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Robert Reed

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# ROBERT REED: an interview

Hailing from as unlikely a place as Nebraska, Robert Reed has gathered momentum in the science fiction field since 1986 when he won the Gold Prize from the L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest. Since 1987, he has published eight novels, and well over 60 short stories – some of which were collected in his short story collection *The Dragons of Springplace*. Among his many distinctions, his novel *Down the Bright Way* won the Imaginaire Award; "Decency" won the Asimov's Reader's Poll for Best Short Story; "The Utility Man," "Marrow" and "Decency" were Hugo finalists while "Chrysalis" was a Nebula finalist; and collected in various Year's Best anthologies were "Marrow," "Chrysalis," "A Place With Shade," "The Remoras," "Guest of Honor," "First Tuesday," and "Whiptails."

Reed's greatest artistic storytelling success has to be his sense of wonder. He can draw the reader a wonderfully strange alien invasion human-born ("Birth Day") or what at first appears to be a mundane, not-so-pleasant, pheasant-hunting trip ("Savior"). The canvas upon which Reed paints his stories is broad indeed. The outer limits of his imagination seem yet to be charted. Kristine Kathryn Rusch wrote that the "quintessential Reed" is "excellent, intriguing, and thoughtful." David G. Hartwell names his strength as "range," which Gardner Dozois renamed as "versatility... no one Robert Reed story is ever much like another Robert Reed story in tone or subject matter."

We spoke at the 1999 ConCussion in Omaha, Nebraska.

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*How did you first approach learning the writing trade?*

I'm self-taught. At one point as a teenager, I thought it would be a fun way to make a living. I worked on a novel – a very, very bad novel – working long-hand in a spiral notebook. Then I found out "This is a lot of work," so I gave it up for a few years. And then I went back [to writing] in college and decided this is going to pay my tuition – ten years later, it could have helped my tuition, but it took about that long. I read a lot of science fiction – more than I read now. I read other genres. I tried to write things I would like to read – to entertain me. It took years before I could sell anything at all.

*How many stories was it between the writing of your first story and your 1986 publication of gold-prize winner "Mudpuppies"? What had you to learn first before you started selling?*

My best example [of selling a story] is watching John McEnroe play tennis on TV. He needed another ball, and it was coming at him at a screaming pace. He unconsciously caught the ball with the racquet, slowing his

arm and stopping – and there's the ball. Everyone starts applauding. I think it was the US Open because an American audience would do that. McEnroe just shakes his head. He's been doing this for so long so much of his day everyday is playing tennis, he's just internalized it.

"Mud Puppies" was an exception. I knew it was a good story, but that was the story I sent to the contest after I sent it to several markets. I was pleased with the response. It was several years later before I could start really selling stories. Just because of that one success – and I had a couple other sales – even selling novels, it didn't translate into immediate sales. I had to win over other editors with other projects.

*What had you to learn before you began to sell steadily? What do you consider to be your touchstone story; that is, the story that pointed you in the direction of science fiction?*

It was so much hit-and-miss for so long. I did well with "Utility Man." Other stories didn't sell, and I would have to rework them. Sometimes they would sell later on. "Chaff" I

knew was good. Right around "The Remoras" I realized something's organically changed in me – without having to treat every success as some miraculous gift. It becomes innate.

I don't know where the letters are on a keyboard. I have long since so internalized that I can type. I just kept practicing enough so that character, plot, and other elements just came naturally. It has become more fun, easier to do certain things: like super-writing where I'm finding out what's happening as I'm writing it. That was one of the things about "The Remoras" that I really keep it to me.

*Do you still worry about getting novels published?*

Oh yeah. I was talking to Connie [Willis] last night and she still worries about it. You have to appreciate how paranoid writers are. The imagination can be very paranoid. You can see doom in everything. She worries about meeting deadlines. I asked what did her agent tell her; they aren't going to get too angry – I guess, they could kick you.

*How do you incorporate the "large concept" into a story, whether it be politics, myth, or science? In such stories as "Whiptails" and the deeply moving "Savior" there is an undercurrent of current or, rather, ongoing political situations. Do you begin with an issue and create the analogy? Or do you simply have an image, a scene, or a character in mind? For instance, how did the story Savior come about?*

When I have an idea and write down a title, it's supposed to remind me of everything I need to know. I don't need to write down a bunch of ideas about the story. With "Savior" I had written it down and forgotten what the hell story that was going to be, but then I remembered. Originally, it was about a grandmother, but now I made a grandfather: "What horrible thing did you do in the war, Granddad?" What is the context to decide, many years later, to decide whether what a person did was right or wrong. I have no answers. So far as I'm concerned, it's an open-ended story. I don't tell you what the man did is right and how he should respond to this.

Oftentimes I draw these large concepts and put them on a universal scale, but generally they're little things that happened in my own stupid little life. The story before this,

"Decency," [asks] what is the right thing to do if a creature is in pain, and I have a character who knows exactly what to do. One day I was running and a squirrel was running circles on the bike path. I got up close to it and it bumps into my leg. Its head was bashed in, got hit by a car. I decided someone has to do something about this, and I look around like there's a crew out there to take care it. No, no one is. The decent thing to do is to kill it. How do you kill a squirrel? What do you do? Do I get a log and start chasing it to death? People walk past and ask, "What's that man got against squirrels?" So I decided I would drown it. It's half-dead anyway. I sort of usher it down [to a pool of water] and the thing fought me the whole way and I drowned it. I felt kind of virtuous about the whole thing afterwards. [The story] was based upon that.

The truly largest concept I could think of was "The Shape of Everything," which involves an ancient man talking about an instant that happened in his youth – at the same time that everyone is celebrating, they figured out why the universe is shaped as it is, where you have galaxies. It was written originally for an anthology that didn't take it in England, which was based upon the premise of I.p.'s. It had to have something about music. So I had this idea that all galaxies are giant records. The ancient version to these galaxies... all the stars are aligned, dispersed to give information to the far future about how life was back when the universe was a good place. There was life even when it was all radiation and much smaller and much hotter. There were other forms of life that were rapidly dying in the cooling conditions in the universe. And they left behind these momentos which were galaxies. I thought it was a wonderful mindplay on the whole thing. It's a vast scale. On the other hand, I have this little story that is the center of the story for me, not the science, but this young woman is hearing this extremely old man talking about a time he first danced with a woman when he was just a kid and she was a lifeguard at a camp. It's a very small story on the one hand, and the largest possible story on the other. I think that's one reason Jim Turner put it at the back of [*The Dragons of Springplace*]: he thought it was a philosophical closer. My stories favorite stories are [more personally linked].

*What do you believe is or even should be the direction of science fiction? What role should it play in our society? How do you use such a role in your own science fiction?*

Vonnegut's quote that science fiction writers being the scouts [of society] may be dangerous. I do think books like *1984* make a difference in the sense that they become cautionary tales. I don't believe what I do is so very important that anybody's going to bother with it in thirty years in that it will be directing any public policy or debate. It'd be nice to be important that way.

Much of what I've learned in the past ten, fifteen years is that science fiction is a business meant to entertain. As for any great sense of what I think science fiction will be, I just try to entertain myself, banging things together that interest me. I have a narrow little life: I have my fish ponds in the back, I read things, and Lincoln [Nebraska] is not exactly the center of the science fiction world. I think it helps me in certain respects. I have no interest in writer's workshops, but I know professional writers who wouldn't publish anything without having their workshop go over it first. That to me is odd.

*Do you ever seek the advice of another writer? or another reader? How do you decide what works for a story: what to keep, to throw out, to expand, to make less of?*

No. My wife sometimes reads a story when it's been published. Audiences have always been abstract things. They're nice to have -- in large numbers, to a degree. I had two different people do the Myer-Briggs personality test, and I essentially ended up being INTJ, which is introverted, intuitive, thinking, judging, which is one-half of one percent of the population and they're labeled the scientists.

My stories are basically thought problems. I work them out to my satisfaction and send them off. I'm interested in criticism and what people say and don't say. That's one of the saving graces of this attitude: I'm perfectly willing to destroy everything I've ever done to try it again, "Well, I was all wrong. Now I'm going to try something else."

*It's interesting that you cite Hemingway as an influence since I sense a little more of Faulkner's country sensibility seeping into your writing. What exactly about*

*Hemingway's novel influenced your development as a writer? Inside and outside of science fiction, what novels have impacted you most as a writer in his development? What stories?*

I didn't read Faulkner until later. I mean I couldn't. I think you have to be a certain age or a certain wherewithal to even begin to read him. There are certain works that I can't pretend any real knowledge of him. I read *Absalom, Absalom*. I understand what happens but there are stretches that I don't know if it's the whiskey in him or the [difficulty] is with me. Some of my favorites include *Light in August*, parts of the *Sound and the Fury*, and his collection of short stories. He was a very good short story writer.

As for Hemingway, *Farewell to Arms* is about the high point for me. *The Sun Also Rises* I never really enjoyed. I always thought that would be better done by Woody Allen. You have this nymphomaniac in love with an emasculated man. There's some ground there for some real comedy that never was. *Farewell to Arms* is the first time I realized it doesn't end well; and life goes on, in that case.

You have to read and reread the first chapter of *Farewell to Arms*. As far as I'm concerned it's one of the best written things I've ever read. When Hemingway was writing well, he was a spectacular writer: a guy who had this cadence, a very simple elegant style. Others might disagree. I would never say this in *Locus*, but Benford rewrote Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. His science fiction version really made me appreciate who [Hemingway] was -- the differences between the writing... at least it did for me.

*Inside and outside of science fiction, what novels have impacted you most as a writer in his development? What stories?*

I started reading science fiction in late teens. I started writing the stuff almost when I started reading. The early to mid-seventies were a big time for Ursula LeGuin, James Tiptree, and Gene Wolfe. Those were my three. The other person I've always, always enjoyed reading in science fiction who has absolutely no sense of character and other things I'm interested in is Arthur C. Clarke. Rarely do I have a sense of drama -- it's the speculations that I find interesting. I've never read Heinlein, much. When I have, I haven't

enjoyed it – another admission I don't make in *Locus*.

Outside of science fiction, one of my favorite adventure books I've read is *Endurance* about the Shackleton Expedition. In the science fiction sense, *Endurance* is one of the books I would strongly recommend. Mickey [Zucker Reichart] was making noise at one panel about not liking *Man against Nature*, but boy it is a wonderful story. The Shackleton Expedition goes down to Antarctica to winter it out in the ice caps, with all this stuff meant for brutally cold, dry weather and the boat gets frozen in the ice and they don't go anywhere. After a while, the boat starts to collapse. After months, the mission is to live and get out of there. It's just like one damn thing after another, this incredible odyssey. I don't think it lost a man. It's desperate, it gets worse and worse, and you think it can't get worse and it gets worse. There's this wonderful point late in the book: they finally get to an island to a whaling station. The men are waiting in these crudely made mud huts in the boats, eating nothing but raw bird eggs and living baby birds for weeks on end. They have this newspaper from World War I that they've been reading over and over again, and they haven't washed in months, they've been going through this deprivation, yet he thinks to himself, "I've never been happier" – as genuine a moment I can think of. That's one book I would suggest. There are many books.

*What advantage do you have from reading Leguin, Tiptree, and Wolfe?*

If I was born without having writers to read, I would have never been a writer. So obviously all these things play into it. I don't know who had the greatest influence. As much as anything, Tiptree's suicide has more influence on me than Tiptree.

I try to instill in myself when I'm writing some sense of what I felt when I was reading them, when I read them all the time with great pleasure. I try to grab that sense of story. Each had their own strengths and weaknesses – as do we all – but Gene Wolfe always had these moments: images that have stuck with me over the years. LeGuin's worlds were always very interesting, even though they were ordinary, earth-like. She played the games with the human sexuals. With Tiptree I follow this raw energy when she was at her best. I still remember I was on the bedroom

floor reading "The Women Men Don't See." It's difficult to say what strict influence any of those have had on me.

*What makes a good story? and what makes a good story great?*

There's some pretty pat answers for what makes a good story: interesting characters, good writing, something that grabs you, a twist or two, and makes you go, "Oh, wow." Some writers are able to write characters who cast shadows, who could vote. Faulkner had some characters that could vote. They're more finely realized than real people. That's the way it seemed when I was reading it. They're black marks on white paper and don't have a life of their own. Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, a character which starts from the very first page: you want to hear about my life and all that David Copperfield crap, you're not going to. That just about killed my parents.

Everyone has their idea of the great book: that sense that it stays with you long after you read it. I talked about [Ian McLeod's] "Summer Isles" earlier today. At one point I stopped reading to tell my wife, "I'm really enjoying this," and I just don't do that much anymore, not with science fiction, unfortunately. I'm not even saying it's a great story, all in all, because it lost steam, in a sense. More things happen and there's a resolution. Now I would do whatever it took to buy that story as an editor. You got a real sense of the character that you just don't find in a lot of work anywhere.

*"Guest of Honor" could be read as the relationship between author and reader. At what point do you say, this is my theme. Do you start with a theme? Or revise with the theme in mind?*

I think that's an interesting interpretation. I really like it. I think it's fun.

It's all a big conscience dream. I'm walking around in a dream, except it's more coherent, hopefully, than a dream. My dreams are useless in terms of writing. I wake up thinking that would be quite a story. I write something down and look at it the next day. Boy, that's the biggest load of crap I've ever seen. No, but when I'm writing, it's a dream state. Things will occur to me, and I will see systematic elements. This story is about loss, it's about cannibalism -- most of my stories in

some way or another have cannibalism involved: symbolic or otherwise or directly. Most of these things are instinct. That's an important element: where do you finish the story, what is the location. One of the things I hate to do is to introduce new locations late, so I'll bring it back to a location you're familiar with. It's done on instinct. Afterwards, I can see reasons why I'd argue that this is the reason of my choice. Editors rarely take me to task on any of these decisions; maybe they should. When I went to Bantam -- with Betsy Mitchell, excellent as she is, a very good editor -- they gave editorial advice, but for the most part my stuff is basically left alone. For good or not, I'm doing this on instinct; it feels like the right thing to do -- I rarely have to defend myself in any sense of the word. I actually get my way. *Marrow* is going to have minimal editorial changes, and I could have the disk again, just go through adding a little here adding a little there. Sometimes a few more details might be helpful: to flesh it out a bit, make more atmosphere. I try to be minimal on the language. Jim Turner commented on my stories that I cover a lot of ground relatively quickly -- things are very dense. He thought that that was a good thing, I hope. *[laughs]* Maybe now I should take him to task for that. Maybe he was insulting me and I didn't know it.

*How do you approach a novel as opposed to a short story?*

I figured this out on my first novel: generally, I try to approach novels as being a series of connected stories that are very tightly plaited, so you call them chapters or whatever -- you have the breaks, but I deal with each of them as a story essentially. I have many of the same people in each story. In the past I've made the point that I don't write with words. When I'm writing, I'm driving over a landscape: and now we need a... and now we need a... and a... *[makes a series of hand-gestures and noises to indicate the quick maneuvers one needs to make when driving through a varied landscape or plot]* and then we're done. And that's how I go through stories when I'm building them. With a novel, it's a damn long drive. The best

advice I ever got on how to write a novel was from the [Nebraksa] state poet, a teacher of mine at Wesleyan: "You write like hell. And you number the pages." And that's basically it. Obviously, it's more complicated than that or secretaries would be wonderful novelists.

The other difference is with stories I can do several at once. I have them in various states of production. When I'm working on a novel, that's about all there is in my life. I'll do that as long as I can until I'm absolutely sick of the thing. I can't see how Connie -- anyone -- can work five years on a single novel.

*What do keep in mind while revising? and when do you know it's done?*

If I feel I have closure as a project and I can't go near it anymore, then I feel it's done, certainly for a while. At one time I would rely on editors to reject me, so I could have another shot at it. Unfortunately or not, I'm much more likely to sell it to the first place I send the story. What happens then is it has to go as it is. The editors in a magazine won't quibble about a phrase here or a line there and I kind of wish they would because sometimes I look backwards and think, "Well..." That was the thing about *[Dragons of Springplace]* I was able to "Oh, that wasn't the way to phrase that. I can change that for the better."

You should be able to figure out where everyone is at a given time -- just the structural elements of orchestrating everyone. There shouldn't be any loopholes, any goofiness. Certain elements I used to work very hard on -- the language -- I no longer have to, for better or for worse. I know if go through the story three or four times, the language will work out accordingly. There are places where it breaks down, and I try to find those places when I'm proofing at the end. There are some advantages to word processors: I have a big enough screen where I can look at it. When I do proofread them, I'm not one of those writers who say, "Oh, that paragraph should be down below." If the paragraph doesn't work there, it ain't going to work somewhere else. These aren't cards in the deck that you find the right pattern. Everything's an organic part of the whole. You have to respect that.