

WHERE NEXT?

KARL SCHROEDER'S NEWSLETTER FOR FALL 2019

"A PROPULSIVE, HEARTFELT, WISE AND GENEROUS NEAR-FUTURE NOVEL THAT HOLDS OUT A HOPE WE DESPERATELY NEED."

--PAUL DI FILIPPO, REVIEW OF *STEALING WORLDS* IN *LOCUS*

BUTTERFLIES & OBJECTIVE MEASURES

When a book comes out, I always wait for reviews. It's great to get a starred review in *Kirkus* or a good write-up in *Publishers Weekly* (and *Stealing Worlds* did get a good review there), but what I really bite my nails waiting for is the opinion of *Locus*.

Locus calls itself "The Magazine of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Field," and that's pretty much right. It's the premier review publication for SF&F, and ever since *Ventus* I've been reviewed there. Sometimes I have to wait a couple of months after a book comes out, and that was the case this time. When they did review the book, though, it was worth the wait.

On July 29 Paul Di Filippo released an [online review](#) for *Locus*. It begins,

"There are a handful of SF writers whose novels are both vastly entertaining and which also serve as engineer-level blueprints for refashioning the world. In this category I would put Kim Stanley Robinson, Vernor Vinge, Cory Doctorow, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Neal Stephenson, Greg Bear, and Charles Stross. Now, with a shift in his focus from far futures to [near horizons](#), I would add the name of Karl Schroeder."

Imposter syndrome is beaten back, at least for now.

GALAVANTING

I went to Worldcon this year, which was held at the Conference Centre of Dublin, Ireland, August 15-19. I had a great time, and for instance a well-attended reading, a packed Kaffeeklatsch and a good book signing. The panels

were great, and I got to spend time with a lot of colleagues and friends that I don't see on a regular-enough basis.

Naturally I brought a copy of *Stealing Worlds* to show off, but sold it almost immediately. I just can't say no, I guess.



FALL EVENTS: WORD ON THE STREET & TPL

- [Digital Dystopia](#), a talk with Cory Doctorow, at Toronto's Word on the Street festival, Sept. 22.
- [Seeding Utopias and Resisting Dystopias](#), at Toronto Public Libraries starting Sept. 23.
- I was [interviewed in the VR space Sansar](#) by Draxtor. Get a Sansar account and join us!
- [Scintillation](#), October 11-13. I'll be attending this small but intense literary SF convention, in Montreal.

MY FIRST BOOK TRAILER!

To celebrate *Stealing Worlds* I decided to try something new: a book trailer. With the assistance of acclaimed artist Dave Seeley, I put together a 1-minute video, which you can [watch on YouTube](#).



TEMAGAMI

Every summer, we go for vacation in the Temagami region, in Northern Ontario. Even though we generally take midsummer off to do it, it's usually cool if not downright cold there. (There's nothing quite like a morning dip in a deep lake carved from Precambrian basalt to wake you up!)

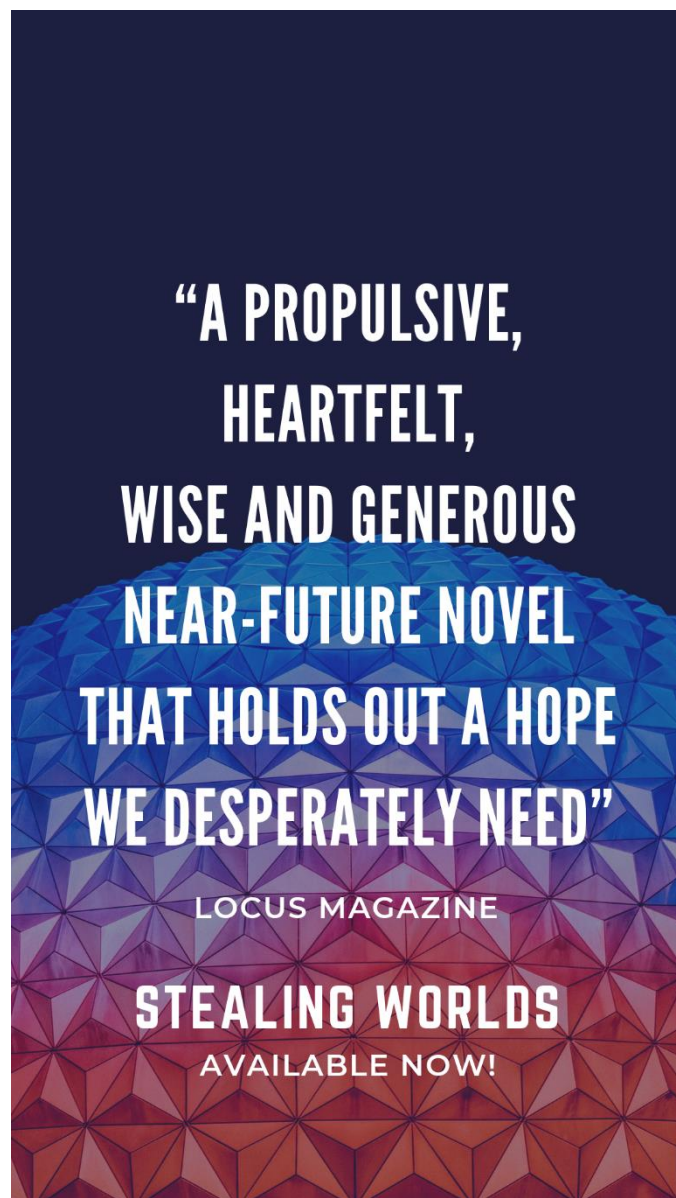


Kayaking at Dawn

This year, it was gloriously warm and sunny the whole time we were there. I usually write because there are always rainy days to stay indoors and do that; not this time! I wasn't under deadline, so it was just fine.

PROMOTIONS AND ADVERTISING

This year I've been experimenting with new ways of reaching out to be people (like this newsletter). Here are a couple of examples of Instagram and Facebook ads that I've had made recently.



PIECES OF A NEW BOOK

With *Stealing Worlds* out and doing well, I'm turning my attention to the next big project. I've pitched something, and now we wait; meanwhile, I thought I'd list some of the ideas I'm working on. Not all of these are going to end up in the next book, or anywhere at all; they're just parts of my general ongoing research project. But I thought you might find them interesting.

AFTER GLOBALISM

The current backlash against globalism (manifested in trade wars and resurgent nationalism) might continue and even accelerate. What would a post-globalist world look like? I'll ignore the dystopian possibilities because everybody else focuses on those.

I think the ideal outcome of the present transition is a world of centralized operational *power* and fully decentralized *authority*. How exactly this would work is the subject of my recent fiction (e.g., *Stealing Worlds*). Of course, it could go badly wrong—hence, in my last novel, *Lockstep*, Earth is fully under the thumb of the trillionaires. You either are one, or you work for one.

Viewing the State monolithically makes it harder to think about the situation, though. If we conceive of certain layers being distributed while others remain centralized (operational coordination remains, while e.g. democratic consultation devolves to a decentralized autonomous blockchain) then the State still has a role to play. What I'm trying to world-build now is a credible system in which the authority of science (and evidence-based policy) can retain a central position in an otherwise decentralized political system.

THE RACE TO EXPLOIT THE ARCTIC

It's not Arctic resource plundering by itself that interests me. It's the idea that by the time it starts to happen, the peoples of the Arctic will have modernized their political links to allies and clients around the world, and will be able to muster a spirited defense. What that would like... well, that would be a good story, wouldn't it?

DEMATERIALIZING THE SPOILS

Our main task after tackling Global Warming might be figuring out how to replace competition over resources with competition over non-physical status markers. Competition over resources is wrecking the planet and will get us all killed in the long run. You could call the alternative

“dematerialization of the spoils.” Just as vicious in personal and social terms, but nobody starves or gets executed. I did a study a couple of years ago that looked into the dematerialization of status markers, and there are a lot of weak signals that indicate it's happening; the main idea is that the current generation of nouveau riche are more interested in accumulating experiences than acquiring stuff, and services that pander to the rich are shifting their offerings accordingly.

FORGET THE ROBOT APOCALYPSE

When I did my Master's degree, I closed my thesis by saying that what was needed after an analysis of structuring ideas through narrative was an analysis of how to dismantle a compelling narrative to discover whether it is compelling because of its ideas, or because of its structure.

The AI apocalypse narrative is compelling because of its structure, not because of its content. Because the only conceptual metaphor we have for AI is people, we by default slot people's behaviour into the AI's role when we construct narratives about it, and the result is ugly. This is a major error; it's no more logical to imagine AI would act like people than it is to imagine they would act like fungi. (And you're about to say, “no because intelligence is active, fungi are passive”—but again, *why?* I can easily imagine AI via metaphors such as “idea sponge” and “pool of scenarios” that eliminate the whole idea of agency from it, and make it inconceivable for it to act on its own.) The robot apocalypse is not based on a vision of artificial *intelligence*, but rather artificial *desire*—and those desires we ascribe to AIs are inevitably like our own.

The interesting topic is not AI, it's how limited our thinking about it has become. I blame SF writers for this.

AUGMENTED RELATING

Rather than AI, I'm turning my attention to Augmented Cognition, and imagining fun variants on it that can spark story ideas. For instance, “augmented relating,” which is an AI-assist for managing your relationships; or, “augmented humility,” which is a system that gently and nonjudgmentally shows you the biases and weaknesses in your thought patterns. Once you start imagining ways of assisting human thought and decision-making, though, you inevitably start wondering about whether you can do the same for groups of people; or for non-human entities (such as my deodands); and you also start thinking about the sinister alternative of “augmented propaganda,” which arguably is the future we're actually moving into.

DELIBERATE OPTIMISM

How can we have a positive vision of the future while not prescribing the future? Prescription would seem to be the problem of naïve optimism, particularly of the Campbellian version: “the world will become perfect if everybody just does exactly what I say!” Is there any alternative approach to shaping positive futures that is not prescriptive?

Arguably there is. I don’t know if you’ve read Stuart Kauffman’s preprint, “[No entailing laws, but enablement in the evolution of the biosphere,](#)” but he’s basically saying that the creative direction of natural selection does not and cannot come from a prescriptive set of laws (entailing laws) working through their causal implications. Briefly, all that natural selection does is designate failures—it doesn’t pre-decide successes in any way. Failure is possible to predetermine in natural selection, but success (viability or fitness) is not. The creative drive of natural selection is therefore literally exempt (in a very specific way) from natural law.

It’s possible to write SF that functions the same way: SF that doesn’t prescribe the steps that must be taken to achieve a better future, but presents possibilities. By this argument you could achieve Utopia entirely by means of dystopian discourse. View each dystopia as a “designation of failure” for a particular approach to improving the future, and let society do nothing but *avoid failures* and the natural selection of social changes will lead us in the other direction without anybody ever prescribing the specifics of that other way.

Or, you can take the above approach and combine it with positive visions of the future that are not prescriptive but make visible the liminal possibilities outside of the dystopias and default futures. Aspirational futures are important in foresight, as targets to shoot for even when we acknowledge that we’ll miss them. Utopias can serve the same function: we agree that this or that future is not going to come to pass, but we allow ourselves to be inspired to work in a particular direction that is no longer that of our default future. This is foresight as strategic planning, and arguably, a good approach for SF as well.

Which is not to say that science fiction stories in which things blow up will not always outsell stories with happy bunnies and flowers, ten to one.

WRITING IN THE “ABANDONED PERIOD”

I deliberately chose to set *Stealing Worlds* around the year 2034, knowing I would get considerable push-back from my editor and publisher. In fact, I never told them what the exact

timeframe was, because I was pretty sure the project would be cancelled if they knew.

This is one of those known, but never talked-about things in science fiction. It’s just common wisdom that you never set a story *too close to now* if you’re going to be talking about transformations and innovations that could have entirely different outcomes during the publishing run of the story. It’s anecdotally talked about as having a story “be obsolete by the time it’s published.”

My decision in this case was partly motivated by opportunity and partly by concern. There is a huge opportunity in examining the very near future that is just outside the innovation-cycle of companies. If you want a timespan, I’d say fifteen to 25 years. When futurist Brian David Johnson was at Intel, he claimed that the company looked 8-10 years ahead because that was the planning cycle for major computer chipsets. In science fiction, the gap seems to be slightly different. You can set a story now—there are tons of SF tv shows out there that do just that. You can set a story in the far future of 100+ years. In television, the only way to cover the intermediate period is via post-apocalyptic narratives. This by itself is very interesting in what it suggests about the popular imagination: there are almost no popular representations of an optimistic mid-term future in media (exceptions, such as the Wil Smith movie *I, Robot*, stand out rather starkly).

In writing, the gap is more flexible because it depends on what kind of changes you’re talking about; still, any novelist will be terrified of writing a near future that’s been bypassed by reality by the time the book comes out. I decided to defy this and almost lost—*Stealing Worlds* depends heavily on the success of blockchain technology, and about six months before it came out it was starting to look like blockchain was going to fizzle. Publication could easily have coincided with headlines trumpeting the obsolescence of the very tech I was using as my Macguffin.

But the decision to write into what I’ve been calling ‘the uncomfortable adolescence of the future’ was also motivated by concern. I think we are at an historic moment; major decisions affecting not just the future of humanity but the future of life on the planet will be made in the next few years. If we do not project our art and imaginations into that period, we stand to sleepwalk into the very apocalyptic scenarios that dominate mid-future tv and film.

So there is an immense amount of risk yet an equal amount to be gained by exploring the abandoned period. It may be that its time has finally come, so to speak.

THAT'S ALL FOR NOW!

Thanks for your interest. I'll continue to update my website, and of course, I'm on social media if you want to talk to me (Twitter gets the fastest response).

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