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## **WYWIAD Z PAOLEM BACIGALUPIM**

**It's obvious that entertaining people isn't what you're trying to accomplish with your stories (or it isn't the only thing). What message are you trying to send to your readers? (I hope that, despite the very pessimistic vision of the future, you're not just trying to tell: „We're all doomed!”)**



Well, I really do want to entertain people. I very much hope that my stories always function well as stories, and that they take the reader on an interesting journey. That's a top concern for me. But yeah, I have other agendas as well. I also hope the stories cause people to reflect on their present and perhaps pay close attention to the world around them. I see interesting trends all around me, every day, and one of the things I'd like my fiction to do is to provide readers with my lens on our present, so that they can take a look through that glass as well. The fact that the stories sometimes present bleak futures... well, if we don't want a bleak future, one hopes that we'll stop building it. From my personal perspective, I'm not really seeing a huge shift in the way we organize our economies or our societies for sustainability, so my suspicion is that while we aren't doomed yet, we are apparently bent on dooming ourselves.

**Since '99, when your first story, „Pocketful of Dharma” was published, you've written only ten other stories. Why is it like that? Lack of time? Or does it take you so long to write a story?**

A lot of what you're seeing (or not seeing, as the case may be) is that I actually went off and wrote four novels during those early years, none of which ever sold. So I was pretty busy writing, it's just that none of that work saw the light of day. By the time I really started focusing on short stories, I'd given up on novels (I think this was in 2002), and after that it maybe appeared that I was becoming at least a little more productive, because at least my work was making it into print. In reality though, it does seem to take me a while to come up with a story, and then to make it come together... and I don't commit to that many stories. A topic needs to be pretty compelling to me before I have enough drive to sit down and start writing, and then finish a story. It takes a certain amount of obsession, and that only seems to happen once or twice a year for me.

**How would you classify the pessimistic visions of the future in your stories: predictions, pure fiction or something in-between?**

Not predictions. More like extrapolations. I see a trend, or notice an aspect of the world around me, and I start thinking about what the world would look like if that trend continued to

gain momentum. I'm sort of turning up the volume on that trend, making it louder and louder, until it drowns out everything else. The extent to which I think of these stories as predictive has more to do with watching and seeing if our present-day society seems as determined to turn up the volume as I am. I leave that to readers to judge.

**As I've mentioned earlier, your stories are really bleak and pessimistic. How does that affect you?**

They depress me, sometimes. After I finish story, I'm often affected emotionally by the end result. The thing that really bothers me, though, is that in order for me to not be depressed, I need to ignore all the trends and details and data that I gathered during my research and used in the story to make it come to life. Essentially, I have to pretend that all the research doesn't actually exist. It's not the story that's really depressing, it's that the stories are often grounded in horrifying fact.

**What about your family? You're wife wasn't probably very pleased, when she read „Softer”. Although I think that „Pop Squad”, with all the children extermination isn't much better.**

I have to laugh at this question. You're right. My wife's comment after reading "Softer" was, "Don't touch me!". And in "Pop Squad" I actually dressed some of the children in clothes that my son was wearing at the time. The dinosaur and the T-Shirt that said "Who's the cutest?" were both his. I think the best way to characterize what my wife thinks of my writing is that she respects it, even if she doesn't enjoy all of it. But she's always been amazingly supportive of my writing, despite the difference in taste.

**Again with the pessimism and the bleakness: the editors don't like that (your fiction was rejected due to it, same as some of Peter Watts' stories and even „Blindsight”). And yet you're being nominated and awarded. Doesn't that mean that the editors don't know everything, that the readers do like to read bleak stories?**

For me, there are really two different marketplaces. The short fiction market has always been amazingly open to my writing. Gordon Van Gelder at F&SF, Sheila Williams at Asimovs, Lou Anders at PYR, all of them have been enthusiastic supporters. Short fiction provides a venue for more aggressive storytelling because an editor plans to balance a story like mine against a story by someone who isn't as hard-edged. They have leeway.

With the long fiction market, this is different. It's very difficult to get editors to take risks with some of the novels I write, and it's been a slow process trying to find the right balance between what I like to write and what they want to buy. I've been getting closer to figuring out some points of agreement in recent years, but it's been difficult. Honestly, I think there's a huge difference between artistic work that is respected (likely to be nominated for an award) and artistic work that is strongly commercial. Long-form editors always have to pay attention to the commercial potential of writing, and that ties their hands in some cases, even when they like or respect what a writer is doing.

**How did all the awards and nominations affect you and your work?**

In some ways, it helps a lot. It makes me more confident of my voice, and it makes me feel supported and cared for as a writer, which matters quite a lot. It's very hard to keep sitting down to write and not have any positive feedback. I did that for years and it was soul-crushing, because you're always filled with doubt about whether your work is even worthwhile. So from that perspective, it's hugely rewarding and comforting to know that readers and critics are paying attention to my writing. From another perspective, it's a bit paralyzing. You can get caught in a loop where you ask yourself, "But is this story as good as "Yellow Card Man"? Does this story live up to 'The Gambler'? Is it as evocative as "The Fluted Girl"? And then you tie yourself in knots, instead of focusing on the story at hand.

**You said: „The last part is, I have no faith in my writing.” Has anything changed yet?**

Not really. I still pretty much hate everything I write by the time I'm finished with it. My first novel, "The Windup Girl", is just coming out and I was pretty sure it was a failure. I had run out of energy to keep working on it, and knew I wasn't making it any better, even though I wanted to keep picking at it. I finally just abandoned it, deciding that even if it was flawed, it wasn't within my ability to make it actually work. And now it's getting rave reviews. Which is humbling and surprising and makes me wonder why I'm always so hard on myself. With distance, I can feel better about a story, but in the moment I don't see the quality. I always end up focusing on the flaws.

**Some of your stories are set in East Asian countries. Where did this interest come from?**

At first, I didn't really have an interest, per se. As a college student, I wanted to study a foreign language, and I was looking for a challenge, so I picked Chinese. There wasn't a lot of thought behind the decision. But it led to all sorts of interesting unintended consequences. I ended up living and working in China for several years, which led to doing a lot of traveling over in Asia as well.

Experiencing China in the early years of my life was formative for me. I got to see a completely different way of life, with completely different cultural and societal assumptions, and that shock of being in a very different culture has continued to affect my writing, both when I write stories set in Asia, and when I write about my own country. I was just in Japan to speak at a symposium on sustainability, and I now have a whole new set of experiences to incorporate into my thinking. As a writer, you need that. I hope I never stop learning about new places.

**When I've read „The Gambler”, I couldn't help but wonder: how much of yourself you've put in the main character? (He's also a journalist and he's keen on the environmental issues.)**

Maybe a little. I've gotten enough reviews of my writing that say something along the lines of, "if Bacigalupi would just quit ranting about the environment, he'd be a much better writer." So yeah, there are some echoes there.

**“The Gambler” is about journalism. Although the story itself is set in the near-future scenery, it brings up modern issues: hunger for scandals, celebrity-news, measuring values of the articles with clicks on the Internet site. Did you, as a journalist, come**

**across those problems? Did you feel, just like the main character, that your articles were only read by few people, while the rest was busy searching for more celebrity sex scandals?**

The magazine I worked for was blessed in that it's run by a non-profit organization dedicated to reporting environmental news regardless of its popularity. But as the online editor there, I was responsible for increasing page views and viewer retention, and that's pretty hard to do when you're reporting on complex, dry, and depressing topics. There's not much sizzle in a story about dwindling checkerspot butterflies and habitat loss. And even though our readers are donating to support the magazine, the most common complaint about our reporting is that High Country News is too depressing.

**On the other hand, being a writer gives you an advantage. Most of the people wouldn't read an article about terminator gene or drought. But all you need is to add some characters and action and presto: you've got thousands of readers. Maybe that's the new way to get to people, to force them to think: show them the consequences, shock them?**

Actually, I think fiction focused on these issues is even less popular than the non-fiction. Michael Pollen writes very effectively about food issues. David Quammen writes about extinctions. Michelle Nijhuis publishes stories about global warming and reaches a significantly larger audience than I reach with fiction. What I think I add to that discussion is that I can make a dry concept viscerally meaningful. I can help a reader live inside the consequences of the topics that journalists write about, and I think that sometimes I can make something that is otherwise abstract a lot more real.

**"The People of Sand and Slag" is actually the first story of yours that I've read. I remember being astonished by the lack of emotions and compassion in the main characters. I think, that it's the most terrifying vision of the post-humans that I've encountered. Do you think that with developing more advanced technology we'll lose ourselves on the way?**

In some ways, I don't think it's possible to lose our selves. Maybe we're actually becoming more of ourselves. I don't see the characters in "The People of Sand and Slag" as all that different from us today. We all want to have fun and buy the things we like and do what we want, and we aren't all that worried about the impacts of our lifestyles, either. So I think rather than being in danger of losing ourselves, we're in danger of losing everything around us, and not noticing as it happens. With the increasing penetration of the internet and cellphones, I'm seeing us failing to connect as much with our home places, with the immediacy of our surroundings, the people around us, just failing to focus on the here and now. The more we live in abstracted and artificial environments, the easier it is to think of our real environments as disposable or negligible. It's hard to care about nature if we aren't connected to it. It's hard to care about neighborhoods and communities, if we're focused on our screens talking to our virtual communities instead.

**Also in your other stories advanced technology seems to be the source (or, more correctly: is used to cause) some pretty bad problems (terminator gene in „The Calorie Men”). Are you afraid of what new technologies might bring?**

Right now, I think I'm more afraid of what our current technologies are \*already\* bringing. We're still finding out what the real consequences of the internal combustion engine are going to be. To the extent that future technologies will presumably be more powerful than the ones we already have and which are already wreaking havoc on our future.... yeah, I'd say I'm concerned. I don't think there's a single technology that hasn't had runaway unintended consequences.

Even the really simple ones - things like sailing ships - have unexpected results, some good, some bad. From that one technology you have everything from potatoes growing in Ireland to Native Americans dying of smallpox. And it's all unintended. So yeah, I'm definitely worried. We'll have more unintended consequences in the future, and presumably we'll all stand around scratching our heads and looking surprised, even when we shouldn't be.

**Why do you write science fiction? You said that you were given an advice not to write in this genre and yet, you're still doing it.**

Science fiction has tools that no other genre has. It makes it possible for me to show a reader what might be, and to reflect on what's important now. And really, I don't think there's a better set of tools to do that.

**You've said that you had to add some high-tech gadgetry to „Pop Squad”, although the story was already written in the way you wanted it to be. Don't you have a feeling, that the genre is limiting you? I mean: you have a good story, well written, with a strong message, but you are forced to decorate it with some advanced technology bling-blings. Something's not right.**

I think it's an interesting question about whether you're writing a story that aims to have a dialogue within the science fiction genre, or outside it. I think of it in the same way as when you enter a country, it's handy to speak the language there. I don't think there's much point in complaining about what languages the locals speak; it's more productive to just learn it. That said, from my perspective, a lot of science fiction is becoming extremely specialized, and as it does so, it loses an opportunity to speak with others. For myself, I'm hoping to write stories that are both thought-provoking to a serious SF reader, but also accessible to a general reader. At root, I'm writing to communicate, so I don't want to cut anyone off.

**With „Tamarisk Hunter” you didn't had the problem, because it was written for a mainstream publication, High Country News. Was writing it any different from writing for SF readers?**

The core process was the same, in terms of extrapolating on the consequences of a trend - in this case drought. But I had to stay very focused on the topic, and so it required that I write a story that was set in the very near future, and the only extrapolative twists I was introducing related directly to the water topic. No gadgets allowed, and no eye-popping scenery. But F&SF picked up the story later, so I don't think it was unsatisfying for SF readers. So who knows? Maybe I'm wrong and maybe SF is more flexible about what it's looking for than I perceive.

**Your first novel, „The Windup Girl” was released in September. How did the work on it look like? I’ve read, that you had about twenty versions of Chapter One? Was it the same with the following ones?**

Thank God, no. Chapter 1 was unusually difficult. I had a very hard time deciding on how to introduce the reader to “The Windup Girl's” world and its complexities. I was still rewriting the opening even after the book had sold and my editor had accepted it. Honestly, I think I was going a little crazy with obsession by that time. In contrast, some of the later chapters are almost exactly the way I wrote them in my first draft. Overall, though, the book was much more complex than I expected it to be when I set out to write it. I started playing around with some of the ideas as far back as 2003/4, and at first, I just didn't know what I was doing - so I started writing short stories in the world I was creating, playing with the ideas of genetically modified foods, peak oil, monoculture, poverty, etc, which was how "Yellow Card Man" and "The Calorie Man" were created. So between the oddness of the world, and then with all the research into Thailand and its culture that was required, along with the complexities of the plot and the four main characters I was building, it turned into a significantly bigger project than I expected. At an early point in the process, I sort of gave myself permission to take a lot of risks and be really ambitious with the book, but I didn't really understand how ambitious the whole thing was until I was mired deep in the swamp.

**You had some plans about writing young-adult fiction. Are you still interested in it?**

Very much so. I actually just finished a young adult novel called “Ship Breaker” which I'm very proud of. It will come out from Little, Brown next year. It's an adventure novel set in a future with rising sea levels and depleted oil, but it's an opportunity for me to stretch out and have some fun with my writing and to focus on ideas of sustainable technologies that I like and that I hope will feel exciting and inspirational to younger readers. I've recently realized that if I want to have much impact on the world, it doesn't do much good to speak to adults. We're all pretty set in our ways. But kids still have a chance to make better choices than we adults do.

**And other plans? More stories? Or another novel?**

LOL. Lots of plans, and too little time. I'm currently working on a sequel to “Ship Breaker” which I should have done by the end of the year. And I'm doing research for my next adult novel... which I'm not quite ready to talk about, but which is starting to seem even more ambitious and complex than “The Windup Girl”, but in completely different ways. There's a point when you realize that you're probably in over your head, but that's also an exciting feeling. It's good to feel like you're still stretching and developing as a writer.

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