existence is appropriate fodder for fiction. Certainly, yes, I believe in empathy and compassion, and I try to inculcate those in everyone I encounter, whether in real life or with my readers through my books.

And, no, I do my research *before* I publish my books. After I wrote *Calculating God* my younger brother Alan was diagnosed with lung cancer, just like Tom Jericho, the main character in that book. And so I saw close up what he went through until he died; sadly, as he himself would say, I nailed it. There will always be *individuals* seeking to play dominance games, and claim, oh, you shouldn't have written it that way — and then posture that they speak with authority as if they represent *everyone* in a group — but, as my colleague Joe Haldeman observes, the standard edict to write what you know is why every professor of creative writes books about being a middle-aged frustrated novelist contemplating adultery; it's *all* they know. Better to write what you can find out about — and that, my friend, is the key to empathy: figuratively walking a mile in someone else's shoes.

Michael Nabert: Which other writers do you often turn to when you want to feel inspired as a writer yourself?

I go back and read classics, and you see *why* they've endured hundred or two hundred years. This past summer, I re-read three of H.G. Wells's most-famous works, *The Time Machine, War of the Worlds,* and *The Invisible Man*. Or even works that have endured half-a-century. Jonathan Ball's novel *In the Heat of the Night* holds up *way* better than most science-fiction from that era, for instance, just in terms of prose and characterization. Asimov, on the other hand, is all but unreadable as an adult.

Molly Greenspring: In the Neanderthal Parallax series, Neanderthals often seem to be the opposite of what humans are, they are less violence etc. Did you write The Neanderthals to contrast human society?

Ha! Forgive me, but no — I wrote them to contrast Canadian and American society. The Neanderthals are Canadian: ecologically minded, secular, willing to sacrifice individuality for the collective good, and fully accepting of various modes of sexuality. And the *Homo sapiens* of our reality in those books are Americans, or, at least, the right-wing part of America.

Molly Greenspring: How ever thought about write fantasy, the sword and magic kind?

Not in the least. I don't enjoy reading it, and I have no interest in writing it. If it's not something that plausibly might happen, I have zero interest in it.

Molly Greenspring: Many elements of your science fiction writing have detective fiction in them, where do you draw your influences for that?

Picking up on your previous question, Molly, I think science fiction has much more in common with mystery fiction than it does with fantasy. Both SF and mystery require the reader to be attentive to subtle clues — in the former about the world they've been thrust into; in the latter in order to solve the crime; both prize rational though and deductive reasoning; and both deal with realistic characters, not pure good or pure evil (otherwise, the detective cliché would be "the monster did it," not, "oh, my, who'd have suspected it — the butler, who is much more complex than we thought, did it).

Molly Greenspring/Teresa Palomar: How did you think up Ponter Boddit and Afsan? From what dark recesses of your mind do you pull these names?

Ha! Afsan is Nasfa spelled backward, and Nasfa is the acronym for my high-school science-fiction club, which I co-founded: the Northview Association for Science Fiction Addicts. As for Ponter Boddit, I was just playing around with sounds that I knew Neanderthals could make (they couldn't likely make the long EE phoneme), and trying to come up with something that sounded good. That "Ponter" and "ponder" are similar appealed to me. As for Boddit, in the first draft it was Bodt, which I thought was nicely alien, but my friend and colleague Edo van Belkom pointed out that if you try to say B-O-D-T as one syllable you can't hear the final T, so I changed it to Boddit. Since Ponter was a specialist in quantum computers, I like that "Boddit" suggested "Baudot," who is the man after whom our data-communication rate, "baud," is named.

Andrew ten Broek: What are your thoughts on the tv show *FlashForward* that adapted your novel for the small screen?

By and large, I loved it. I think the clue board in Detective Benford's FBI office turned out to be a dumb idea, and was all but abandoned as the series went on, and the notion that someone had stayed awake during the global blackout — which turned out to be, I kid you not, because a hobbit, Dominic

Monaghan, had a magic ring — was probably not a good addition. But most of the actors were fabulous, and I had the privilege of working with the staff writers, every one of whom I have nothing but respect and fondness for.

Eva Sable: While I haven't read it yet, I have purchased a copy of *The Oppenheimer Alternative*. A couple members of the group said they liked it. I'm very much looking forward to it.

How has this book been received by readers with more than an average layperson's understanding of The Manhattan Project, The Super, and Oppenheimer's Security Hearings?

With nothing but praise! We have a cover quote from Martin J. Sherwin, who cowrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning Oppenheimer biography, *American Prometheus*. Physicists Lee Smolin, who used to be at the Institute for Advanced Study, said, "I loved it! I know the history of this period well and I'm one or two degrees of separation from many of these people. Sawyer's portrayals ring true to me." And SF writer and physicist Greg Benford, who happened to have been Edward Teller's graduate student, said in his blurb, "The feel and detail of the Manhattan Project figures is deep and well done. I knew many of these physicists, and Sawyer nails them accurately." Seriously, I haven't had a single negative word on that score.

Mike Saltzman: How hard was it to write a fiction book (*The Oppenheimer Alternative*) using only real people? What were the challenges there and how did you overcome them?

I think I would personally have been paralyzed by the very idea of writing dialog and actions of people who really existed for fear of getting it wrong.

As I said earlier, I honestly thought *Quantum Night* would be my final novel; I have no economic need to write another book. It was *only* because I could come up with something that would challenge me that made me want to get back to the keyboard. And this notion of writing characters about whom I *wasn't* the world's foremost authority was precisely that. I relished digging into their writings, their autobiographies, their biographies, and so on. Yes, it's a daunting undertaking, and it took a lot of work to understand these people as deeply as I understand characters I've made up, but that was the fun of it.

Ed Newsom: At what point in your life did you decide to write hopeful science fiction rather than cautionary tales or dystopias, and why?

I've never been drawn to dystopias. I've read the famous ones, of course, and they leave me cold. I grew up watching *Star Trek: The Original Series* and its optimism was infectious. Also, as I mentioned, I'm a member of The Order of Canada; the orders motto is "We desire a better country." I'm naturally upbeat, and I don't think that's naïve. The world of 2020 may not be better than the world of 2019, but it's way better than the world of 2000, in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, actual pro-environment activity, and so forth. And, my goodness, 2020 beats all hell out of 1920, a world in which vanishingly few people had indoor toilets or electricity, and there were no antibiotics. We *are* making progress, and, as Martin Luther King Jr., said, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

That said, I suppose my books really became consciously upbeat with *Factoring Humanity* in 1997. There is precisely one thing that I believe in without evidence to support it. Not any sort of god, not extraterrestrial life; no. But I do believe in actual altruism — not game-theoretical tit-for-tat "reciprocal altruism," which is all pure Darwinism would allow for, but the fundamental worth and good of human beings, and our ability to empathize with and want to help out others.

Ed Newsom: Are you hopeful about the future?

Very much so! After all, it's all I've got left!

John Grayshaw: Do you think the 21st century will see the same sort of scientific leaps we had in the 20th century?

On the one hand, it won't see anything as seminal as the breakthroughs that were relativity, quantum physics, atomic power, computers, deciphering and then editing the genetic code, crewed spaceflight, and people walking on another world; there just isn't anything that big left to do. Yeah, yeah, Mars — but so what? It's a difference in degree only from going to the Moon. But technological advances of the 21st century will far surpass those of the 20th, thanks to things like exponential growth and Moore's law.

John Grayshaw: How did you know in September of 2018 when we set this interview up, that your book would be out by August 2020?

It had to be out by then, I knew, because it's launch needed to be tied into the 75th anniversaries of the birth of the atomic age: July 16, 2020, was the 75th anniversary of the Trinity test and August 6 and 9 were the 75th anniversaries of uses of the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

John Grayshaw: In your books the characters often talk through their ideas and theories and discoveries, crossing a multitude of disciplines. As a writer dealing with high concept and complex ideas, how do you go about presenting those in such a compelling manner to a casual reader such as myself, who may not have a science background?

I think of science the way a sports fan thinks of sports, particularly when they're trying to get someone else to share their passion. Don't start with the boring history — "You know, basketball was invented with a peach-pit basket by the Canadian James Naismith in 1891," blah, blah, blah. Instead say, "Let me show you a person leaping higher than you though anyone possibly could!" Concentrate on what's exciting and intriguing. Also, sprinkle in lots of puns and jokes — seriously. Make the banter entertaining in and of itself, and the information content will be absorbed effortlessly.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the science fiction writers who inspired you as you discovered the genre?

In order of discovery: Alan E. Nourse, David Gerrold (with his first novel, *Space Skimmer*, which was a gift from my dad), Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke. I still see their influences in my work: Nourse's belief that science fiction should adhere to actual science; Gerrold's rather spritely and exuberant prose style; Asimov's clarity of explanations; and Clarke's ability to rationally explore subject we'd normally consider too metaphysical to take seriously.

John Grayshaw: Who are some science fiction writers you are friends with? How have these relationships influenced your writing?

Well, my best friends in the industry are my local peers, of course: Robert Charles Wilson and James Alan Gardner. For those I see only when I travel, there are so many I think of as family, but among my closest pals in the big-publisher-novel game are Allen Steele, Tanya Huff, Jack McDevitt, David B. Coe —

now writing as D.B. Jackson, Steven Erikson, Kevin J. Anderson, and Gerald Brandt. As for influencing my writing, every one of them shares my belief that it's *not* a competition; when one of us has a success, we should all celebrate it. They let me relax and do my thing while they do theirs.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them?

I love them. They have been the cornerstone of my social life since my first one in 1975. I dearly miss them in this year without a con, thanks to COIVD-19. As for fun stories, well, there's the time Jim Minz sat on the toilet tank —not the seat, but the tank — at a Tor room party and it burst open ...

John Grayshaw: Are there any TV or movie deals in the works for any of your novels or stories?

Yes, always. Currently in serious development are an adaptation of my WWW novels *Wake, Watch, and Wonder* in Canada and my novel *Rollback* in the US.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies other than writing?

Reading. Travel. Fossil hunting.

John Grayshaw: Do you have a writing routine that you stick with?

None whatsoever — that'd be like having a job! I write when I feel like it, don't when I don't, sleep when I'm tired, and wake when I'm rested. Oh, and there's often pizza, too.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

A major media project that hasn't been publicly announced yet, but will be shortly. It'll keep me busy until the end of the year. It's a new intellectual property created by me, but licensed to one of the biggest players in the industry, and I'm enjoying the heck out of it.

John Grayshaw: What are your plans for the future?

Write less. Read more. Relax. And did I mention pizza?